Assessing the Effect of Family Planning on population wellbeing in sub-Saharan Africa. Available data and challenges.

Abstract

Slowing population growth has been identified as a significant factor in ameliorating the population wellbeing. Existing studies revealed that the use of family planning (FP) reduces fertility rates; improves women's health' bargaining power; and improves child survival rates. In addition, FP enables women to achieve their educational and employment goals; and influence changes in the population structure, which will help the country experiencing a demographic dividend. The important question is to know whether sub-Saharan African countries have data to monitor the impact of FP on population wellbeing.

Overall, countries have data on fertility, FP, health, education, and poverty. However, those data sources are not integrated to enable impact evaluation. The study suggests the development of national platform to link available data on investments, programme implementation and impact of multi-sectorial FP policies and programmes at national and sub-national levels; and introduction of FP module in Health and Demographic Surveillance Systems (HDSSs).

Background

With more than 72% of people living on less than 2 US dollars per day, sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is the poorest region worldwide. The region also has the highest total fertility rates in the world: 5.1 children per woman, the lowest prevalence of contraceptive use (23%), and the highest infant mortality estimated at 67 per thousand. The SSA population is projected to grow from 860 million in 2010 to around 2 billion by 2050.

Slowing population growth has been identified as a significant factor in ameliorating the population wellbeing. Experimental studies have revealed that the use of family planning not only reduces fertility rates but also improves women's health, bargaining power; and improves child survival rates. In addition, family planning enables women to achieve their educational and employment goals. Furthermore, smaller families might ultimately influence changes in the population structure, which will help the country experiencing a "demographic dividend." Demographic dividend becomes possible when fertility declines and working-age people outnumber dependents. This powerful opportunity offers the potential to boost economic growth and poverty reduction—but only if government leaders implement sound policies. Strong evidence is lacking on the effect of family planning on poverty reduction at the household- and individual levels. However, though the relationship between population dynamics and economic expansion is complex, population dynamics, including population growth rates and age structures play an important role in national development. Therefore,this study aims to describe available data, which could allow analyzing the effect of family planning on population wellbeing; discuss the challenges and suggest the way forward.

Main question/hypothesis

The important question is to know whether sub-Saharan African countries have data to monitor the impact of family planning on population wellbeing, especially in reducing poverty. Existing studies show association between family planning and population wellbeing indicators using cross-sectional data. Such relationships could be spurious due to several confounding variables, which are associated with family planning and development indicators. Furthermore, the causal connections are not as easy to disentangle, partly because of the bi-directional nature of the effects. Also data from household surveys such as Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) and Multiple Indicators Cluster Surveys (MICS) do not include Information on Health District, which is the unit of health policy implementation in the country.

Methodology

Theoretically, Better birth spacing reduces incidence of low birth weight and poor maternal nutrition.

- Family planning prolongs education and helps girls in particular to achieve their dreams for the future.

- Unplanned pregnancies divert women from other life plans.
- Family planning increases child survival.

This study relies on analysis of existing family planning, its determinants and population wellbeing data sources in sub-Saharan Africa. These data sources include health information systems, administrative sources, household surveys and project reports. I will describe data sources including information on family planning, population wellbeing and other variables included in the causal pathway.

Results/key findings

Inventory of existing data sources on family planning, its determinants and impact indicators revealed mixed results. Overall countries have data on fertility, family planning, child' survival, education.

However, those data sources are not integrated to enable impact evaluation. In addition, the appropriate longitudinal data for quantifying the impact of family planning use are also in short supply, except in countries with Health and Demographic Surveillance Systems.

Therefore, we suggest: (1) the development of national platform to link available data on investments, programme implementation and impact of multi-sectorial family planning policies and programmes at national and sub-national levels. The platform will also contribute to build country capacity to use these linked data to answer policy and programme-relevant evaluation questions; (2) introduce family planning module in Health and Demographic Surveillance Systems (HDSSs) questionnaire to analyse changes at individual, household and community level.