

## Births of a nation

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Dr Jotham Musinguzi, Uganda's leading population adviser, has the serenity of a man who can do no more. A former gynaecologist and obstetrician with a methodical, gentle voice, Musinguzi is the director of Uganda's Population Secretariat, which advises the government on population policy. And for 10 years he has been asking the same question: "Are we ready?"

The answer has always been no. Recovering from civil war and an HIV prevalence rate that peaked at 30 per cent in the 1990s, Uganda now has one of the world's fastest-growing populations. There are twice as many Ugandans today as there were 20 years ago, and there will be twice as many again – about 60 million – by 2030. By 2050, Uganda is expected to have 103 million citizens: a shade more, if current trends continue, than Russia. But it is not so much the size of the population as its structure that has Musinguzi concerned: Uganda is also the world's youngest country, with more than half of its population – 56 per cent – under the age of 18.

Youth pervades Kampala, the country's dusty, traffic-mad capital. The habits and ambitions of young Ugandans are visible everywhere: in the internet cafes, the brand new universities, the mobile-phone stalls selling credit in 200-shilling (6p) denominations – enough for a few text messages, not even a call. But their needs are evident, too: in the half-built schools, the throngs of teenage boys that gather outside carpentry shops and butchers, looking for odd jobs to do, the ceaseless tumble of children in the slums. "In Africa we don't see children as things to be counted," explained one Ugandan youth worker. "A child is a child."

Coping with, and celebrating, an explosion of young people places Uganda at the leading edge of the demographic challenge that is confronting most countries at the beginning of the 21st century. Not the familiar European and east Asian unease about ageing baby boomers and low fertility rates, but the opposite: the larger question of how to feed, employ and generally satisfy the biggest generation of young people in human history. There are 1.5 billion people between the ages of 12 and 24 in the world, and 87 per cent of them are growing up in developing countries. "I have turned down several jobs elsewhere because the challenge is here," Musinguzi told me recently, over coffee in Kampala. "Is our population going to be a positive resource or the thing that undoes all our progress? This is the question I will keep asking."



His uncertainty, despite abundant statistics, is genuine. To some extent, Uganda's population is following a path already travelled, and one that has generally led to prosperity. In the coming decades, Uganda and other countries across Africa, the Middle East and south-east Asia will go through the steepest phases of the "demographic transition" that other societies went through when they industrialised in the 19th and 20th centuries. The demographic transition describes the swing from the high birth and death rates of pre-industrial, uneducated, unhealthy populations to the low birth and death rates of their richer, healthier and more cautious descendants. The process involves rapid population growth because the death rate – eroded by improvements in public health – falls before the birth rate does, leaving one, or two, or three much larger generations that can double or triple the population when they themselves reproduce, even if they do not have as many children as their parents and grandparents. With development, the fertility rate then tends to fall, leaving countries in the advantageous situation of having a labour force that is much larger than both its dependent young and old: a 30- or 40-year opportunity to generate wealth, save it and invest.

The rewards of this "demographic window", while hard to calculate precisely, can be enormous. Europe and the US made the best of their demographic bonus in the second half of the 20th century. China, whose birth rate fell dramatically because of the one-child policy, is in the pink right now. India, whose growth rate peaked in the 1970s, is about to come good. Economists have attributed as much as 40 per cent of east Asia's per-capita income growth between 1965 and 1990 to its beneficial population structure. By contrast, Latin America, through inept military dictatorships and economic instability, has largely fluffed its demographic opportunity.

All of which can feel a long way from Kampala. In part, that is because if Uganda is on the same demographic path as the richest countries in the world, it is only at the very beginning. With a life expectancy of 47, and with 56 per cent of people younger than 18, Ugandans in 2008 are demographically not dissimilar to the English of 1821, when 51 per cent of the population was 19 or younger and people could expect to die at 40. Uganda's fertility rate is yet to fall noticeably from seven children per woman. Population dynamics suggest that Uganda, along with the rest of the world's youngest countries, will not benefit from any demographic bonus until 2045 at the earliest.

But another possibility is that Uganda – like much of the rest of sub-Saharan Africa and other outliers such as Afghanistan, Yemen and Iraq – might not be following any familiar demographic path at all. First, there are the numbers. Developing countries, above all in Africa and the Middle East, are experiencing rates of growth, youth and change that have never been seen before. Through all the turbulence of empire and the industrial revolution, Britain's population never expanded at more than 1.5 per cent per year. America's century-changing baby boom, meanwhile, peaked at a growth rate of 2.05 in 1950. By contrast, Musinguzi expects Uganda's population to grow by 3.6 per cent in 2008, and in recent years both Kenya and Yemen have broken the 4 per cent mark. A population growing at 3 per cent doubles every 23 years. To be as rich (or merely just as poor) as their parents, these children will require an economy twice as large.

But what raises the most questions – and fears – is where these demographic changes are taking place, and who they are happening to. The youth wave of the early 21st century is breaking over societies that appear least equipped to receive it. Demographic success stories in the past have relied on strong economies. Youth unemployment in the US actually fell during the 1960s, despite the flood of jobseekers in the enormous postwar generation. Likewise, from 1993 to 2003, GDP growth rates across Asia managed to outstrip the growth in the labour force, in China comfortably so. By contrast, average GDP growth in sub-Saharan Africa in the same period was 2.9 per cent, all but cancelled out by a growth in the labour force of 2.8 per cent. Simultaneously, across the Middle East, demographic pressures have been at least partly blamed for youth unemployment rates of 30 per cent or more.

The prospect of record-breaking generations of young people coming to maturity in fragile economies directed by brittle, corrupt governments has prompted plenty of dire predictions, known in the trade as "security demographics". A German anthropologist, Gunnar Heinsohn, for instance, has enjoyed cult success in Europe and invitations to international security conferences on the back of his theory of the "youth bulge".

According to Heinsohn, who uses historical analysis to come to his conclusions, once a country's proportion of males between the ages of 15 and 29 reaches 30 per cent, it is more likely to dissolve into civil war or start a conflict with its neighbours. "I would be careful not to argue that the youth bulge explains every huge atrocity there has ever been," he said. "But it explains quite a few developments in human history." After the rioting in Kenya in January, Heinsohn e-mailed me to point out that the Kenyan population had grown by a factor of 13 since 1928, and that 15- to 29-year-old males now represented almost exactly 30 per cent of the population.

Ask Liliane Katusiime about Uganda's population and she will reply "Ensi Yaleta". It's the name of a Ugandan pop song that means "the world has brought" – as in stuff, people, chaos – and young people in Kampala use it to describe their crowded lives. Liliane is 16, and one of 20 relatives who live together in Kalerwe, Kampala's western slum. I met her outside the hairdressers where her mother works. There was the fluff of hair extensions in the dust and small radios everywhere played the hectic commentary of a Uganda versus Kenya football match.



"Every time you are walking around, you are seeing so many people my age," said Liliane. "I think there is going to be a struggle for space. Where I come from, people are living very many in a house. Then, when you go to school, you compete for a desk, for a class, for a teacher and so on."

Liliane wants to be a journalist but has had to give up school; stretched family finances are being concentrated on her older sister, Maureen, who is going to Makerere University, Uganda's best, to study computing. Liliane described her large family as, simultaneously, a source of support – "without them you get trampled" – and a place where everything, including opportunities, had to be shared. "I grew up in a family of seven. Life becomes expensive when you have seven young kids. Living is a crowded thing. When I get rich, I'm not going to bother with so many kids."

She took me to meet her brothers and sisters in the family house in a district called Mulago after Kampala's biggest hospital, which sits on the top of the hill. There was an evangelical prayer book on the

one table and around it sat her sisters, including Maureen, an amplified version of the precocious Liliane. I asked Maureen if she felt optimistic about finding a job in IT and she looked at me as if I were a very simple person indeed. "In Uganda you can't just get a job anyhow," she said. "Didn't you search the internet before you came?"



Then I noticed a small boy sitting on my left. It was Liliane's younger brother, Ronald Agaba, who wants to be an accountant. He had been out playing football. Ronald was born on May 11 1993, making him the median age for a Ugandan man – between

14 years and 8 months and 15 years and two months, depending on which international statistics you use. When I told Ronald this – that half the Ugandan male population was younger than him – and that the equivalent age in the UK was 39, in Japan 43, he looked worried and said: "My age is too young. I want to continue my studies."

It is the Ronalds that occupy Dr Musinguzi, who is 58, and the alliance of demographers, statisticians and opposition MPs that is trying to bring down Uganda's birth rate. Andrew Mukulu, the director of population in the Ugandan Bureau of Statistics, has an eight-year-old son. "He is one of the people who makes me think so much about the population," he said. Mukulu's other great worry, shared by the World Bank, is Uganda's dependency ratio – the size of its labour force compared with those too young or old to work. In Europe, Italy's dependency ratio of slightly over 50 per cent (two workers to each dependent) is causing concern. Uganda's dependency ratio, the world's largest, stands at just over 110 per cent (nine workers to every 10 dependents). Even that might be bearable if Uganda's labour force was fully employed, or paying taxes, or working mainly in the formal, salaried sector, but it is none of these things. Seventy per cent of adult Ugandans describe subsistence agriculture as their main economic activity. According to Mukulu, that leaves just 10 per cent of the population generating a surplus that can pay for Uganda's public services. "They can pay for all this healthcare and education?" He asked. "To me, that burden is big."

Increasing formal employment in countries with young populations is also a demographic priority, because it can bring down the birth rate. Few family-planning campaigns have rivalled the contraceptive power of modern, urban, wage-earning life. I learned this from another elder of the Ugandan population scene, John Ssekamatte, who teaches the country's only demography course at Makerere University. I saw Ssekamatte the evening before I met Musinguzi and the professor was the first person to tell me about another great challenge for demographers in Uganda: that most people, including President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, who has ruled the country for the past 22 years, do not think the country has a population problem at all.



Ssekamatte told me a story about the adviser who stood up to present the results of Uganda's last census to the president in 2002. For the first time, statisticians predicted that the population, even allowing for a fall in the fertility rate, would pass 100 million in 2050. According to Ssekamatte, the adviser told Museveni that such a high rate of population growth would cause Uganda serious problems. The president responded that a population of 100 million in 2050 should be a target, rather than something to worry about. "That is what I want," he said.



"Of course we teased the man who was standing there," said Ssekamatte. "We said, 'You got a real slap in the face there'."

The man was Jotham Musinguzi.

That was when we realised we had a president who was hooked on a large population," Musinguzi told me the following day. And the president is not the only one. Every morning Kampala wakes up to

Kalisoliso (“the sharp-eyed”), a radio show that commands seven million listeners across southern Uganda. Kalisoliso began 10 years ago as a sports segment but has become a hectoring, song-laden blast of news, gossip and social commentary that can set the tone of national debate.

On the Friday before Christmas, Abbey Mukiibi, one of the presenters, a big-voiced man who fondles his belly before telling a joke, was preparing to go on air. That meant checking his mobile phone for any last-minute messages; he and his co-host, Kato Lubwama, read out as many as 20 rowdy congratulations for new parents every day, even though their show is only 15 minutes long. “It’s still a big deal here, giving birth,” said Mukiibi. The radio presenter is aware of Musinguzi and the work of the Population Secretariat. “We have had a lot of clashes with Pop Sec and the UNFPA [United Nations Population Fund] because we urge people to have lots of children,” he said. “But we want to have a large market base to make us a strong nation. That is what we believe.”



The Kalisoliso doctrine – “We believe that population is power. We believe that population is production,” said Lubwama – is the other side of the Ugandan youth debate, and it reaches to the top of politics and business. It blends traditional African pride at having a large family, the economic argument for a large domestic market and alarm at what is happening to Europe and Asia’s ageing societies.

Bitamazire Namirembe, the country’s veteran education minister, a long-time ally of President Museveni, believes it. And she is in charge of a system that will have to educate twice as many children in 15 years’ time, but even now has only one teacher for every 54 pupils – of whom just 4.5 per cent complete secondary school. “It is like a flood coming,” she said. “But what can we do?” Even James Kinobe, Uganda’s youth minister, who talks openly about the need to reduce the country’s fertility rate, was careful to moderate his concerns: “We will not be another Japan, where they don’t recognise they need their own children.”

At the end of our interview, Kinobe waited for one of Musinguzi’s colleagues from the Population Secretariat to leave the room before turning to me: “You need to have positive thinking. That’s the problem with these population people. They look at the population as a bad thing, but there is nothing we can do.”

The result, after listening to both sides, is the ambivalence of Charles Mbire, a businessman who runs the Ugandan arm of MTN, the mobile-phone network. Mbire, a powerful, pragmatic man in his 40s, does not know what to think about Uganda’s record generation. Primarily, he wants customers, and young ones. “I am a businessman. I am happy. My market is growing,” he said. Since the first day of business in 1999, MTN has grown from 7,000 customers to 2.5 million and seen the average age of its mobile phone users fall from 24 to 17. It is now the largest taxpayer to the Ugandan government. But Mbire is also an avid watcher of the History Channel – “all my spare time” – and he does not want Uganda to make avoidable mistakes. “Uncontrolled population growth will bring an unsatisfied population and that will bring revolutions, so you are back to square one,” he said. “So there should be an orange light beaming, saying, ‘Gentleman, we have a problem’.”

But Mbire cannot suppress his commercial instinct that Uganda’s population growth is also providing it with a young labour force that other countries do not have and that some of the richest among them are going desperately to need. When we met he was excited about reports that Ugandan security guards in Iraq had sent home more than \$4m in remittances. “Resources are moveable,” he said. “The world is a global village and right now human labour is a very important resource if properly used.” Mbire suggested that the Ugandan government set up a ministry for emigration, subsidise air fares and offer practical teaching specifically for those going abroad. “That is what is wrong with us,” he said. “Everybody says, ‘Train.’ Train. Train. Train. Everyone wants to be a graduate. A graduate of what? Of philosophy? In Uganda?” He looked exasperated. “If we had technical schools for taxi drivers, nannies and bellboys – that would be practical! Every hotel in Europe needs bellboys.”

Increased migration must be one logical consequence of the youth wave in places such as Uganda. If 87 per cent of the world’s young people are in developing countries, there must be places where they are not. According to the Ifo Institute, a leading German economic think-tank, the traditional 15 countries of the EU will need 190 million working-age immigrants by 2035 to maintain their present dependency ratios – and that figure assumes that the immigrants themselves will not age. But it is not just manpower that Uganda can provide. According to Mbire, his young mobile-phone users are a different, globalised breed. “This generation is productive. They are not a sit-back generation. They are very exposed. They wear shoes. They eat sausages. They have fashion,” he said. “They are like a new tribe.”

And that is the heady, truly unknown variable in arguments about the teenagers of the 21st century: whether the IT revolution, freer movement and new technologies will make the demographic transitions of the future as radical and optimistic as those that came before. Jo Boyden, who runs Young Lives, which collects data on 12,000 young individuals in the developing world for a project funded by the Department of International Development, cannot quite give in to the pessimists. "It just troubles me that we base so many conclusions on stereotypic assumptions about ourselves and [our] own past," she said. "In any discussion about youth bulges, the context is as important as the demography. And the context is no longer Uganda, or Ethiopia, or West Africa, or Vietnam, or India. It's that plus the world. That is what is socialising these young people, and in a way that has really never happened before."



On my last morning in Uganda I went with Musinguzi up the hill from Liliane's house to the maternity wards of the Mulago Hospital, where Musinguzi worked until the early 1990s. "This is where we churn them out," he said, as we walked through the blood-swiped labour ward to the bright, postnatal dormitories where new mothers rested with their babies. When Musinguzi left, just over 15 years ago, between 25 and 30 babies were born each day at the Mulago. Today, the same staff, in the same rooms, accommodate between 50 and 80 deliveries every 24 hours. "It is too much," said Clemensia Nakabiite, the senior obstetrician. Musinguzi walked along with his former colleague, past the mothers in labour, sitting on the hospital floor, and I

thought of what he had said once when I asked him how he imagined the future of Uganda.

"I travel a lot," he had replied. "And when I go to the main streets in London, when I go to Euston Station, or when I am in New York, on 42nd Street, near the UN, I see the hustle and the tussle of human beings. I see the world moving and I think, this is good. This world has energy, this is growth.

"But when I see Uganda with 55 million people, will Kampala be like London, with everyone healthy and well-dressed, charging to the Underground? Or will I see people just begging in the streets, still two worlds apart? This is not what I want to see, but if I do, I will tell the story of how it came to be this way."

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