DISCUSSION PAPER: A comparative analysis of selected International Conference on Population and Development indicators among Southern African and other upper middle- and high-income countries

BACKGROUND

The world’s middle-income countries (MICs) are a diverse group by size, population, and income levels. Lower middle-income economies (LMICs) with gross national income (GNI) per capita ranging from $1,026 to $3,995 and upper middle-income economies (UMICs) with a GNI per capita of $3,996 up to $12,375 at 2019 levels, often demonstrate the complexity of coexisting wealth, economic prospects and development inequalities. The transition of MICs through resource-constrained contexts, emerging economy, and current MIC status present opportunities for economic acceleration, as well as risks of economic downturn and failed prospects.

As such, UMICs must remain proactive to steer their sustainable development through inclusive policies and strategies related to health, including sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), economy, education, environment, and gender equality, among others. The African continent has eight UMICs and one high-income country (HIC), Seychelles. Half of the UMICs in the continent are in Southern Africa while two each are in West Africa and North Africa. This brief presents a comparative analysis1 of selected indicators related to the International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action (ICPD) between Southern African UMICs and selected UMICs and HICs from other parts of the world, with a view to identifying opportunities for improvement2.

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2 The countries included in the analysis are: Southern Africa (South Africa, Namibia, Botswana, Mauritius, Seychelles** and Eswatini), West Africa (Gabon and Equatorial Guinea), Middle East and North Africa (Algeria, Libya, Jordan and Israel**), East Asia and Pacific (China, Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore**), Latin America and Caribbean (Brazil, Mexico, Peru and Uruguay**). Throughout the presentations, HICs are denoted by ** while the selected Southern African countries are denoted by *. 
Total population: Population size varies widely among the selected UMICs and HICs. As shown in Figure 1, South Africa tops the pack of the Southern African UMICs with a population of nearly 60 million people. All the HICs have population of less than 10 million, suggesting that a country’s wealth status is not a function of its population size alone.

Population change is influenced by level of births (fertility), deaths and migration. Changes in total fertility rate (TFR) have a bearing on the population stock. Of the Southern African UMICs, Mauritius has the lowest total fertility rate (1.4), placing it among seven of the selected HICs and other UMICs with below replacement level fertility (that is TFR below 2).

Eswatini recorded the highest (42%) reduction in TFR among the selected Southern African countries during the last 25 years, second to only Libya among the rest of the selected countries (Figure 2). Even though still characterized by a below replacement level fertility, the Russian Federation saw a 29 per cent increase in its TFR during the last 25 years. Southern African UMICs may benefit from lessons on effective population and development policies, strategies and programmes from the other countries that have experienced replacement (or below replacement) level fertility through South-to-South and triangular collaboration.

Population age structure: The age structure of a population is an important demographic feature that can provide an economic boost to countries. As fertility declines, the population age structure changes towards a higher working-age population (aged 15–64 years) relative to the dependent population under 15 years of age. The surge in the working-age population and the decline in the dependent population present countries with a unique demographic dividend that can be channeled to socioeconomic development when supported by appropriate policies and strategies related to health, education and employment. Of the Southern African UMICs, Mauritius has the highest proportion of the working-age population (71%) as well as a growing older population, similar to Singapore, China and Thailand (Figure 3).

Despite their level of wealth, all the Southern Africa MICs fall below the median life expectancy at birth (76 years) of the selected countries. Mauritius has the highest life expectancy at birth of 75 years while South Africa’s life expectancy at birth of 64 years is the lowest among the Southern African UMICs, just five years above Eswatini’s, a LMIC (Figure 4).
SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS

Maternal mortality rate: Maternal deaths per 100,000 live births (MMR) is an important marker of health system performance. Of the Southern African UMICs, Namibia has the highest MMR (195), following Eswatini, a LMIC (437) (Figure 5). Despite falling below Namibia, South Africa is the only of the Southern African UMICs to have recorded an increase (72%) in its MMR during the last 25 years. Other countries with an increase in MMR include Libya (167%) and Jordan (48%). Southern African UMICs can still improve on their MMR to attain the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) target of less than 70 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births.

Teenage pregnancy: In addition to being an indicator of girls’ empowerment, teenage pregnancy is a contributing factor to maternal mortality. Figure 6 shows that Namibia has the highest teenage pregnancy rate among the Southern African UMICs with 82 births per 1,000 girls aged 15–49 years, Eswatini’s is 87.

Contraceptive use: Modern contraceptive prevalence rate (CPR) is mixed among the selected UMICs (Figure 7). Eswatini has the highest modern contraceptive prevalence rate (65%) of the selected Southern African countries, followed by Namibia (59%). CPR rates above 76 per cent in Thailand, Uruguay, Brazil and China suggest that Southern African countries can still improve on their CPR and reduce the unmet need for family planning (FP) (Figure 8).

ECONOMIC PERFORMANCE AND EQUITY

Gross domestic product: The gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate is mixed among the selected UMICs. April 2019 projections of the International Monetary Fund suggests that South Africa and Namibia will have less than 2 per cent growth, while Botswana, Mauritius and Seychelles will have more than 3 per cent growth, all of which are below the rates above 4 per cent projected in 2019 for other UMICs such as China, Malaysia, Armenia and Libya. Eswatini, Turkey, and Equatorial Guinea are expected to record negative real GDP growth of between -0.4 to -4.0 per cent (Figure 9).

Economic growth alone is an insufficient measure of prosperity. Attention must also be paid to the distribution of that wealth among the population. The Gini index, a measure of wealth or income distribution, is an important measure of equitable growth.
Inequality in the MICs extends also to other social spheres, such as gender. The gender inequality index (GII) provides a composite measure of gender inequality, using three dimensions: reproductive health (MMR and adolescent birth rate), empowerment (political positions held by women and secondary level education among women), and labour force participation. Countries with low GII value have low inequality between women and men, and vice-versa. As Figure 12 shows, Namibia and Eswatini have the highest levels of gender inequality not only among the Southern African MICs, but among all the selected countries, second to only Gabon, a major oil producing country that has been characterized by political instability in recent years. Both Israel and Singapore with GII close to zero confirm that achieving gender equality is an important element of development.

The level of inequality in the selected countries is further highlighted in Figure 11 on the distribution of income and consumption. Here again, South Africa, Namibia and Botswana lead with the richest quintile accounting for between 59 and 68 per cent of their income and consumption distribution.

CONCLUSION

The UMICs in Southern Africa demonstrate diverse performance in the selected ICPD-related indicators. As the countries continue to undergo demographic transition, deliberate efforts are required to promote learning as well as exchange on effective policies, strategies and programmes among themselves and with other countries from the rest of the world, through a South-to-South and triangular collaboration.