

# TRANSFORMING AND UPLIFTING LIVES

*One Region One Mission*



**REALIZING THE DEMOGRAPHIC DIVIDEND:**  
Empowering and protecting young people  
across West and Central Africa

*“We have a global resource that until now has been largely overlooked, and it has nothing to do with science or technology. It is the world’s young people.”*

Dr. Babatunde Osotimehin,  
UNFPA Executive Director.

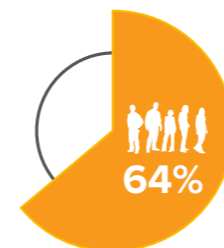


## Fulfilling Young People’s Potential

UNFPA promotes the empowerment of young people in order to build resilience, address instability and combat the rise of extremism. We want to create a conducive environment for harnessing the Demographic Dividend and contributing to the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals and the African Union’s Agenda 2063.

The people of West and Central Africa are young. More than 64% are under the age of 24. This youthful population is our region’s brightest hope – but only if we invest in it now. This must start today and ensure long-term, sustainable solutions to the health, education, employment and empowerment issues that hold young people back.

The future of the countries across the Sahel, along the Mano River and around the Lake Chad Basin depends on [governments, national stakeholders and the international community addressing the prevailing challenges in a strategic and sustainable manner.](#)



of the population in West and Central Africa is **under 24 years old**

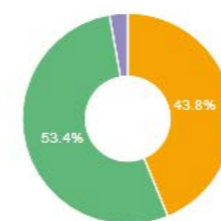
We will only harness the Demographic Dividend - where a youthful population becomes an economically advantageous workforce with fewer dependents - by allowing people to make informed choices about when to have children and to plan how many children they have. Also ensuring that these children are educated and provided with skills and opportunities for productive employment and access to decent jobs. Doing so will benefit the economy and contribute to the well-being of the family.



### WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA DEMOGRAPHIC DATA - SWOP 2015

#### Population

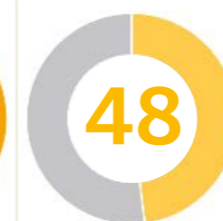
Population, per cent



- Population aged 0-14
- Population aged 15-64
- Population aged 65+

#### Maternal and Newborn Health

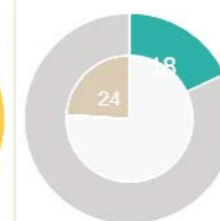
Births attended by skilled health personnel, percentb 2006-2014



- Births attended by skilled health personnel

#### Sexual and Reproductive Health

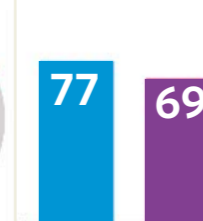
Contraceptive prevalence rate and unmet need



- CPR any method 18%
- Unmet need 24%

#### Education

Adjusted primary school enrolment, net per cent of primary school-age children, 1999-2014



male female

#### Fertility

Total fertility rate, per woman, 2010-2015



5.5



Ensure access to health  
Education  
Employment  
Empowerment  
Equality / Equity

UNFPA recognizes the power of young people and sees them as agents of change. To leverage their potential, we work on the 5E's for young people:

1. Enabling access to Quality Health
2. Empowerment
3. Education
4. Employment
5. Ensuring Equality and Equity

### What is the Demographic Dividend?

A Demographic Dividend is a boost in economic growth that occurs when a population has more workers than dependents (children or people too old or unhealthy to work). To create and realize the dividend depends on good governance and the empowerment, health, education and employment of people, together with higher savings, which can free up resources for sustainable development and well-being.

The key to harnessing the Demographic Dividend is enabling young people - and adolescent girls in particular - to achieve their potential. The Demographic Dividend can also speed up the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals.

To achieve a Demographic Dividend, governments across West and Central Africa must also recognize that human rights and demographics are the corner-

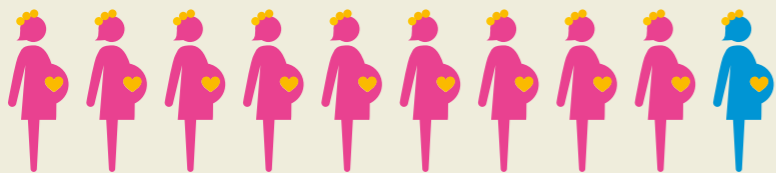


stone of development; know the size, sex and age structure of their population, both now and in the future and invest in empowering and protecting young people.

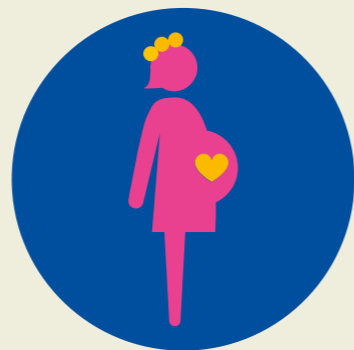
### What are the issues preventing the region benefitting from the Demographic Dividend?

- **Terrorism and security threats** are major concerns across West and Central Africa, especially in the Sahel and Lake Chad region. Young people and women, who constitute a majority of the population, are often the targets for recruitment into radical movements or the victims of violence. In just five countries alone - Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger - up to 41 million youth under 25 years of age are at risk of radicalization or migration.





**Nine of ten adolescent births are in the context of child marriage**  
 Source: Demographic Perspectives on Female Genital Mutilation (UNFPA, 2015)



**West and Central Africa has the largest percentage (6%) of reported births before age 15.**

Source: Motherhood in Childhood: Facing the Challenge of Adolescent Pregnancy. State of the World's Population 2013 (UNFPA)



**40%** of girls are **married before their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday**  
 Source: Demographic Perspectives on Female Genital Mutilation (UNFPA, 2015)

- Harmful traditional practices.** The West and Central Africa region has some of the highest child marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM) rates in the world. In Guinea and Mali, more than nine out of 10 girls (between the ages of 15 and 19) have been victims of FGM. Two out of five young girls are also married before the age of 18. Adolescent birth rates are highest where child marriage is most prevalent. Nine out of ten adolescent births take place in the context of child marriage. West and Central Africa has the largest percentage (28%) of women between ages of 20 and 24 who reported a birth before age 18 as well as the largest percentage (6%) of reported births before the age of 15 in the world.<sup>1</sup>
- Unmet need for Modern Contraceptives and Weak Health Systems.** Eighty per cent of unintended pregnancies among adolescents occur among those who do not use modern contraception or rely on traditional methods. Compared to other age groups, adolescents who are married or in a union have the lowest use of contraception and the highest levels of unmet need.<sup>2</sup> Complications from pregnancy and childbirth are a leading cause of death in adolescent girls and young mothers are more at risk of suffering obstetric fistula. Adolescent girls and young women account for one in four new HIV infections in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>3</sup>



1 Motherhood in Childhood: Facing the Challenge of Adolescent Pregnancy. State of the World's Population 2013.

2 Ibid.

3 UNAIDS Gap Report 2014.



- **Lack of schooling and skills.** Education and learning can play an important part in countering terrorism and harmful traditional practices as well as promoting good sexuality and health practice. Information represents power. But it is a severe challenge in a region where only 56% of children have access to primary education and only 36% of the population can read or write. There are huge numbers of children out of school and without the right skills to eventually access productive employment and decent jobs. In Nigeria, the most populous country in the region, there are some 7.7 million children out of school.<sup>4</sup> Girls are particularly disadvantaged when it comes to education - less than half go to school.
- **Unemployment and persistent underemployment of young people** especially in the informal sector, where entrepreneurship opportunities, productivity and pay are low. Even those who have completed their studies are in vulnerable employment situations because they are not adequately prepared for working life. The figures provided by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) are indisputable - between 2000 and 2008, some 73 million jobs were created in Africa, but only 13 million for the 15-24 age group.
- **Gender disparities.** Although gender equality has improved in the region, the situation is not the same for all women and adolescent girls. Progress has been slow and limited for women and girls in very poor countries, especially for those who

<sup>4</sup> Education data from UNICEF website accessed 28.06.15. Link here: [http://www.unicef.org/wcaro/overview\\_1898.html](http://www.unicef.org/wcaro/overview_1898.html)

also face other forms of exclusion because of their social status, disability, location, and ethnicity. Women and girls are more likely to work in the informal sector, where wages are low, and therefore gain less than men. In some settings in the region, access to health care still remains a decision made exclusively by men.

### How can the challenges be addressed?

This is where demands of the Demographic Dividend, which highlight the need for a multi-sectoral approach, come into play. It provides a strategic framework for addressing these challenges and it is clear that success depends on a unified, holistic effort.

In countries with severe protracted crises, such as Mali, where schools have been closed for three and a half years in some regions and teachers have been forced to flee, young people have been left vulnerable and exposed to all kinds of exploitation and manipulation, including violent extremism and forced migration.

Keeping young people in school and providing them with skills for a dignified life therefore becomes much more than just a development issue; it becomes a necessity for stability, peace and security too. This calls for implementing policies to restore peace and also to support the enrolment, retention and completion of primary, secondary and tertiary levels of schooling and training, especially for girls. Measures to support this include, but are not limited to, reducing school costs, addressing skills mismatch and providing attendance incentives, particularly for girls and the economically disadvantaged, and ensuring the protection of teachers and students.



Investing in adolescent girls will lead to:

- The realisation of a girl's full potential
- Improved mother and child health
  - More girls finishing their education
  - Increased economic productivity

Equally important is the need to [support the creation of an environment that allows young people to find decent jobs and earn a living wage](#). The continent's current economic growth is still largely dependent on extractive industries and most countries do not have an active strategy to absorb this potential new young workforce. Strategies to address this must include [realising the importance of investing in human capital](#) and advocating for incentives to encourage scaling up of the labour market to create opportunities for young people. They must also strengthen the [provision of quality education and vocational and entrepreneurial training](#) and address the issue of high under-employment in the informal sector.

The data shows that [adolescent girls and young women are the most vulnerable in the region](#) and so their rights must be addressed as a matter of priority. There must be policies, legislation and programmes to [address child marriage, female genital mutilation and gender-based violence](#). Interventions must also take into account their [sexual and reproductive health needs](#) and focus on scaling up quality youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services, including family planning, to both married and unmarried adolescents and young people.

With a better educated, healthy population and with investments in human capital development, countries would enjoy a larger proportion of their population being economically active, further advancing economic growth and development.

## What is UNFPA doing to help?

UNFPA in West and Central Africa uses the [Demographic Dividend as a framework and strategic focus for our work](#). We draw a clear [link between the empowerment of young women and the provision of sexual and reproductive health and rights and sustainable economic development](#). We therefore encourage and work closely with governments to invest in these historically-undervalued issues and use a business model which ensures we maximize our investments in the areas we best serve.

We are also [prioritizing the need to protect young people growing up in the many fragile countries](#) in the region. The UN system as a whole recognizes the vital role that young people can play to counter violent extremism and the Security Council adopted a historic resolution on 9 December 2015 on Youth, Peace and Security to this effect. UNFPA is playing its part by contributing to [building the resilience of individuals, communities and systems to better withstand environmental as well as other shocks](#).

**Curbing the threat of Boko Haram:** UNFPA has engaged with governments and partners in the Lake Chad Basin Countries to encourage and enable young people to become agents of change and contributors to their countries' development. A high-level event took



place in September 2015 in New York to mobilize key stakeholders to take action to address this issue. Following the meeting, an initiative to curb the threat of Boko Haram and respond to the increased vulnerabilities of young people in conflict situations is being developed.

**Mano River Youth Empowerment and the Demographic Dividend:** UNFPA is partnering with the Mano River Union and the countries most affected by the Ebola Virus Disease to develop an initiative for young people which puts in place relevant social, economic, governance and health policies to ensure a multi-sectoral approach to inclusive economic growth in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone in the context of the recovery process.

**UNFPA-UNICEF Joint Programme on Child Marriage:** In 2015, UNFPA – together with UNICEF – launched a Global Programme on Child Marriage to ensure that girls fully enjoy their childhoods free from risk of marriage and experience healthier, safer and more empowered lives. Within this framework, UNFPA ensures girls access to life skills, age-appropriate sexuality education and health services, including sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services. It gives girls opportunities for participation and enhanced mobility and documents, evaluates, and shares this body of work across countries. UNFPA's efforts on child marriage bring together the areas of population data and dynamics, SRH information and services while accounting for gender dynamics, girls' rights and cultural con-

text. Recent data from the WCA region indicates a slow decline in child marriages in some countries and regions, particularly among younger girls. Child marriage has fallen by 10% or more in a handful of countries: Ghana, Liberia, Mauritania and Sierra Leone; in urban areas of Togo, Benin and Cameroon and in the rural areas of Congo<sup>5</sup>. The UNFPA-UNICEF Joint Programme works to maintain these hard-won gains and build on this promising progress alongside the African Union campaign against child marriage.

**UNFPA-UNICEF Joint Programme on FGM/C:** Equally, there has been tremendous progress made on the elimination of female genital mutilation in the region. Since 2008, UNFPA has been working together with UNICEF to support 8 countries to accelerate abandonment of this harmful practice. Most countries have seen a decline in the prevalence of FGM, but some countries including Guinea and Mali have actually seen an increase<sup>6</sup>. The Joint Programme on FGM/C is the largest global programme to accelerate the abandonment of FGM and to provide care for women and girls affected by it. UNFPA helps strengthen health services and works with civil society organizations, religious and traditional leaders to amplify and generate support for abandoning the practice. With the support of UNFPA and other UN agencies, several countries have passed legislation banning FGM and developed national policies to achieve its abandonment - Nigeria and the Gambia being the latest examples in 2015.

5 Marrying Too Young: End Child Marriage UNFPA 2012.

6 Demographic Perspectives on Female Genital Mutilation (UNFPA, 2015).





**Engaging with Faith Based Organizations:** In an effort to address the youth and family planning challenges in the region, UNFPA organized a high-level consultation in October 2015 with religious and political leaders of ECOWAS Member States and Mauritania. The event brought together Ministers; leaders of diverse religious groups and faith-based organizations; traditional leaders; United Nations agencies and development banks. The main objective of the meeting was to encourage support to strengthen youth empowerment and ensure their access to reproductive health services. The outcome of the consultation was captured in a Declaration<sup>7</sup>, which outlines an innovative and strategic partnership between governments, religious organizations and development partners to harness the Demographic Dividend in the region.

**Reproductive health and rights and women's empowerment:** In November 2013, Niger President Mohamadou Issoufou called for better action to tackle the region's fragility, highlighting a lack of family planning, child marriages and poor education as the main problems. In 2015, this call was turned into action in the Sahel Women Empowerment and Demographic Dividend Project. The overarching goal is to reduce fertility and child mortality to achieve the broader goals of triggering the Demographic Dividend (economic gains) and reducing gender inequality in the Sahel region. The development objectives focus on improving women and adolescent girls' empowerment and their access to quality reproductive, child and maternal health services in selected areas of the participating countries, through improving regional cooperation, sharing and generating knowledge and enhancing capacity and coordination.

7 The "Dakar Declaration of Faith-Based Leaders on Harnessing the Demographic Dividend in West Africa".

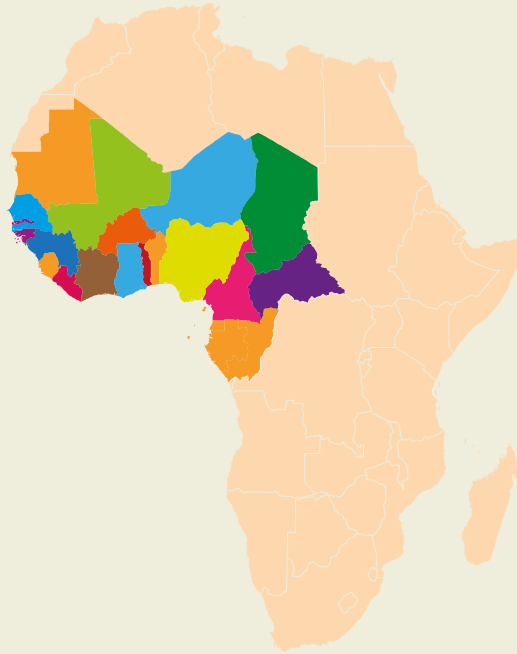
## Conclusion

We are standing at the gates of a new journey in global development which gives us an unprecedented opportunity to [focus on young people as key drivers for progress](#). Let us all [commit to the bold pledge of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda to leave no one behind](#) and prioritize investments in the health, education, employment, and empowerment of young people.

Dignity and rights lie at the heart of realizing the Sustainable Development Goals. [UNFPA strives to unleash the potential of young people](#) through the realization of their rights and dignity. If this principle is put into practice, and all young people can stay in school, have access to health services including sexual and reproductive health services, be protected from early marriage and adolescent childbearing and join the workforce and earn a decent, living wage, [the whole region will harness benefits of the Demographic Dividend](#).







United Nations Population Fund  
Route du King Fahd Palace,  
Almadies - PO Box 21090 Dakar  
[www.unfpa.org](http://www.unfpa.org)  
[www.wcaro.unfpa.org](http://www.wcaro.unfpa.org)