The promise of rapid economic growth that can occur as a country’s age structure changes—known as a demographic dividend—is igniting a resurgence of interest in population and family planning issues across sub-Saharan Africa.

Based on recent gains in health across much of Africa and the past experience of several Asian countries, many African leaders believe they too can attain a demographic dividend.

But a demographic dividend will not automatically result from Africa’s large population of young people. It also requires action from leaders, including investments in family planning, education, and child survival to foster fertility decline as the first step. Only when there are fewer children to support and the large population of young people reaches working-ages can countries begin to transform this demographic opportunity into the accelerated social and economic gains of a demographic dividend. Additional policies are crucial to support good governance, a healthy and skilled workforce, infrastructure, and economic development.

Activities
Over the last five years, the Population Reference Bureau’s IDEA Project has been a leader in communicating the potential of a demographic dividend. IDEA created the defining set of materials explaining the demographic dividend, illustrating how investments in family planning—combined with investments in health, gender equality, education, and the labor force—can foster economic growth and transform development. Project activities translated the evidence base about the demographic dividend into clear messages and concepts, creating tools for policy communication that are easily understood and useful for leaders and advocates.

These tools have reached audiences from civil society leaders to heads of state. For example, the multimedia ENGAGE presentation, “Harnessing the Demographic Dividend,” uses data and animated graphics to show what it takes for the demographic dividend to be realized, and has been the opening presentation at nearly every high-level dialogue in sub-Saharan Africa on the demographic dividend over the last four years. To complement the key messages from the ENGAGE presentation, IDEA produced a series of short video presentations and an online interactive infographic.

Various IDEA policy briefs, such as “The Challenge of Attaining the Demographic Dividend,” provide more detailed data and information to explain the demographic dividend and clarify how to achieve it. Two series of briefs about the demographic dividend were commissioned for the 2013 International Conference on Family Planning (ICFP) in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) in Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire. And IDEA has written specific country briefs on the demographic dividend with partners in Kenya, Malawi, and other countries.

IDEA staff, through participation in policy dialogue, technical meetings, development of materials, and technical assistance with southern partners, have emerged as leading authorities on the demographic dividend. Increasingly IDEA is asked to foster continued collaboration in the development community about how to understand, explain, and harness the demographic dividend as a paradigm for sustainable development in sub-Saharan Africa.

Results
IDEA’s communication framework for the demographic dividend has become the model for the international community and IDEA materials have been at the forefront of the discussion.
The ENGAGE multimedia presentation “Harnessing the Demographic Dividend” catalyzes discussion at international fora. It has been presented to heads of state, ministers, finance experts, and others at high-level events for UNECA, ICFP, Africa Union (AU), and the UN General Assembly. At these events the presentation enhanced policy dialogue about the importance of family planning and the investments and good governance practices necessary to achieve a demographic dividend as part of economic and social development efforts. “Harnessing the Demographic Dividend” has become the defining message about the connection between family planning and accelerated economic growth for sub-Saharan Africa. In 2014, the presentation launched discussion at an AU Commission (AUC) celebration of Africa Youth Day. The youth delegation used language from the presentation in their roadmap presentation to the AUC for youth and economic development in Africa.

IDEA demographic dividend publications are a model for the international community. The IDEA Population Bulletin on the demographic dividend has been disseminated around the world. The policy briefs are in high demand for international events, influencing discussions on the demographic dividend among policy audiences. These materials provide concrete guidance on the investments African leaders can make to position their countries to achieve a demographic dividend. During the 2013 ICFP High-Level Ministerial Meeting, information from the IDEA policy briefs framed the demographic dividend debate among policymakers, and the meeting report included data from IDEA materials. At Uganda’s first National Conference on Family Planning in 2014, President Yoweri Museveni launched a national report on the demographic dividend showcasing IDEA content and graphics.

IDEA technical assistance and leadership shape understanding of the demographic dividend among leaders. IDEA staff have participated in technical panels and reviews about the demographic dividend for a broad range of activities in Washington, D.C., and across the globe, including events for the Aspen Institute, Wilson Center, Population Association of America, ICFP, AU, and World Bank among others. IDEA provided detailed technical assistance to UNECA as they prepared and hosted a 2013 meeting for finance ministers. The IDEA technical support to develop materials and the use of the ENGAGE presentation to frame discussion convinced finance ministers attending a 2013 UNECA and AU Conference that immediate health and educational investments are needed to slow fertility if they hope to benefit from the demographic dividend. The ministers called for such investments in their final statement of commitment concluding the conference.

Lessons Learned And Looking Forward

Concise, nontechnical information empowers leaders and decisionmakers with a better understanding of the demographic dividend and the investments required to achieve sustained social and economic growth.

Using a variety of materials and tools for policy communication reaches a broad range of audiences. Disseminating these materials—from multimedia presentations to policy briefs—at different events and online further expands the reach of policy messages.

Multimedia presentations can increase and influence dialogue about the demographic dividend at high-level events by delivering concise and compelling messages.

As a result, there is increasing enthusiasm about the prospect of benefitting from a demographic dividend, especially among African leaders of countries with large, young populations. It is critical for advocates and leaders to be equipped with accurate data and tools to understand how to achieve and benefit from a demographic dividend, as well as how to effectively communicate this information to decisionmakers.

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