

»»» What is the relationship between population growth and fragility?

One Pager

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High population growth and fragility often go together. Of the 37 countries with the highest rates of children per female, 33 are considered fragile states according to the World Bank. Most of them are located in Sub-Saharan Africa. They are unable to provide their populations with essential basic services, they are more likely to experience violent conflicts and a large proportion of people live in poverty. What role do demographics play in fragile and conflict-affected states?

Population growth and youth bulge as secondary causes of conflict

Studies show that demographic factors alone do not trigger fragility – but they can exacerbate other conflict drivers such as high levels of inequality and discrimination against certain groups.

- If the population grows very quickly in relation to economic productivity, competition for limited resources, such as clean drinking water, arable land or raw materials, may increase. For many people, alternative sources of income are lacking and the likelihood of distribution conflicts increases. Extreme weather conditions as a result of climate change will also increase the likelihood of conflicts over natural resources.
- In countries with widespread poverty, tensions between ethnic or religious groups can flare up more easily if the two groups develop at different rates. As a group's proportion of the population increases, efforts to redistribute political power may intensify. This can result in violent domestic conflicts.
- In particular, the link between the risk of active conflicts and a youth bulge (i.e. a large proportion of 15–24-year-olds in the population) of more than 20% or a low average age of less than

26 years has been extensively studied. In poor countries, young people are particularly affected by unemployment. They often grow up in volatile conditions, where opportunities for political participation are lacking and violence is already widespread. At the same time, they have poor access to education and health services. If a lack of future prospects, widespread poverty and political instability come together, the risk of parts of the large youth population becoming radicalised or joining extremist groups and exacerbating the fragile situation may increase.

Population development therefore influences the likelihood of fragility through a variety of channels. At the same time, there is a corollary effect at play. The number of children depends on the largely insecure living situation of the population in fragile states.

Crises may delay births in the short term – long-term fragility is an obstacle to family planning

In acute crises such as wars, coups or similar, fewer children are born in the short term, because couples are either separated or they postpone their desire to have children until better times. On the other hand, however, economic hardship leads to earlier marriages and more births in some instances, especially among young women with low levels of education. Sexual violence, rape as a weapon of war and sex for food or protection usually increase. Once the acute crisis has passed, the birth rate generally soon jumps back to its previous level.

Few studies look at the impact of persistent fragility on population development. However, in the absence of basic social services in unstable

states, it is evident that the number of children per female remains at a high level, partly because:

- Essential health services, such as access to contraceptives and family planning advice, are interrupted or entirely absent. This means that couples cannot decide for themselves how many children they want to have and at what intervals.
- In conditions of extreme poverty, many children contribute to the family's income rather than going to school. Yet education has a major impact on the birth rate. In fragile countries, women with secondary school qualifications have up to three children less than those who do not.

Conclusion: Basic services have an equally positive effect on population growth and conflict management

Countries with rapidly growing young populations are at an elevated risk of fragility. Demographic factors do not trigger political instability and conflicts on their own. Government action in key areas such as youth employment, education and health is essential to break the spiral of fragility and population growth. Where governments accelerate demographic change and offer young people prospects of economic, social and political participation, the youth bulge can even work to their advantage. If the large youthful working population enjoys a good standard of education and finds qualified work, it can contribute to an economic upswing, resulting in a demographic dividend. ■