Rethinking African fertility: The state in, and of, the future sub-Saharan African fertility decline

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Abstract

Despite large differences in total fertility, there are strong similarities in the patterns of family building across sub-Saharan Africa. In this paper we argue that these patterns of family building and the persistence of high to medium-high fertility regimes across the region can be understood better if the institutional context in which African women's childbearing occurs is brought back into focus. Historical institutions affecting attitudes towards childbearing, combined with contemporary social, political and economic uncertainty and institutional capriciousness, have inhibited the African fertility transition. Until these institutional dynamics and their path-dependence are engaged with, Africa's fertility decline will remain slow.

Introduction

Over the last few years, our research on fertility in Africa has introduced the notion of postponement of childbearing (Timæus and Moultrie 2008) as a valid, viable and important childbearing strategy adopted by women – one that sees women's family building and contraceptive use intentions as something more nuanced than simply stopping (i.e. parity-specific limitation) or spacing (where the timing of childbearing is contingent on the age of the youngest child). We have argued that postponement, whereby women indicate equanimity about further childbearing provided that it does not occur in the foreseeable future, played an important part in the lengthening of birth intervals in South Africa, and contributed to that country's slow pace of fertility decline from the 1960s. We also noted that the pattern of birth intervals observed in South Africa lengthened from around 30 months in the late 1960s to around 60 months in the late 1990s largely independent of either age or parity, a finding consistent with the hypothesis of Caldwell, Orubuloye and Caldwell (1992) that fertility in Africa would decline more or less simultaneously at all ages and parities.

Subsequent work (Moultrie, Sayi and Timæus 2012) has found that, across 24 countries investigated in sub-Saharan Africa, the pattern of changes in birth intervals has been remarkably similar (albeit reflecting widely divergent levels of fertility – from over 7 children per woman in Niger, to close to replacement level in South Africa). Again, this pattern of change in birth intervals is suggestive that postponement of childbearing in the region may be an important family building strategy.

Still other research (Timæus and Moultrie 2012) has demonstrated that postponement is not only conceptually distinct from stopping and spacing behaviours but also results in a distinctive and diagnostically important pattern of change in fertility by interval duration.

Our work resonates and is largely consistent with the work of anthropological demographers working in Africa. Johnson-Hanks (2004, 2007), for example, proposes a third – 'frankly different' – approach to family building that is in essence similar to the strategy of postponement that we have identified. She describes the circumstances surrounding the adoption of this third-way strategy as one fundamentally mediated by uncertainty:

> Parents cannot reliably trade child quality for child quantity, or predict that the foreign models of reproduction that now appear promising will not fall apart tomorrow. Prices for schooling, healthcare, or housing are extremely unstable, as are wages; even government employees are not paid reliably in some countries. Most employment opportunities are filled through social networks or kin relations, rather than according to formal skills or job experience; few people have access to formal credit. Buses do not run on schedule. Electricity and running water go out regularly, even in capital cities. In the rainy season, roads get washed out. Insect-borne diseases like malaria seem to strike more or less at random; the water-borne and sexually transmitted ones, from cholera to HIV/AIDS, only marginally less so. Mortality rates at all ages are high, and death often unpredictable. (Johnson-Hanks 2007:1036)

The premise of this paper is that postponement of childbearing (which is inherently unable to produce as rapid a decline in fertility as family size limitation), coupled with high levels of desired fertility, might be a rational response to the uncertain personal and institutional context in which the majority of African women find themselves. We will argue that the excessive focus on individual-level attributes (women's education, autonomy etc.), while providing important information and data on differentials in childbearing has mistakenly diverted attention from some of the more institutionally-mediated determinants of fertility, which – once these are taken into account – might offer a better understanding of the slow pace of fertility decline observed across sub-Saharan Africa[1].

The purpose of this paper is therefore to describe possible explanations for the widespread adoption of postponement of childbearing as a family formation strategy in Africa, with a view to enhancing our understanding of current and future fertility decline in the region.

In doing so, we seek to move the debate beyond attribution of persistently high fertility in sub-Saharan Africa to pronatalism (see most recently, for example, Bongaarts and Casterline (2012)) and to situate postponement of childbearing within a political economy of production and reproduction in a framework that holds, perhaps, greater explanatory power for the fertility dynamics observed in Africa. A further implication of the analysis is that the current approach to fertility analysis in Africa, unintentionally aggravated by the nature of the DHS surveys and the instruments that those surveys use, has become excessively focussed on a hyper-individualised mode of analysis, where the wider context in which reproductive decisions are made and mediated is pushed into the background. In

[1] Henceforth "Africa".

doing so, an important level of explanation for fertility dynamics in the region is lost and thus ignored.

This paper comprises the following sections. First, we set out – from a sociological perspective – the nature of social institutions, and the roles they play in mediating and reproducing reproductive preferences (and thereby affect fertility dynamics) in societies. We then proceed to describe how the nature of these social institutions in many (if not most) African social formations articulates with social and economic transformation. Having done so, we argue that both a strategy of postponement of childbearing (which we argue to be brought about because of the uncertain structural, social and economic conditions in which women live their lives in most of Africa (the extended quote from Johnson-Hanks above is instructive in this regard)); and the observed slow pace of fertility decline in Africa are rendered more comprehensible. The implications of this for both the future course of the African fertility decline, as well as for the analytical approaches adopted by demographers seeking to use standardised instruments such as those in the DHS, are discussed in the conclusion.

Social institutions and fertility change

The economic and development studies literature has tended to adopt rather narrow, structuralist definitions of institutions. In the development studies literature, for example, North (1989:1321) defines institutions as the “rules, enforcement characteristics of rules, and norms of behaviour that structure repeated human interactions”. Thus, the definition of institutions in these disciplines places much greater emphasis on the manner in which structure constrains social behaviour than on the potential for individuals to shape and determine that structure.

Such a structuralist view stands in contrast to the reflexivity of social action, described by Giddens (1984, 1990) in his theory of structuration. Giddens argues that the role of individuals and individual action (“agency”) has been neglected and marginalised in the analysis of institutions and social change. First, for Giddens, institutions are not just “rules”, but the “more enduring features of social life” (Giddens, 1984:24). However, they are capable of being (and are) constantly challenged, mediated and remade through the process of individual action. This mode of analysis is closely allied to Bourdieu’s (1977) view that institutions are simultaneously enabling and constraining, establishing the framework that permits individual action while simultaneously circumscribing it. Second, Giddens argues that our interest should be directed to both horizontal (that is, between individuals) and vertical (that is, between individuals and systems of power) institutional forms.

However, as Giddens suggests, institutions are not static: they change and mutate over time. Accordingly, descriptions that reify culture or institutions are essentially ahistorical: the analysis of institutional forms and their sociological impact needs to pay more than cursory attention to history and historiography. However, it must be appreciated that (barring radical political change bringing radical social change in its wake) social institutions

change only slowly. Institutions, furthermore, tend to be path-dependent. By this it is meant that, given an initial starting point, what McNicoll (1994) terms an "institutional endowment", societies will tend to follow particular paths of development and social organisation. Or, as Putnam argues, "path-dependence can produce durable differences in performance between two societies, even when the formal institutions, resources, relative prices, and individual preferences in the two are similar" (Putnam 1993: 179). Path-dependence arises from the fact that the forces of history exert long-term consequences:

> institutions evolve through history, but they do not reliably reach unique and efficient equilibria. History is not always efficient, in the sense of weeding out social practices that impede progress and encourage collective irrationality. On the contrary, individuals responding rationally to the social context bequeathed to them by history reinforce social pathologies. (Putnam, 1993:179)

But, to emphasise, this does not in any sense mean that those institutions are static and unchanging.

The principal institutional forces affecting and mediating the process of fertility change are those related to modes of social organisation, production and reproduction. Thus, for example, one can see Caldwell's theory of African fertility decline based on the reversal of wealth flows (Caldwell 1982), as being governed by changes in an institutional context that converts children from being assets (as labour, or old age security) into liabilities (as a result of the introduction of mandatory schooling, for example). In a completely different context, the work of Hajnal (1982) and Goody (1996) describes how patterns of marriage (and, consequently childbearing) in Europe were regulated by changes in the work opportunities of both men and women, and institutional norms that prescribed neolocal residence after marriage.

In both these examples, the role played by social institutions is clear.

The broad classes of theories of fertility decline that have been developed – Mason (1997) identifies six – have been subjected to strong and vigorous critiques from social scientists in other disciplines for their failure to accommodate local institutional specificities (Greenhalgh (1990, 1995a, b) and Carter (1995) being the most outspoken). Potter, writing in 1983, made the same argument:

> in studies of the determinants of fertility, much more attention has traditionally been given to the characteristics of individuals, households and families than to the characteristics of the environments in which they are found. (Potter 1983: 627)

More to the point, however, is the contention that it is these local institutional specificities that are much more dominant than the role of individual agency in defining the process of fertility decline:

> in the familiar opposition between structure and agency, institutions by definition have to do with structure. But they are not hard-cast channels that, once set in place, demand compliant behaviour. They are constantly being made and remade by those coming into contact with them,

> emerging renewed or marginally changed, or falling into disregard and disuse. The role of agency is distinct, although limited (McNicoll, 1994:201).

Casterline (1999: 36) makes a similar point about the effect of path-dependency on the pace of the fertility decline: “path-dependency can result in changes that proceed either more quickly or more slowly than would be expected”, while in a review of theories and narratives of the fertility decline over the last fifty years, van de Kaa (1996) concluded that:

> [o]verall sufficient material has been accumulated to conclude that path-dependency and institutional aspects are mainly responsible for the regional flavour which can be detected in the demographic transition process. And further, the initial transition narrative is too deterministic in nature, too general, and so far removed from concrete societal settings that it leaves insufficient room to account for differences in institutional endowments and the fortuitous elements present even in path-dependent processes. (van de Kaa 1996: 428)

This weakness has led Geoffrey McNicoll, probably the foremost demographic theorist on the role of institutions in the course of fertility declines, to observe that in the fields of demography and population studies, despite the limited role afforded to agency, “the institutional structure that underpins – indeed, that virtually constitutes – human society is simply neglected …[a large] part of standard demography [has] no interest in institutions” (McNicoll 1994: 200).

Thus, the starting premise for an institutional approach to understanding fertility dynamics is that while fertility outcomes are the outcomes from the actions of individuals, those actions are not determined solely by the micro-rational economic choices of individuals acting independently of the institutional context of their actions. Instead, fertility behaviour and family building strategies are mediated by social phenomena in which the reproductive choices made by individuals are structured (or shaped) by the political, economic and social institutions that exist in a given society at a given time: as McNicoll puts it, “fertility transition, whatever else it may be, is an institutional phenomenon” (McNicoll 1994: 206). Potter (1983) suggests that institutions affect fertility precisely through changing the perceived costs and benefits of childbearing; shaping internalised values relating to marriage, the family and fertility; and through the social and administrative pressures that can be brought to bear on reproductive behaviour. In other words, institutions mediate individual decisions on childbearing in an important and fundamental way.

However, as noted earlier, institutions are both dynamic and context-specific. Hence, the set of institutions assumed to impact on fertility outcomes must be determined by reference to both the temporal period of investigation and local particularities. This necessity notwithstanding, McNicoll suggests a list of institutions that, in most situations, have a bearing on fertility by virtue of the fact that they give “rise to local patterns of social organisation – particularly the family and local community; family and property law and the local dimension of public administration; the stratification system and mobility paths it accommodates; and the labour market” (McNicoll 1994: 206). By this definition, state ideology, the economic structure of society, and the relative weight and interpretation lent

by society to concepts of social and administrative justice, fairness and equality (amongst others) are also important insofar as they affect those local patterns of social organisation. Other institutions that fit this description include the social construction of gender relations, the legal system itself and the fiscal stance of the state.

The role of the state in the course of the fertility decline is of particular importance in the analysis of fertility change from an institutional perspective. Whether or not the state can direct a process of fertility change, one thing is certain: the state, by the mere fact of its very existence, cannot not influence fertility (McNicoll 1998). The acknowledgement that the nature of state-individual relations may bear strongly on individuals' reproductive intentions (and hence on the efficacy of population programmes) should bring the role of the state, and state institutions into sharper focus.

McNicoll (1996) elaborates further on the role played by the state in governing the process of fertility decline and identifies two routes whereby the state, irrespective of its initial institutional endowment, can attempt to gain purchase on the pace of fertility transition, although its success in the pursuit of either or both of these is still contingent on the state's initial institutional endowments and characteristics. The first route McNicoll terms regularity: the state's ability to create and maintain order and, in particular, orderliness (predictability, or non-arbitrariness) of state-individual and individual-individual relations. The second is duress, "the use of political or administrative pressure or, at the extreme, physical force to attain fertility objectives" (McNicoll 1996: 17).

Further developing and applying the concept of path-dependency outlined earlier, McNicoll (1994) suggests that the combination of institutional endowments found in a particular setting determines the pattern of fertility decline observed. Some combinations promote rapid fertility decline while others retard the process. Five archetypes of institutional endowment are identified, broadly associated with different geographic regions, ranging from "traditional capitalist" through to the "soft state", "radical devolution", "growth with equity" and "lineage dominance". In this typology, he argues, the "radical devolution" (e.g. China) and "growth with equity" (East Asia) archetypes have been associated with the most rapid fertility transitions, while societies with institutional arrangements characterised by "lineage dominance" (e.g. sub-Saharan Africa) have shown the slowest pace of fertility decline.

Uncertainty, social transformation and production of reproductive norms

However, the notion of "lineage dominance" McNicoll uses to describe African institutional systems requires further consideration. Bayart (1992) argues that such a description is imprecise. It is true that lineage dominance was the crucial aspect of social organisation in much of Africa in pre-colonial times, but, as Bayart documents, the political organisation of most African societies reflects a grafting onto that system of an administrative component run by administrative (urban, educated) elites.

First, Bayart argues, that the weight ascribed to ethnicity (and, by implication, its associated forms and putative norms of social organisation) is in large degree a consequence of the nature of colonialism as it occurred in Africa:

> Although it would be too much to maintain that all contemporary ethnic groups are the products of the colonial period, the precipitation of ethnic identities becomes incomprehensible if it is divorced from colonial rule … the contemporary force of ethnic consciousness comes much more from its reapproriation by local people, circumscribing the allocation of the State's resources. (Bayart 1992: 51)

Second, Bayart characterises the postcolonial political and social transformation in Africa as the "reciprocal assimilation of elites". After colonialism, he argues, the administrative and bureaucratic reach of the state in most African countries was exceptionally limited. In order to govern, therefore, the administrative elite had to co-opt local leaders to extend the reach of the state, thereby setting in place a mode of contestation between local administrators (who gained some political superiority at a village level by participating in state structures, and local leaders (who exerted power through systems of lineage dominance). At the same time, the power of leaders exerting power through lineage dominance was undermined by the new central and local elites who were more familiar with discourse of modern statecraft. Traditional systems of leadership based on lineage dominance, therefore, afforded control over a "demographic unity increasingly marginalised by the development of the modern state" (Bayart 1992: 137). Thus much of the administrative weakness of the modern African state arises from the contestation between different loci of power, both of which require the other in order to assert their legitimacy.

For Bayart, the result of this weakness and contestation, together with the experiences of most African states under colonialism, and subsequently as articulated into the contemporary capitalist ordering, is a fluid and vigorous process of contestation for power, authority and resources at every level in society:

> The baroque style of contemporary political constructions is the result of many different formative processes and borrowings from political repertoires, made possible by cultural heterogeneity and extraversion … these discursive genres do not represent a coherent stock of values whose political impact will always be the same. On the contrary, they are also composites and ambivalent. … In order to understand 'governmentality' in Africa we need to understand the concrete procedures by which social actors simultaneously borrow from a range of discursive genres, intermix them and, as a result, are able to invent original cultures of the State .. Too often the creation of the postcolonial State has been portrayed as the Titanesque achievement of enlightened Princes, combating the dark forces of tribalism, tradition, and imperialism. Despite the interest and comfort in such imagery, it does not do justice to the complexity of the facts. (Bayart 1992: 248-249)

For our purposes, the essential conclusion is that of Bayart: that the "spatial hold of the State is incomplete" (Bayart 1992: 254). Or, differently put, the nature of social and political transformation is in such circumstances of necessity incomplete. A further implication, of

course, is that the power of the state, to impose its will, to lead, or guide in the *dirigiste* mode of the transformation of many East Asian countries is neither obvious nor realisable.

Kreager (1986) has come to much the same conclusion in his discussion of generalized and restricted demographic regimes. By the term 'regime' he wishes to emphasize that population, and in particular fertility and its proximate determinants, represent the recruitment component of social structure. They need to be understood in this context. The concept avoids the misleading analogy with the functioning of a machine that stems from the use of the term 'system'. It also emphasizes that different actors (for example men and women or the young and old) may have different interests in reproduction and that a regime can serve the interests of particular social groups, much as the macro-level institutions of the state are contested as described by Bayart. By a generalized regime Kreager means a model phrased in terms of the utilitarian logic of the researcher. Such analysis bears fruit because, after all, domestic groups in agricultural societies must function to secure the production of the means of subsistence and the reproduction of families if such a society is to continue to exist. The limitation of the approach is that it imputes economic motives and strategies to people that they may not possess. In fact, Kreager argues, what is demographic behaviour to the observer may be directed at quite different ends for members of the culture concerned. Therefore by a restricted regime he means an analysis of the meaning of a demographic regime from the participants' point of view. Thus he argues:

> We need to identify the institutions which are the locus of deeply held values, and explore the various ways that vital events and relations are used to define groups in terms of these values. To what extent are observed changes contained within permutations of customary behaviour, or are changes in vital relations a marker of a more profound change in social structure? (Kreager 1986: 150)

But if, as we have argued above, the institutional, social and economic transformation of African countries is incomplete and contested, it is hardly surprising that perhaps the fertility transformation in those countries is also incomplete and contested. And if fertility is institutionally mediated, it follows that changes in fertility follow from changes in those institutions. African fertility has remained high (and been slow to change) precisely because those institutions have been slow to change for the reasons outlined above.

Furthermore, we argue, it is this incomplete transformation that creates the conditions of uncertainty (of outcomes, and of the ability to envisage future courses of events) that in turn gives rise to both slow fertility declines, and the evolution of postponing of childbearing as a common pattern of family formation in Africa.

The process of economic transformation in Africa is largely incomplete, for reasons that are not entirely disconnected from the failure of the state to replace existing modes of social organisation as described in the previous section. Because of the contested nature of political and social control, whereby significant power is still situated in the hands of local

authorities, and the failure of the urban administrative elites to harness the productive capacity of urban areas, it is hardly surprising that residual ties to the land remain strong, both as a form of claim on historically allocated land, and as a buffer to the vagaries and exigencies of urban life in many situations. The rise of what have been termed 'stretched' households (Spiegel, Watson and Wilkinson 1996) in many African countries, where households are deemed by their members (even if not by those responsible for collecting or analysing data – see Randall, Coast and Leone (2011) for an important discussion of this subject) to exist and function across significant reaches of time and space, is one such manifestation of this incomplete capturing of the populace by the institutions of the state. In turn, this retention of significant ties connecting urban and rural areas under conditions of incomplete social and economic transformation means that the putative decline in fertility brought about by the reversal of wealth flows described by Caldwell is almost certainly undermined, as are efforts to reduce child mortality or to transform gender relations, both of which are commonly argued to be important vectors for bringing about fertility decline.

Conclusions

This paper calls for a return to the more institutionally-nuanced framework and the "thicker description" propounded by anthropologists and anthropological demographers. In essence, our argument is that the slow decline in fertility in the region, and the supposed stalls in several countries, is largely institutionally mediated. Uncertainty about the future – property rights, education quality, employment prospects for one's children, and the absence of social welfare systems in most parts of the continent – brought about by the incomplete social and economic transformation of those societies, militates against rapid declines in fertility.

Postponing behaviour is widespread across the continent, and fertility remains stubbornly high, we argue, because in the uncertain institutional context in which couples and women find themselves. In the absence of 'duress' (and we have noted the weakness of the state in Africa to act accordingly), according to McNicoll, the alternative path to guiding fertility decline lies in the creation of conditions of 'regularity'. But, as Johnson-Hanks (2007) has noted, regularity – orderliness – is not a condition familiar to many women in sub-Saharan Africa:

> Much of African reproduction conforms neither to the definition of natural nor of controlled fertility, but represents some third, not intermediate, but frankly different, regime. … life in Africa is extremely uncertain and the requirements for success are changing and ambiguous. … To some degree, this radical uncertainty is a straightforward consequence of life in a poor country with weak institutions and underdeveloped infrastructure. (Johnson-Hanks 2007: 1036)

Under conditions of such uncertainty as prevail in many, if not most, countries in sub-Saharan Africa, the deemed-rational preference for low fertility and small families would appear to be anything other than rational. Making long-term decisions predicated on the survival, education and gainful employment of only a few children offers little in the way of

security either in the short-term or in one’s old age in this milieu. Cain (1983), for example, has emphasized that peasant farmers in most underdeveloped countries are faced by a high degree of risk in the form of climatic accidents, unexpected deaths in their family or threats to the security of their persons or property from bandits or more powerful neighbours. Large families are a form of insurance against such risks in societies where other forms of financial insurance or state welfare insurance do not exist. As with any other form of insurance, it may be economically rational to invest in children to rule out disaster; even they are likely to represent a net outgoing for most couples.

While the costs of raising children have no doubt risen with the partial, incomplete, transformation of those societies, the benefits of large families remain substantial, especially in situations where individuals retain a meaningful connection to the land and localised systems of authority.

The incomplete social and economic transformation, with significant employment still occurring within the (subsistence, unmechanized) agricultural sector, serves as an inducement to retain a large pool of family labour as an economic asset. Similarly, incomplete economic transformation has limited the returns on investment in the education of the next generation. At the same time social change, the development of economic opportunities for the younger generation that do not involve access to land, and increasing geographical mobility may make it less likely that children will honour traditional obligations to support their parents. In parallel with all of this, new ways of saving for one’s old age may develop. These may include social insurance and pension schemes, other financial institutions that pay interest on deposits and State-sponsored welfare systems. Furthermore, physical security may improve if the capacity of the State to maintain the rule of law improves. However, such developments are, in themselves, of course uncertain.

This uncertainty-mediated constraint is amplified by the real failings of contraception and family planning programmes both to ensure the delivery of adequate and reliable contraception to women (a failing that lies, predominantly, in the realm of state institutions and capacity, and the often tenuous mechanisms by which they are held to account) and to bring the desire for significantly smaller families into the realm of the calculus of individual conscious choice. Simultaneously, the weakness and disarticulated nature of systems of authority and power has meant that family planning programmes in these conditions are unlikely to be able to systematically or effectively challenge some of the long-held, social barriers to contraceptive use among women (e.g. concerns about long-run effects on fecundability) and this has almost certainly contributed to the slow pace of decline.

Thus, while many women in Africa now express a preference for family sizes markedly smaller than achieved by women 50 years ago, there is a real and profound perception that there are real risks of having families that are ‘too small’. While the rationale for having a large family may have largely disappeared in most of Africa during the post-colonial period,

it is far from clear that most African parents face strong incentives to have only a small family either. On top of this, the frequent, if subtle, subversion of family planning programmes by political and administrative elites documented in many parts of Africa (see Moultrie (2005) and the excellent paper by Kaler (1998) for a description how in South Africa and Zimbabwe respectively the family planning movement in the 1970s and 1980s was undermined by the male-dominated liberation movements) has further served to attenuate the pace and progress of fertility decline in Africa.

The argument that institutions matter in the analysis of fertility has profound implications for what is meant by a theory of fertility. It is no accident that neo-classical economics and much of mainstream demography ignore institutions and prefer to focus any analysis of differences on the characteristics of individuals. Institutions are the product of a history and the way that they adjust to new circumstances reflects not just current conditions but that history and the partly arbitrary outcome of competition between different interest groups and systems of belief. In other words, to use another popular bit of jargon, institutions are path dependent. What seem minor events at one point in time can lead to cumulative divergence between the actual history of a society and 'alternative futures' that could have occurred. Social and economic systems are chaotic in the technical sense. If one accepts this argument, it has serious implications for our ability to construct any generalizations about fertility with predictive power. However, it does not throw us into a stance of totally relativist 'post-modernism'. McNicoll (1994) summarizes the implications succinctly:

> The characterization of any society by [its institutional] features reflects its unique history. There is no reason to expect that the fertility regime it exhibits should be identical to that of any other society, or that it will respond similarly to changes in "inputs" such as new technologies, new resource flows, or, more relevant here, much larger surviving youth cohorts. However, there may well be reason to anticipate some convergence of demographic outcomes, tracing the historical transition to low fertility of the advanced economies. And there may even be reason to expect a long-run convergence of institutional structures and individual behaviours, based on the effect of "expectations" - in this case, derived from some process of globalization of cultures and technologies.

Finally, it is probable that the neglect of institutions, political systems and uncertainty as important distal factors that shape the nature of the fertility decline in Africa, and which has impoverished our understanding and thinking about the topic, is in part a response to the data that are available to track and measure fertility. The cart (of data) has been placed before the horse of robust and rigorous thought. The data collected in multiple DHSs lends itself exceedingly well to the quantitative nature of demographic analysis. Standardised datasets permit rapid cross-country analysis of a range of proximate and distal variables on fertility outcomes and preferences. However, the ready availability of individual-level data can lead to the institutional context, which does not lend itself to easy measurement, being pushed into the background. The result is that the analyses of demographic data from DHSs, as well as from longitudinal studies, become, to our mind – in contradistinction to the

arguments about the locus of the real drivers of fertility decline described by McNicoll and others – excessively focussed on individuals, and individual outcomes and preferences.

Many of the arguments presented here are not new, although very little has been contributed recently to the literature on the institutional dynamics that governs fertility change. This forgetting of that rich past, which repeatedly inveighs against an excessive focus on individuals as the unit of analysis for analysing the pace of fertility decline, has weakened our ability to critically understand fertility decline in Africa.

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