

## Comment on the paper *The Role of Public Population Institutions on Fertility Outcomes in Sub-Saharan Africa* by John F. May

Yilma Melkamu<sup>1</sup>

May's paper raises key and timely issues related to institutions which directly affect population dynamics in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). There is a growing commitment and interest by SSA governments to address adverse consequences of high population growth (Bongaarts, 2017; African Union, 2016). However, the public population institutions lack technical capacity and funding and heavily rely on donors such as UNFPA, World Bank and foundations. Census and major surveys such as the DHS are funded and technically supported by non-state actors. Locally grown robust academic and research institutions, researchers and advocates are needed to lead the institutions and champion population work across the different sectors. North-South, South-South collaboration are key to facilitate experience sharing and capacity building especially among similar institutions.

Although countries with population policies had better fertility decline and managed to attract more resources, lack of adequate political commitment, absence of intersectoral collaboration and weak national capacity prevented population institutions from effectively implementing the policies (Robinson, 2016; Thaxton, 2004; Hailemariam et al., 2003). I argue that to have effective policies and strong population institutions in the region stakeholders should focus on the following.

Policies are effective if they are developed in a bottom up, participatory and inclusive way, involving key stakeholders especially communities who the policies directly affect: women, youth, community leaders among others. In particular, a shared vision, participation, ownership and institutionalization of policy across different actors within the public sector is critical. Population issue is not about fertility control and should not be left only to the health or national population offices. It is about political, economic development, human rights, health and security issues and should thus be positioned, coordinated and managed as governments' standing priority agenda for decades to come.

Though mainly championed by Civil Society Organization (CSOs), it is encouraging to see that availability of costed national implementation plans, budget and performance tracking, as well as accountability initiatives for family planning that monitor policy implementation, are now becoming common in the

region. This should be strengthened and expanded to subnational level as governance and policy decisions, including budget allocation are more and more decentralized. Likewise, accountability tracking should not be limited to the public sector alone and should be extended to CSOs, private sector and community leaders to enable the monitoring of allocation, disbursement and utilization of resources for provision of quality and rights based services (Hecht et al., 2014; Boydell et al., 2014).

The demographic dividend discussion opened a new chapter for population issues at national and continental level (Gribble et al., 2012) but this is not achievable without substantially reducing the high fertility rate which requires significant investment for implementation of policies and programmes that support family planning (Canning et al., 2015). Advocates, CSOs and community leaders should intensify efforts to ensure that family planning is at the center of demographic dividend discussions.

Overall May's paper gives a comprehensive analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and recommendations to strengthen these institutions. No doubt the paper will be an important source of information as the region is increasingly focusing on population issues due to the prevailing high fertility levels, the largest young generation ever and our improving understanding of the linkages between population and development and security.

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<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author: yilma@ippf.org

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*Dr Yilma Melkamu* is the Director of Programmes at the *International Planned Parenthood Federation—Central Office* in London. A medical doctor by profession, he has over 15 years of programme management experience in family planning, comprehensive abortion care, quality of care, HIV/AIDS, safe motherhood, and social franchising of sexual and reproductive health services.

Before joining IPPFAR in 2009, Dr Melkamu worked for Pathfinder International and Marie Stopes International in Ethiopia. He consulted on public health at the national and international level for the Ministry of Health, United Nations, and several universities. He was a lecturer at the Addis Ababa University and published extensively in the areas of family planning, maternal and newborn health, comprehensive abortion care, and HIV/AIDS in national and international peer reviewed journals.