

SOUTH Africa is experiencing a youth bulge as a result of the demographic transition that is under way.

Demographic transition is the movement from high to low mortality and fertility rates.

It has been seen in most parts of the world and is happening in some parts of Asia and Africa, and is a result of the decline in fertility and mortality which leads to the population undergoing a drastic change in its structure.

In societies in demographic transition, the proportion of older people is low due to historically high mortality. On the other hand the proportion of children is also low due to a recent decline in the rate of childbearing.

A paradox associated with demographic transition is that despite a decline in fertility, population growth continues.

The reason is a change of population structure. During this period, the bulk of the population is within the reproduction ages of 15 and 50.

Thus, in spite of the fact that the majority are not giving birth to many children, the momentum of population growth is built via changes in the population structure (ie increase in the youth population), resulting in sustained growth of the overall population.

The growth of the youth population in a society is a double-edged sword. If the majority of young people are employed, the economy benefits greatly as a large number of people working support a relatively low number of economically dependent age groups (the very young and the retired old).

At a national level, the state reaps the benefit from a large tax base as a result of the increase in the working population, laying a solid foundation for economic investment and growth. Households

benefit as working adults contribute by financially supporting fewer children and fewer older persons in families.

Many parts of the world have benefited from the youth bulge. The often-talked-about economic miracle in Southeast Asia, in which countries were dubbed the Asian Tigers, owes its success to a large extent to demographic transitions.

Benefits from the youth bulge have not only been confined to the Southeast Asia region, as many parts of the world have made the best out of the window of opportunity, the latest example being China. Of course the

opportunity presented by demographic transition is not eternal, thus it is expected that many Asian countries will start seeing a decline in their economic growth as their population ages. And Asia's demographic transition has not been timed harmoniously across the continent. China is expected to experience a drastic decline in economic growth as it faces an

ageing population. On the other hand, India, with its demographic transition timed behind many other Asian countries, is poised for enormous growth in its population and its economy, with some economists predicting that its population and economy will surpass that of China in the future. The main reason Asian countries managed to benefit from the youth bulge is due to providing skills for the majority of young people, many of whom managed to

SA'S youth bulge:

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If we're smart
we can use it to
grow the
economy and
create work

It can go either way – if we address the needs of our young, it will go our way

transition and enter the labour market. In addition, the economic advantage that was accrued from the youth bulge successfully translated into investments, thus boosting households and national economies. These investments resulted in capital accumulation that provided further stimulus for economic growth.

Africa, the last region in the world to experience a demographic transition, has started to experience the youth bulge that is associated with it. There has been some scholarship that has openly expressed the view that Africa is unlikely to benefit from the youth bulge, citing mainly the failure by the continent to provide universal quality education for its populace.

The first region to witness a large youth bulge has been North Africa. Incidentally, this is the same area that recently saw massive unrest that led to the fall of some long-entrenched governments, the so-called Arab Spring.

The unrest in North Africa and in other parts of the Middle East points to a dreaded prospect for countries in demographic transition. Indeed some analysts have found a correlation between the level of social unrest and the growth in the size of the youth population.

Irrespective of the veracity of the findings, the message from recent events is that the possibility of social havoc and unrest exists if the economic and development needs of the youth are not

addressed.

In addition to North Africa, the southern African region has begun experiencing a demographic transition. South Africa is at a more advanced stage compared to other countries in Africa.

It has high unemployment, especially among its youth. The most-often cited reason is the rapid decline in the mining industry, part of a rapid shift from primary to secondary and tertiary industry in the economy. Given the history of colonialism and apartheid which resulted in the paucity of specialised skills needed by this shift, a huge disjuncture between the skills required and skills available among the majority of job seekers is being experienced.

But it isn't so much that the economy has not been able to create jobs for an increasing number of job seekers; the major factor has been that it could not keep pace with a dramatic increase in the working-age population.

The reasons for the increase in the labour supply are multifold. The first is the promise of a better life that came with newly attained freedom in South Africa. The post-1994 period has seen an increase of young people entering the labour market, with this increase being larger among women.

The second reason is the subject of this article. There has been an increase in the number of young people at job-entry level.

One of the corollaries of the increase of the proportion of young

people is the rise in population mobility. As has been seen all over the world, young people are the most mobile section of the population. Population mobility should be seen in a positive light, especially in dealing with the youth bulge. Movement of young people leads to the acquisition of new knowledge, skills, and navigational capacities that help in the transition from education to work.

The major issue in explaining the importance of mobility in

Africa is that in most contexts, mobility is seen as migration, which is generally a one-way stream from rural to urban areas propelled by inter-regional economic disparities.

But the youth bulge should not necessarily be associated with negativity in Africa. As is often noted, the continent has some of the fastest-growing economies in the world, and a fast-growing middle class. While a link between these positive signs and the demographic

transition under way is yet to be established, it is a possibility.

Even if there is no such link, a youth bulge in a growing economy would probably spur economic development and innovation.

Such an example is the rapid penetration of cellphones. The growth of the proportion of young people in Africa has assisted in the mobile technology revolution.

Africa has been at the forefront in introducing use of cellphones in novel ways. Young people can communicate with their international peers despite the constraints posed by poverty and poor transport infrastructure.

In order for a demographic dividend to be a possibility, we need a skilled, healthy, and financially savvy cohort of young people.

A large internet survey conducted by Barclays Bank last year showed that young people in Africa are prioritising the acquisition of skills, investment and their health care.

Many would prioritise the acquisition of books and computers over making flashy statements to their neighbours. And most are prioritising savings and investments as they have become confident that they will live long enough to enjoy them.

These are sentiments we need to build on if we hope to make the best of the youth bulge, to create new and sustainable jobs and grow African economies.

The Asian tigers invested in their youth through innovations that drove a skills revolution.

We are facing unprecedented economic growth or unprecedented social upheaval. I believe we can do something to realise the former.

● *Professor Monde Makiwane is chief research specialist at the Human Sciences Research Council*



A number of Southeast Asian economies have benefited from the youth bulge; for other nations, demographic transition has led to social upheaval. PICTURES: REUTERS