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GUEST CONTRIBUTOR

Age Structure: The Root of sub-Saharan Africa's Governance Problems?

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Sub-Saharan Africa's sluggish economic growth and brittle political structures are clear challenges for the region. And two major development theories—one strictly political, the other demographic—seem to steer parallel courses in explaining them.

On one hand, a growing number of Africa's political analysts and academics are drawn to the conclusion that *weak governance* lies at the root of the slow economic progress and acute political fragility that stifle development in most of sub-Saharan Africa's nearly four dozen states. Yet political demographers have argued that the persistently *youthful population age structures* (Fig. 1) that are a characteristic of nearly all of this region's countries have constrained their socioeconomic development and sustain their vulnerability to coups d'état and civil conflicts.

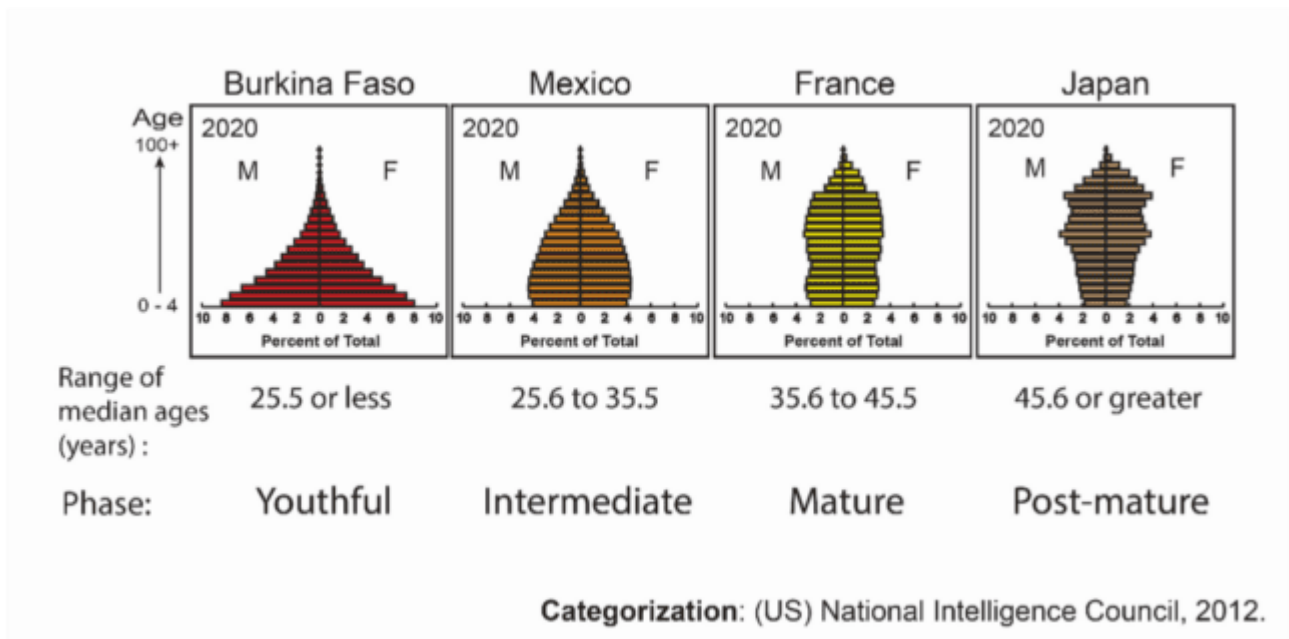


Figure 1. Phases of the Age-structural Transition

This disciplinary standoff took an odd twist when I began examining the six categories of data bundled into the World Bank’s Worldwide Governance Indicators database. These measures indicate that countries with youthful populations are generally assessed to have weak governance—a generalization that spans all six of the WGI categories and affects virtually every country within the tropical midriff of Africa (from Senegal to Somalia, then southward to Angola and Mozambique).

This finding suggests something startling: these two seemingly irreconcilable theories may simply be one in the same—or, at least, they conspicuously overlap.

Measuring Governance

The rising tide of criticism of governance in sub-Saharan Africa has met with little resistance—or even evaluation. So access to the World Bank’s Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) Dataset provides my new research with a means to objectively compare the relative strength of governance in and among sub-Saharan African states, and then evaluate the merit of this increasingly vocal critique.

The Worldwide Governance Indicators summarize multiple types of surveys that assess how strongly (or weakly) governments have responded to each of six scored categories: (a) government effectiveness; (b) control of corruption; (c) rule of law; (d) political stability and absence of violence/terrorism; (e) voice and accountability; and (f) regulatory quality.

From 1996 to the present (with omissions), Worldwide Governance Indicators governance scores have been generated from responses obtained in surveys of enterprises, citizens, and experts collected by survey institutes, think tanks, non-governmental organizations, international organizations, and private sector firms. Nearly all governance scores range between -2.5, which

indicates a near-consensus of *weak governance*, and +2.5, indicating a near-consensus of *strong governance*.

Research Questions

My examination of this question begins by attempting to validate (or refute) the criticisms of sub-Saharan Africa's governance using the six Worldwide Governance Indicators. Are claims of widespread weak governance in sub-Saharan Africa supported by governance data? If so, how well, on average, do these assessments of the region compare with other places?

Next, my work assumes a demographic perspective. It turns to *age-structural modeling* (a statistical tool originally designed by and for strategic intelligence analysts) in order to uncover trends in governance scores that could be associated with a population's advancement through the *age-structural transition*. This particular demographic process is driven largely by fertility decline, and it transforms populations that are numerically dominated by children and young adults into distributions in which the majority of residents are middle-aged and elderly.

After positioning all governance data along the age-structural transition, we can proceed to ask a pair of related questions: Is there a global statistical relationship between governance and *population age structure* (measured by median age)? And, if so, how well—or how poorly—does age structure explain weak governance in sub-Saharan Africa?

Are the Criticisms of Sub-Saharan Africa Legitimate?

If we accept the Worldwide Governance Indicators as unbiased measures of the quality of governance, then sub-Saharan Africa's critics have a valid point. The vast majority of countries within the two sub-Saharan regions in this study possess weak governance assessments (negative scores), in each of the six governance categories (Fig. 2). Notably, there are only two small sets that constitute exceptions: one set located in Africa's southern cone (Botswana, Namibia, and South Africa), and a second set among the small island states that ring the continent's eastern and western coasts.

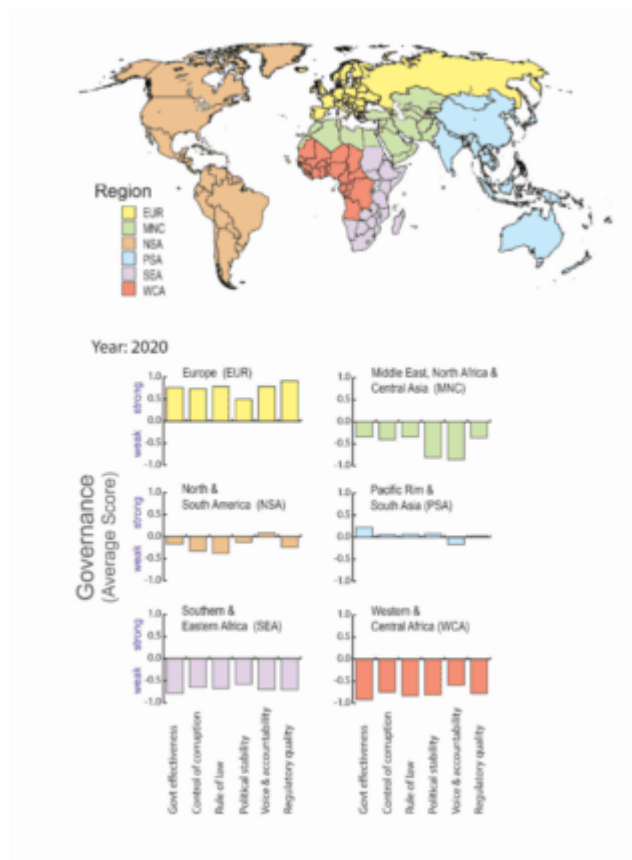


Figure 2. Average Governance by Region, 2020.

Only one other region rivals the two sub-Saharan regions in assessments of weak governance. This region encompasses the countries of the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia, and it features very low average negative governance scores in two Worldwide Governance Indicator categories: political stability and absence of violence/terrorism, as well as voice and accountability.

Links Between Governance and Age Structure

One surprise in examining the question is that governance is statistically—and quite consistently—related to population age structure. Regardless of the governance category, the age-structural patterns described by weak governance (negative scores) are virtually identical (Fig. 3).

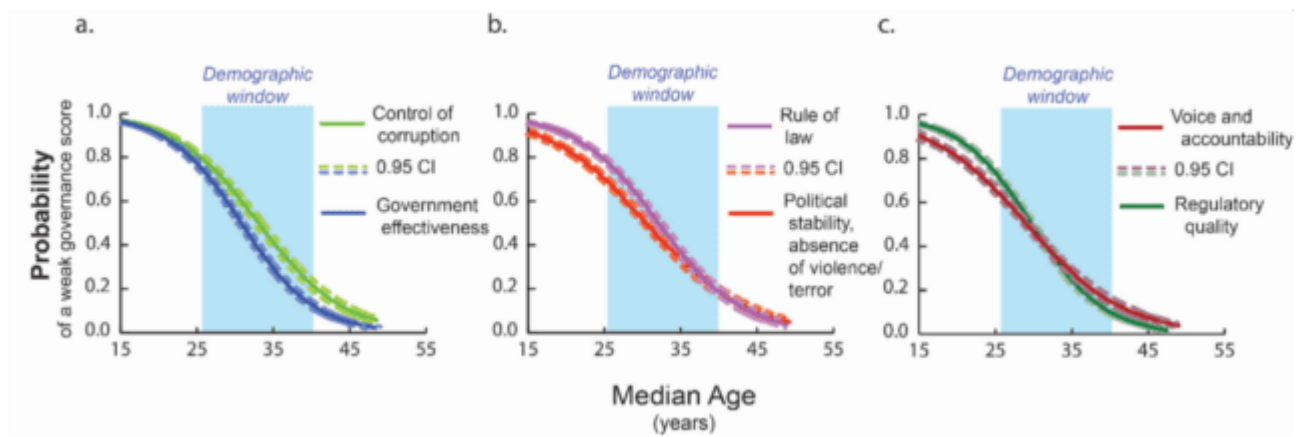


Figure 3. The Probability of Weak Governance Across the Age-structural Transition

For nations in the earliest portion of the youthful phase (low median ages), the chances of being assessed with weak governance (a negative governance score) are extremely high—consistently greater than 0.90 in all governance categories. As age structures mature, the propensity to govern weakly tends to decline steeply, ultimately dropping below a probability of 0.50 toward the middle of the *demographic window*—a development-favorable segment of the age-structural transition beginning near a median age of 26 years and ending around 40 years.

So far, statistical modeling has identified two exceptional groups of countries. The so-called least-populated states (countries with less than five million residents, such as Botswana, Namibia, and most small island states, including Cabo Verde, São Tomé, and Mauritius) tend to govern more strongly than expected for their median age in all governance categories. By contrast, resource-reliant states (countries in which oil and mineral rents comprise more than 20.0 percent of GDP) tend to govern more weakly than expected—but only in half of the Worldwide Governance Indicators’ six categories: government effectiveness, voice and accountability, and regulatory quality.

How Weakly Do Youthful Countries Govern?

Among the most youthful countries, positive (strong) governance scores are relatively rare. Negative (weak) governance scores vary. The study concludes that age structure accounts for about 50 percent of the statistical variation in governance scores on average. What accounts for the remaining variation has been difficult to determine thus far. Ultimately, it may be near-impossible to test.

To illustrate both trend and variation, the study generates six scatter-graphs—one for each Worldwide Governance Indicator category for the year 2020 (Fig. 4). Despite considerable individual-country variation around the statistical trendline (red dotted line), the graphs show strong commonalities: (a) similar scatter patterns; (b) linear trendlines with nearly identical slopes; (c) similarly timed shifts from negative to positive governance scores during the demographic window (shaded in blue); and (d) few weak governance scores over the median age of 35 years.

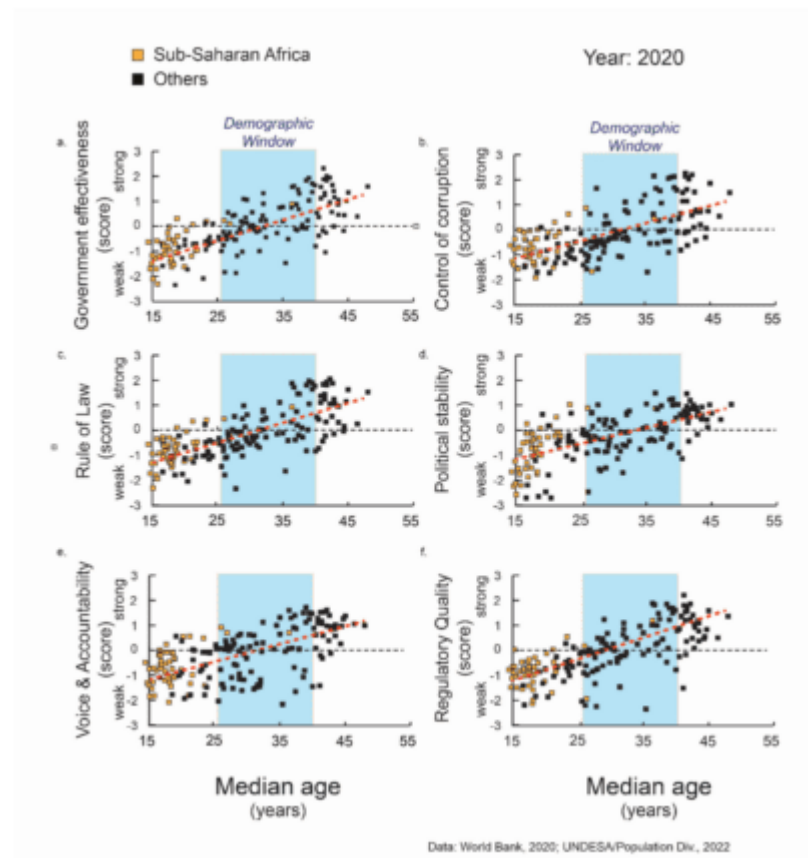


Figure 4. Governance Scores Across the Age-structural Transition, 2020.

Notably, this relationship between age structure and governance is global in scope. Weak governance is *not unique* to sub-Saharan Africa. Wherever countries remain in the youthful phase of this transition—whether positioned along the tropical midriff of Africa, in the core of the Middle East, in the Americas, or elsewhere—their governments are likely to be assessed with negative scores in all governance categories.

Age Structure and the Supply Side of Governance

Looking anew at the question of governance offers us some relevant new perspectives on the questions that opened this essay. Political demographers have focused primarily on the demand-side challenges of population age structure—stresses (and bonuses) associated with the movement of bulges through the age profile (see Fig. 1). In the youthful phase of the age-structural transition, their research has dwelt on the unmet needs for education, healthcare, and jobs among the large and growing proportions of children and young adults (the youthful bulge). In the post-mature phase, their attention has been fixed on the future needs of a growing proportion of retirees (the senior bulge).

Economic demographers take a different approach, studying some of age structure’s influence on the supply of governance. Drawing on data from the National Transfer Accounts Project, they document levels of lifecycle consumption, income, and public and private transfers. These studies suggest that in the absence of substantial resource rents and external sources of income

(such as remittances, foreign loans and grants), states with high-fertility youthful populations are limited in their ability to tax and therefore constrained in their capacity to build and maintain key institutions. Thus, while experiencing a surge in children and young adults, youthful countries typically have limited fiscal resources with which to subsidize basic education and specialized training, to fund and improve services, to exercise quality control, or extend a social safety net widely across their population.

Realistic Expectations

What comes from reexamining these two competing development theories? One is a purely political theory which asserts that the widespread fragility and lagging development of most sub-Saharan African states are products of their weak governance. A demographic perspective drives the other theory, which argues that a youthful population age structure constrains the socioeconomic and political progress of its states.

When compared using the World Bank's six Worldwide Governance Indicators, however, we find little difference between these two perspectives. Demographically, Africa's weakest states are its youthful countries. And, statistically, youthful countries tend to govern weakly.

My findings will likely prove disturbing to Africa's political analysts, academics, opposition leaders, and regional organizations. Virtually all of the governments of weakly governing sub-Saharan states have youthful populations. Understandably, these experts and groups will no doubt continue to press them to launch initiatives to govern more effectively, to regulate more competently, to better deter corruption, and to work toward more open, accountable, and violence-free elections.

Some of these weak states may marginally improve. Yet the findings of my fresh look suggest that as long as countries retain their high-fertility, youthful demographic profiles, there are real limitations to what citizens can expect from the performance of their country's government. Without substantial demographic change among countries within the tropical midriff of Africa, the problems of weak governance, slow-paced development, and persistent instability will likely continue as the rule, rather than the exception.

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Sources: Institute for Security Studies, NSB, World Bank Policy Research Paper, National Accounts Transfer Project

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