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BY
ABIBA LONGWE-NGWIRA

FAMILY PLANNING IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA: A MISSED OPPORTUNITY FOR ECONOMIC GROWTH AND POVERTY ALLEVIATION

Over the past 50 years, fertility has declined in most developing countries but remains high in much of sub-Saharan Africa, averaging 5.2 children per woman in her lifetime. Several factors contribute to this high fertility rate, such as poverty, low education, and high child mortality.

Family planning advocates link high fertility to harming women's health and limiting their ability to work, and thus limiting their ability to contribute to household income and national economic development. However, specific evidence on how family planning affects economic growth in Africa and other developing countries has been lacking.¹

This working paper presents selected research findings on the effect of family planning outcomes on women's labor force participation in nonagricultural work, an important component of economic development. Results suggest that closely spaced births and a high number of young children reduce the potential of African economies to grow, thus highlighting the importance of investing in family planning to promote economic growth.

Fertility and Economic Growth in Africa

Africa continues to register high levels of economic growth (GDP growth rate is about 6.0 percent), but poverty and inequality remain high, and almost one of every two Africans lives in extreme poverty today.² By contrast, in much of Southeast Asia, poverty has declined markedly, and declines in fertility through family planning and other investments have been linked with accelerated economic growth and poverty reduction.

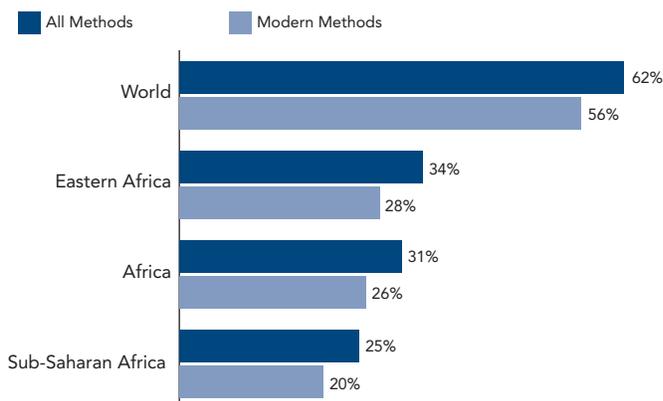
A good example of this is the Matlab region in Bangladesh, where an analysis of a door-to-door outreach family planning and maternal child health program showed that women with access to family planning services were more likely to receive an education, marry later, be healthier, and have healthier families; they also had better access to economic opportunities than households without the program. A study that followed Matlab households over 20 years found that households with increased access to reproductive health services had on average up to 43 percent more family assets than households that lacked access to these services. In the families with access to family planning, girls were better educated and women were more likely to be in the labor force.³

In contrast to Bangladesh where contraceptive use is similar to the world average, in sub-Saharan Africa contraceptive use among married women remains low compared to the world average (see figure, page 2). At the same time, the percentage of sexually active women who do not want to become pregnant but are not using contraception — reflecting an unmet need for family planning — remains high compared to other regions. In 2010, about 23 percent of African women had an unmet need for family planning compared with 9 percent of Asian women and 10 percent of Latin American and Caribbean women.⁴

ABIBA LONGWE-NGWIRA recently earned a Ph.D. from Radboud University, Nijmegen, Netherlands. She was a participant in PRB's 2013-2014 Policy Communication Fellows Program, funded by USAID through the IDEA project. This working paper was written as part of the Fellows Program.

Contraceptive Use Is Low in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Percent of married women using contraception, by method



Source: Carl Haub and Toshiko Kaneda, *World Population Data Sheet 2012* (Washington, DC: Population Reference Bureau, 2012).

New Research on the Economic Benefits of Family Planning

To assess the link between family planning and economic growth in Africa, a recent study used a household-level dataset from the Demographic and Health Surveys from 26 African countries, including more than 205,000 married women ages 18 to 45 with at least one young child younger than age six.⁵ Various statistical methods were used to investigate the causal effect of family planning outcomes on women's labor force participation in nonagricultural work.

The research findings indicate that each additional young child that a woman has reduces the likelihood that she will engage in paid employment. The results further indicate that short birth spacing (the time between pregnancies) also decreases the likelihood that a woman will work outside the home for income. Women who had pregnancies less than two years apart were less likely to work in nonagricultural work. These negative economic impacts of frequent childbearing are even more pronounced for educated women and those living in urban areas.

Investing in Family Planning

Investments in family planning must increase for countries in Africa to economically benefit from reduced fertility. Good family planning programs: 1) offer women the possibility to

avert unintended pregnancies and childbirth, which often limit educational development; 2) allow families to achieve their desired family size, which facilitates their potential to make savings and investments; and 3) improve the health of women, which enables them to remain involved in economic activities.⁶ Not only does family planning help to reduce and space births and thus increase women's labor force participation, but additional findings from the research project indicate that family planning also increases children's education and increases the average wealth of households.⁷

These findings suggest that countries and international donors should invest more in family planning both for the important health benefits and also the potential economic benefits. Additional funding toward investments in reproductive health, especially family planning by individual countries as well as development partners, will help households rise out of poverty and will help accelerate economic growth across Africa.

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1875 Connecticut Ave., NW
Suite 520
Washington, DC 20009 USA
202 483 1100 **PHONE**
202 328 3937 **FAX**
popref@prb.org **E-MAIL**

