

The possible relevance of Kenya's experience to shaping aid to Africa (including reflections on population issues)

By Andrew MacMillan¹

In August 2021, while the US and UK were scrambling to evacuate their nationals from Afghanistan, William Hague, a former UK Foreign Secretary and leader of the Conservative Party, wrote a column for The Times of London, bizarrely entitled [Africa will make Afghan crisis seem a sideshow](#).

After the recent debacle in Afghanistan, it is difficult to see how Hague can reasonably claim that “the West” is qualified to assume “a colossal interest in pushing things in the right way” in Africa. The big lesson from Afghanistan is surely that self-respecting countries deeply resent being pushed around by “the West”, still less by a self-proclaimed ‘Global Britain’ that has cut its aid budget, deliberately picks quarrels with its nearest neighbours, creates a hostile environment for aspiring foreign residents, and has lost much of its former reputation as a trustworthy partner.



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Hague points to Africa as a looming threat to future global stability largely on the grounds that recent projections indicate Africa's population would grow by over 1.1 billion over the next 30 years and result, by 2050, in the continent having a population three times that of all Europe, where numbers would be declining. "Such vast growth in numbers", he writes, "means Africa could become such a success that it lifts more people out of poverty even than China in the past 40 years; or such a disappointment that outward migration, on a scale hundreds of times greater than anything seen so far, dominates the politics of Britain and the rest of Europe. Either way, this is one of the big events of the 21st century — and this time, no one can claim they can't see it coming."

My thoughts turned to Kenya where I was invited some 20 years ago by a very deprived but courageous rural community to raise money to help them to create new educational opportunities that would offer a better life for the younger generation. At that time, about a third of the children in the [Got Matar Community](#) were orphans, victims of the devastating HIV/AIDS epidemic that peaked around the turn of the century but whose legacy is still felt. Through its own efforts, the community has refurbished its 10 primary schools, created a new coeducational secondary school for 600 pupils which is now overflowing with 1240 students, and founded an Institute of Technology, offering training in practical skills that are in strong demand as the economy grows and diversifies.

The experience of working with the Got Matar community on this little programme has convinced me that, even in the poorest of settings in Africa, the institutional capacity exists to 'lift more people out of poverty'. At a national level, in spite of many obstacles, Kenya is also showing how a medium-sized African country can move forward with reasonable success, largely through its own resources and institutional capacities.

The main lesson from Got Matar and many other development activities in which I have been engaged throughout my working life is that external assistance can be very valuable but will only succeed if it is driven by a genuine demand from the people who stand to benefit from it and not imposed by outsiders.

Hague starts on the wrong foot by assuming that 'the West', rather than listen to what kind of assistance African countries might seek, should push 'things' in what they perceive to be 'the right way'. His prime motive for this does not seem to be any concern for the livelihoods of Africans but a fear that rapid rates of population growth in Africa could threaten developed countries with massive flows of migrants.

What makes population growth rates change

Given Hague's highlighting of the population issue, some reflections on what drives population growth are called for.

When I first visited Kenya in the 1990s, boxes of free condoms were available in the 'gents' of every government office, providing visible evidence of the Government's commitment to family planning. Since then, however, we have come to learn that the mere provision of means of contraception – especially for use by men – will have little influence on population trends. The determinants of population growth rates are much more complex!

- Changes in the rate of population growth in any country are the combined result of shifts in the behaviour of millions of individuals as this relates to the most intimate

aspects of their lives – essentially to their sexual activities, their aspirations to have children and the accessibility of means to reduce conception rates.

- The main determinant of the rate of population growth or reduction is the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) - the total number of children that would be born to each woman if she were to live to the end of her child-bearing years. This can change very rapidly, as evidenced in my home country (UK) where the TFR fell from 2.8 in 1963 to 1.8 in 1978. In just 15 years, the UK changed from being a country in which the population was growing significantly into one in which the home-born population would eventually start to fall.
- In countries which have had high TFRs for a long time, the population will continue to grow for years after the rate has dropped below the replacement rate because the number of people of child-bearing age will be on the rise – unless there are high-mortality events such as war, disease, famine, drought or pandemics (e.g. HIV/AIDS, COVID-19) [\[read\]](#).
- Even very small changes in the assumptions on the future TFR make really big differences to the outcome of long-term population projections – for instance for estimated national populations in 2100.
- Future populations are increased not just by births but also by successes in prolonging lives and in reducing infant and child mortality – and who would wish to see these diminish?
- Changes in rates of population growth rate generally reflect shifts in the collective will of the people. This can be affected by government policies, the consequence of major shifts in economic performance, religion, ethnicity and the impact of - usually unforeseen - events.
- In the most extreme cases (for example China until recently) governments may set and apply legal limits to the number of children in a family. Alternatively, they may offer incentives for larger families (as now in most European countries). It is more common, however, that governments that want to slow population growth seek to nudge reductions in fertility by adopting indirect measures such as increasing access to free kindergartens or pre-school nurseries and secondary school education especially for girls; promoting, subsidising and distributing means of contraception; allowing safe abortions and improving life expectancies (including through improving food security and nutrition). The existence of old age pension schemes may diminish the urge for large families to assure care in old age. Agricultural policies, such as those that support farm mechanisation, may reduce the demand for manual labour and hence the practical utility of having large families.
- Religious beliefs as well as cultural traditions may influence decisions on family size, but the connection may not be as straightforward as might be expected. Thus Italy, home of Roman Catholicism, now has one of the lowest TFR in Europe (1.3).
- Almost all societies have norms that govern sexual behaviour and influence family size, and these may not change easily even when a national government commits itself to engage in promoting family planning. Some may favour child marriage and others polygamy: some influence the frequency of intercourse and there is a large variance in attitudes towards extra-marital relationships, more often tolerated for male rather than female partners. The stigma of teenage pregnancies also varies, perhaps in line with the degree of female emancipation and economic independence, and social conservatism and cohesion.

Population in Kenya

Kenya's present population is about 55 million, having risen from 24 million in 1990 and 8 million in 1960. The annual growth rate has dropped from a maximum of around 4 percent in the early 1980s to 2.6 percent this year, reflecting a dramatic fall in the TFR from around 8 in the 1960s and early '70s to 2.36 now. Life expectancy has risen from about 46 years for people born in 1960 to 67 this year, while the rate of under five-year-old deaths has fallen sharply from 128 per 1000 live births in 1960 to below 33 this year. The government claims that the Contraception Prevalence Rate, which now stands at 59 percent, has risen steadily since new policies were adopted in 2012.

As in the case of most countries, there are three main sources of long-term population projections that produce significantly different results, summarised as follows. The most widely quoted figures are the medium projections issued by the [United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs Population Dynamics](#) which also provide high and low projections for all countries up to 2100.

Their figures for Kenya for 2050 and 2100 are as follows:

Population (in millions)	2050	2100
Medium Projection	94.6	125.4
High Projection	100.4	180.9
Low Projection	83.0	83.9

What is striking about these figures is that the gap between low and high scenarios is relatively small for 2050 but massive for 2100. This is because even if there were to be big changes in fertility rates from now on, these would only have relatively small effects on total population by 2050. The 2100 projections, however, show how enormously sensitive these long-term forecasts are to behavioural changes set in motion over the next 30 years and then continued for the next 50 years. The 'high' projection comes out at more than twice the 'low' one! But the figures also show that, if Kenya was to arrive at the 'low' outcome by 2050, it would not grow higher than this by 2100.

An alternative projection by the [Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation](#) (IHME) envisages a population of 80 million in 2050 which would rise to a peak of 84 million in 2070 and decline to about 75 million in 2100.

A [third set of projections](#) has been made by the International Institute of Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA) in collaboration with the European Community's Centre of Expertise in Population and Migration (CEPAM), in which the forecast rate of population growth is related to the rate of 'development' especially in education and health. The resulting figures are as follows:

Population (in millions)	2050	2100
Medium Development	90.6	113.6
Stalled Development	108.5	187.0
Rapid Development	78.6	77.7

All these projections are valuable as they illustrate the hugely different outcomes that could occur in Kenya in terms of the size of its population at the end of this century,

ranging from around 80 million to 180 million. All three medium projections for 2050 are reasonably consistent (between 80 and 95 million): this is because, given that three quarters of the present population are under 30 years old, 'the die has already been cast'.

However, the rate of population growth between 2050 and 2100 is bound to be very sensitive to the speed at which the TFR will decline during the next 30 years.

If we accept the IIASA/CEPAM's powerful argument that fertility is highly responsive to improvements in education, childcare and health the actions taken by the government in recent years – if sustained – seem likely to result in a population outcome that is closer to the lower than the medium projections. Already the number of children enrolled in primary schools (6 to 12 year-olds) has remained constant at about 10 million for the past 4 years, indicating that the ongoing 'bulge' in the size of the fertile population is already being fully compensated for by a corresponding fall in TFR. An immediate implication is also that the focus of government support for primary education can already shift from building new capacity to improving educational quality. Capital investments in secondary schools, technical institutes and universities will become the new priorities.

In the health sector, there have also been most impressive achievements, especially in lowering the incidence of infectious diseases. Though HIV/AIDS is still the top cause of death, its incidence was reduced by 41 percent between 2009 and 2019, and there have been sharp falls in mortality due to diarrhoeal diseases, meningitis and neonatal disorders. Under one-year-old deaths have halved during the same period. In contrast, there has been a growth in deaths attributable to non-communicable diseases, including heart and circulatory problems, diabetes and malaria.

Kenya is, therefore, well positioned to see a continued fall in its TFR and to start to reap the benefits of better education and health in the form of economic growth as long as there are no serious setbacks due to unforeseeable events.

Closing Thoughts

Got Matar provides an inspiring example of how even one of the poorest of rural communities in Africa, devastated by HIV/AIDS and successive droughts, can take it into its own hands to provide a decent education for all of its children and so open the door to a brighter future for them. They are acquiring knowledge and skills that will transform the local economy and contribute to better livelihoods. Though it is too soon to tell, a slowing of population growth in the area is a highly likely outcome of the community's educational successes.

External funding, sustained by a small group of donors for over 15 years, has helped the Community Development Group to implement its entirely home-grown vision of development, without any on-the-spot involvement of foreigners.

There is unfortunately a tendency amongst Europeans, illustrated by William Hague's article, to portray Africa as a threat to the future of their own countries and to assume a paternalistic approach to shaping the continent's future. Instead, I suggest that there is much that Europe, including the UK, can do to contribute to a very bright future for Africa provided that, in defining their strategies, outsiders should seek to learn from what countries like Kenya - and even the most deprived communities within them – have done and are doing, largely through their own efforts, to cope successfully with the extraordinary adversities and historical legacies that they have faced.

In particular, if Britain aspires to serve as a valued source of assistance to African countries, it needs to do much to improve its own credibility as a trustworthy partner that is not driven simply by promoting its own vision of 'pushing things the right way' for Africa.

Footnote

Much of what I have learnt in life has been inspired by the vision, commitment and actions of people like Grace Ochieng Andiki and members of the Got Matar community.

To know more:

- W. Hague, [Africa will make Afghan crisis seem a sideshow](#), The Times of London, 2021.

Selection of articles on hungerexplained.org linked to the topic :

- Opinions: [Reflections on the Impact on Human Capital of Two Pandemics: COVID 19 around the world and HIV/AIDS in Kenya](#) by Andrew MacMillan, 2020.
- [Valletta Summit on migration: 1.8 billion euros for Africa to stop Africa-to-Europe migration - Illusion or irresponsibility?](#) 2015.