

Beyond bonus or bomb: upholding the sexual and reproductive health of young people

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Abstract: *Described as a blessing or a curse, a bonus or a bomb, the youthful population boom in the global South is thought to be the catalyst of present and future social change on a massive scale. These binary understandings of youth are popular among proponents of development programs aimed at young people, including for family planning. But dualistic, numbers-based theories oversimplify a much more complex picture. They narrow our perceptions of young populations and, when lacking more detailed understanding based in youth experience, have the potential to constrict sexual and reproductive health and rights. Instead, youth-friendly, inclusive sexual and reproductive health policy should build from young peoples' visions and diverse realities.* © 2014 Reproductive Health Matters

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The youthful population boom in the global South is thought to be the catalyst of present and future social change on a massive scale. For many, the size of the youth population alone makes it a formidable force in global politics, economics, and international development. Held against a background of supposedly peaceful population ageing and potential economic stagnation in the global North, the youthful population is presented as both the key to positive future growth for global South nations and equally, as potentially explosive.

Political scientist Henrik Urdal describes large youth populations as a “blessing or a curse”.¹ Former World Bank Chief Economist Justin Yifu Lin asks if they are a “demographic dividend or demographic bomb in developing countries”.² Journalist Winsley Masese questions whether Kenya’s youth are a “demographic time bomb or blessing”.³ These comments are illustrative of an international, wider conversation among many development policy-makers, scholars, and media commentators about the potential of the youthful population boom. The dualistic terms they use reflect two popular theories about young people. The “demographic dividend” concept suggests that large youth populations provide a “window of opportunity” for economic growth and development, while the “youth bulge” theory predicts that they are prone to violence and unrest. The

two theories are gendered. The demographic dividend theory emphasizes the role of empowered young women, while the youth bulge theory characterizes young men as prone to violence.

As above, the theories are often used as mutually reinforcing arguments. They function like two sides of the same coin. For many analysts, the side of the coin that faces up – bonus or bomb – depends on the role of family planning in successfully lowering birth rates, along with other interventions to support youth achievement, such as education, employment, and civic participation. A demographic dividend can degenerate into a violent youth bulge and conversely, a youth bulge can be redeemed as an economic bonus given the right opening. USAID Deputy Administrator Donald Steinberg’s comment on a Rio+20 plenary is an example of this thinking:

“The youth bulge are the young people we didn’t reach, the demographic dividend will be the ones we reached.”⁴

This binary framework for understanding large youthful populations is found in development policy. For instance, the online forum for civil society input on the post-2015 development agenda includes a discussion on “high population growth, including the issue of the youth bulge and the demographic window of opportunity.”

As part of this theme one of the forum moderators, demographer John Bongaarts of the Population Council, makes the case for family planning for young people, along with socio-economic development and education for girls to support fertility decline.⁵ As with this post-2015 consultation, the youth bulge and demographic dividend concepts are often used to inform family planning policy. However, use of one theory does not automatically evoke the other, and they are often used separately. For instance, the IPPF briefing paper *Family Planning and the Demographic Dividend* advocates government- and donor-facilitated fertility decline in places like Thailand through provision of voluntary family planning, and improved child survival and women's empowerment strategies. The paper does not refer to the youth bulge theory or to the potential of youth violence due to high numbers.⁶

I agree that providing young people with access to family planning, in the context of comprehensive and quality sexual and reproductive health, is an important policy priority. I also agree that demographic information about youthful population size is one of many essential inputs to inform appropriate policy. At the same time, I argue that numbers-driven theories, like the demographic dividend and youth bulge theories, oversimplify a much more complex picture and provide problematic rationales for family planning. They narrow our perceptions of young populations and, when lacking more detailed understanding based in youth experience, have the potential to constrict sexual and reproductive health policy and impact the type and quality of family planning available. This is true both generally, and for policy aimed specifically at young people. Creative policymaking and thinking are required to provide sexual and reproductive health policy that is responsive to the full spectrum of needs of the global population, build on the gains of ICPD, and uphold rights. Sexual and reproductive health provision should be available to people of all ages who require it, including adolescents and young people.

In this paper, I analyse the popular “youth bulge” and “demographic dividend” theories and look at how international agencies and governments have adopted them as the basis for policy addressing young people. Despite their popularity, I argue that the theories mischaracterize young people and offer limited insight into their complex identities and realities. Because of this these theories

are likely to result in policies and services that do not accurately respond to young peoples' needs. In particular, the theories argue for lowering birth rates as a cornerstone of family planning policy, advocacy and provision, as a way to address global problems. They overemphasize contraception as a technical solution to resolving larger economic and social issues.* Access to contraception is an essential part of sexual and reproductive health provision and an important aspect of women's empowerment. At the same time, any policy that instrumentalizes contraception as a means to achieve national and international goals has the potential to undermine rights.

I argue for inclusive and nuanced understandings of young people, generated largely by youth advocates and their allies, which promote a rights-based approach to sexual and reproductive health. Young advocates' quality work provides a starting point for youth-friendly policies and services that meaningfully include young people. Their visions for sexual and reproductive health services break down walls that have too long divided sexual and reproductive health from HIV services and provide models for inclusive service provision.

Young people: carrying the future?

Current demographic trends show both population growth and decline in different parts of the world. Global population growth rates have slowed significantly since the 1960s, and total fertility rates have fallen. Although family size is getting smaller, with an estimated global total fertility rate (TFR) of 2.53 children per woman, 33 countries in sub-Saharan Africa have a TFR over four. Nevertheless, fertility rates are declining in these countries as well, particularly in urban areas. In other countries, especially in East Asia and Eastern Europe, fertility rates have fallen well below the replacement level of roughly 2.1 children per woman so that population is declining. Between 2005–2010, the 75 countries with below-replacement fertility made up 48% of the world's population.⁸

Trends in fertility rates contribute to the global distribution of ageing and youthful populations.

*For example, see Lisa Ann Richey's analysis of how family planning programs in Tanzania aimed to address economic and political development problems in *Population Politics and Development*.⁷

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