

High fertility threatens Uganda's

By John Semakula
and John Masaba

After conceiving last month, a bitter row ensued between Jane and her husband, Patrick at their home in Mukono town, over her abrupt pregnancy.

Patrick blamed Jane for conceiving yet again against their earlier agreement. This was the first time Patrick was losing his usual calm demeanor before Jane.

The couple had agreed to have a family of only four children and had reached their target several years ago.

Patrick says he wanted four children regardless of their sex, whom he could ably provide for. To ensure he stuck to that number, he asked Jane to seek guidance on family planning.

He said on several occasions he had seen Jane taking birth control pills and did not know when she stopped, without consulting him to conceive.

But Jane abandoned family planning recently wanted a baby girl. She told Patrick during the exchange that if she had discussed her decision with him, he would never have understood her.

"I needed a baby girl," she says. "The day I get one, I will get out of labour wards. I did not want to go through labour again, but a girl is my dream."

Jane, 38 is a university graduate and a mother of four boys aged between three and 10 while Patrick, 40, a civil engineer.

After delivering their fifth child early next year, the couple will have five children and one child away from hitting Uganda's fertility rate – six children per woman. Globally, Uganda is one of the countries with the highest fertility rates and youngest populations.

But the high fertility rate has become a big problem for the economy. Population experts have warned about the danger Uganda is facing if it fails to control its high fertility rate.

Demographic experts argue that the high fertility rate in Uganda may have a direct impact on the country's goal to attain middle-income status since developed nations first reduced their high fertility rates.

The National Population Council (NPC) Secretariat defines fertility rate as the average number of children a woman in child bearing age – 15 to 49 year, produces.

Andrew Tiondi, the head of the monitoring and evaluation department at the NPC Secretariat says with a high fertility and growth rate, Uganda will always be responding to crisis instead of saving and investing.

In Uganda, educated couples like Jane and Patrick usually settle for two to four children unlike less literates in rural areas, who can even have 10 children.

Tiondi also observed that political chaos that usually engulfs Kampala and the current high suicide trend have a direct link to a high fertility rate that has rendered many youth



A Ugandan woman on average produces six children. Such a population growth rate is detrimental to the economy. File photos



In 2002, Uganda had a population of 24 million people but now there are about 35 million people.

unemployed. Figures show that over 70% of the youth in Uganda are unemployed.

Tiondi says politicians will always take advantage of the idle youth and use them for their selfish interests, including involving them in demonstrations.

"So unless we address our population demographics, we shall always struggle with planning and chaos because high fertility rates mean whatever is produced is consumed immediately, limiting opportunities for surplus that may be reinvested for further development," he says.

Tiondi explains that a huge number of dependants resulting from a high fertility rate would render the working class unable to save, invest and develop.

"When the few workers are over-burdened by dependants and

cannot earn enough, the country cannot enhance savings for capital development," he says. "The end is borrowing externally, yet a robust economy should reduce dependence on external loans."

Finance ministry concerned

The spokesperson of Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, Jim Mugunga, says his permanent secretary is very concerned about the high fertility rate and has called for a vigorous awareness campaign on how to contain it.

"There is no excuse for us not to plan because of a high fertility rate in the country whose data we have but the question is: Is our resource envelope enough to cater for the load brought on board by fertile Ugandans?" Mugunga asks.

He added that as the ministry

in charge of planning, their major concern is how to manage information on controlling high fertility rate by involving the other sectors of influence including religious leaders and politicians to reverse the trend.

"Uganda is very big, but in matters of planning it is not about the empty space in the country, but the resources available for the population to share," Mugunga says.

Fertility rates in Rwanda, Kenya

Neighbouring Rwanda has her fertility rate standing at 4.6 children per woman and the country's President Paul Kagame has been credited for transforming his country economically in the last 20 years.

Kenya's fertility rate also stands at 4.6 and the growth in Uganda's eastern neighbour is vivid on the ground. Kenya has, for example, started construction on the multi-billion Standard Gauge Railway line while Uganda, which is also supposed to implement the same project is still trying to find funds.

Population experts argue that the Asian tigers such as Malaysia and Singapore that were once in the same growth bracket as Uganda in the 1960s have grown into some of the world's biggest economies after containing their fertility rates.

The average fertility rate among Asian tigers is about 2.5 and the countries have given priority to investing in education, health, infrastructure and good governance.

Thailand's GDP in 1990 was \$1462 when her fertility rate was 2.2 children while Uganda's GDP is now just about \$700 with a fertility rate is 5.8.

Population experts, such as Prof. Augustus Nuwagaba now say that a high fertility rate has resulted into a high percentage of dependants in

THERE IS NEED TO REDUCE INFANT MORTALITY RATE TO ASSURE UGANDANS THAT WHEN THEY PRODUCE ONE CHILD HE OR SHE WILL NOT DIE PREMATURELY

Uganda which is stifling the country's move to a middle income status by 2020.

"If the country's growth rate is high like Uganda's which is 4.6% and the population growth rate is also high, the benefits of growth rate will be discounted," Nuwagaba says.

The 2014 population census

According to the 2015 Census report, 47.9% of Uganda's population constitutes children under 15 years, while 55.1% are below 18-years of age, and 78% are Ugandans below 30 years.

Experts say that since over 70% of the youth in Uganda are unemployed, that makes majority of the 78% of the population below 30 years less productive.

According to the NPC Secretariat, the productive population in Uganda is only 22%, of whom 2% are retired people.

But countries that have developed have a relatively smaller number of dependants.

The 2014 census report also shows that in the last 10 years, Uganda posted a 3% annual growth rate, which means one million people added to the country's population each year.

By the time districts like Nwoya, Abim, Ntoroko, Buwuma, Bukwa were created, their population had an average of 40,000 people. That means Uganda would have to create 25 new districts every year with a 1 million annual population increase.

Issa Gumonye, the local government spokesperson, says for the creation of district to be granted by the government, the geographical area must constitute a total population of 500,000 people. However, this requirement was revised by cabinet last year to below 200,000 people due to an increase in appetite for districts from the Ugandan population.

Gumonye says despite Cabinet imposing a moratorium on creation of districts three years ago, it was forced to lift it last year by some Members of Parliament.

Working population

Charles Zirarema, the director of National Population Council Secretariat, says countries such as Singapore and South Korea that have developed, have had one thing in common: They have checked their population growth such that the number of the working population (50-60 years) is bigger than the younger dependent population (under 30 years).

move to a middle-income status

GRAPHIC BY BRIAN SSEKAMATE

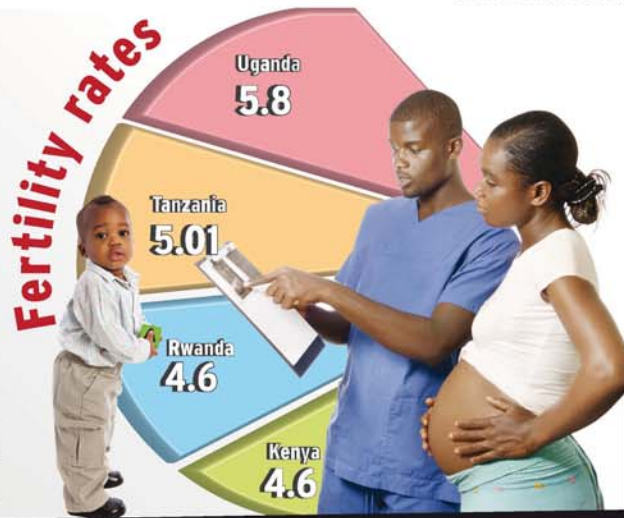
Uganda's population

78%
of Ugandans are below **30 years**

47.9%
of the population is under **15 years**

22%
are productive, of whom **2%** are retired

The annual population growth rate is **3%**



"Here, in Uganda, the biggest chunk of our population (under 30 years) is bigger and forms 78% of our total population (according to National Population Census 2014).

It means our ratio of dependents is very high and instead of using our resources in investment, we have to take care of this young population. It is the reason

the national debt is high. We can't compete with other countries," he says.

Other causes of high fertility rate

In many families in Uganda, men have a final say on the number of children and since they attach value to big families they usually settle for more children.

In Uganda, like the rest of Africa, more boys still mean

extra labour for the families, while girls come with the promise of bride price.

The high fertility rate is also made worse by cultural norms that attach responsibility to a bigger number of children. In some parts of the country, having a bigger number of children may win a politician an office as success.

But Church and opinion leaders who are against

family planning are also exacerbating the problem. Some politicians like Haji Abdu Nadduli, the minister without portfolio, at one time promised pigs to those who deliver more children.

There are also radio presenters who use their

programmes every morning to congratulate couples that have just had children and appeal to others to emulate them.

What should be done

Edith Kangabe, the officer in charge of policy, planning and programming at theNPC Secretariat, explained that to assure Ugandans that a smaller number of children is a good idea, there is need to reduce the infant mortality rate for them to know that when they produce one child he or she will not die prematurely.

But with the current high fertility rate, Tiondi advises the Government to give priority to skilling the youth, like Kenya has done, so they can find jobs in the informal sector.

Zirarema says Uganda has to address the high teenage pregnancies and provide family planning services to women.

"One in every four girls in Uganda becomes pregnant in their teenage, which is complicating things," he says.

He says NPS is sensitising all leaders on what should be done and how Uganda can achieve the demographic dividend (DD) in order to

make progress, although they are facing a lot of threats from a conservative population.

Demographic dividend is the accelerated economic growth that may result from a decline in a country's birth and death rates and the subsequent change in the age structure of the population.

"We are changing from the population policy of 2008 to take into consideration the National Planning Authority II and the Vision 2040, and the globally 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs), which provide for how our population can be turned into an asset," he said.

Kangabesays improving health care and also social security in the country can be helpful.

"Many Ugandans prefer having a bigger number of children as security in case of death," she says.

The number of Ugandan children who die before their first birthday dropped to 54 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2011 from 76 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2006. But Kangabe the drop is marginal, adding that it says is too small to persuade the population for an effective transformation in habits.

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