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## Equity and population

By 2050 Africa's population is estimated to have reached 2.2 billion, which is 3.5 times the population in 1990 and more than double the population today. Africa's share of the global population will be 24% (up from 13% today). While growth elsewhere in the world is declining or flatlining... Africa continues to surge ahead.

Should we be concerned? Should we be prioritising measures to reduce this growth? It is a tough one. As Francis Omaswa rightly points out in his column (page 9) there is a lot to celebrate in Africa at the moment, and the dividend of 10 years of economic growth is there for everyone to see.

The question is, can it be sustained if the population continues to grow at this pace? I recall in the 1980s the given 'wisdom' was that you needed about 3% of economic growth to sustain every 1% of population growth. In those days the situation was gloomy as economic growth was stagnant and health and education services withered as governments ran out of money.

The heady growth in the last few years is unlikely to sustain. With much of the world experiencing recessionary economics, there is bound to be a spill over into Africa as external remittances take a negative turn, and international trade slows.

For many years there have been predictions of wars over water. This hasn't happened yet. We've been told that Africa does not produce enough to feed itself (and lots of others) but there has not been a decrease in nutritional status. In other words many expert predictions have not come to pass so far. Should we there-

fore just keep on keeping on as we are?

Or is there a tipping point after which everything goes backwards?

The population under 30 years of age in 2010 was 701 million. In 2050 it will be 1.2 billion. The 15–29 year olds will represent 46% of the population. At the same time the population aged 60 plus will have risen from 56 million in 2012 to approximately 215 million in 2050.

Historically Africa's famed extended family system has taken care of the young and the old and many in between. But is the family institution under strain? Have years of migration, urbanisation and social and political stability (and HIV) taken its toll on the venerable informal system of social support? Just maybe.

It seems that Africa does need to take heed, and to avoid risking its fast-moving upwardly mobile status. The conundrum remains though that the families providing the reproductive growth are more often than not the families who are directly benefitting from the new wealth. It is the poor who are multiplying fastest. And of course convincing them of the need for change is a much more challenging task.

In fact, until Africa has a more equitable balance of wealth, it is unlikely to be able to temper its population growth.

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