

This is Sub-Saharan Africa, the region South of the world's largest desert. It includes 49 countries, but a closer look reveals that there are actually hundreds of different ethnic groups speaking over 2000 languages.

The region is diverse economically as well. South Africa has a modern economy with a huge variety of important industries from tech and finance to chemicals and manufacturing. While many of its neighbors rely heavily on commodities and natural resource exports, it's not just diversity that makes this region unique. It's also the age of the population. Almost 60% of Sub-Saharan Africa's population is under the age of 20 making it the most youthful region in the world.

It's also the fastest growing. It's estimated that by 2050, one in four people on earth will be African. In Angola, women have an average of six children and in Niger the average person is just over 15 years old. This young growing population is one of Sub-Saharan Africans defining features and it affects several major trends in the region.

Sub-Saharan Africa has suffered an epidemic of poor leadership since the majority of the region gained independence from Europeans in the 1960s in many countries, corrupt government officials act on behalf of a few powerful individuals and private businesses helping to protect and promote their interests. Often at the public's expense. For example, it's estimated that the reported corruption of South Africa's former President Jacob Zuma cost his country billions of dollars in government funding and private investment.

Meanwhile, democratic and civil rights so are disappearing across the region. As leaders cling to power Zimbabwe's former President Robert Mugabe controlled the country for 37 years by jailing political opponents, intimidating voters, and controlling the press. Ultimately leaving the country in economic ruin. Elsewhere in the region, though free elections and peaceful transitions of power occur regularly.

Yet freedom of the press is still limited in varying ways across nearly all of Sub-Saharan Africa. The government of Tanzania passed a law requiring all media, including individual bloggers and podcasters to buy a \$930 license in a country where the average income is only \$910.

This suppression and corruption only becomes more problematic

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as the region's population increases. Dysfunctional governments are unable to provide enough infrastructure or jobs to support their new generations and economically deprived young people are pushing back against their governments frequently with protests, but also with more violent means. The disillusioned youth can be easily recruited for violent extremists in the region, strengthening terrorist groups, which carry out a huge number of violent attacks each year.

Nigeria is the region's largest economy, but in the Northern part of the country, far away from the prosperity of the largest cities, the terrorist group, Boko Hara is finding success, recruiting disillusioned and unemployed young men and women convincing them to commit brutal violence. Notoriously, the group has abducted over 1000 children since 2013 including 276 girls taken from a secondary school in Chibok in 2014. But it's not just Nigeria, groups like this are cropping up elsewhere in the region and like Boko Hara they're often affiliated with other terrorist groups from the Middle East such as ISIS and Al Qaeda.

Their attacks have garnered global attention pulling in troops from the United States and other Western countries. US special forces have 1700 military personnel undertaking around 100 missions in over 20 countries in Africa, mostly operating in secret. Ongoing conflict plagues 18 of the region's 49 countries and presents additional challenges to the region's development.

Millions of people, many of them under the age of 18, have fled their homes as refugees searching for safety abroad. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, conflict has been raging on and off since 1996, and the number of people displaced continues to grow. 1.7 million people were displaced in 2017 alone. The more recent conflict in South Sudan, which started in 2013 has driven an even higher number, over 2.4 million people out of their country.

Yet it's not just conflict driving this movement, climate change and desertification are also playing a major role. For example, Lake Chad, which supports nearly 25 million people in four different countries, has shrunk by 90% in the past 60 years. Increasingly displacing many of the people who depend on its water.

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In recent years of the 10 countries with the largest increase in people leaving for other countries, all but Syria are in Sub-Saharan Africa and while much media attention is focused on people seeking safety in Western Europe, the vast majority of refugees don't actually end up in Europe, but rather end up in neighboring countries, many of which don't have the infrastructure to adequately support everyone.

According to the United Nations, it's Africa, not Europe, that is most burdened by the ongoing refugee crisis in Dadaab, Kenya, one of the world's largest refugee camps. Many fear for a lost generation of young people missing out on adequate schooling. Given the fact that the majority of the camp's population is under 18. Many having spent their entire lives there, but the region's explosive population growth doesn't just create challenges.

It also provides opportunities. Sub-Saharan Africa's young population presents an attractive consumer market for the rest of the world. It also offers a large workforce with a favorable ratio of working age, people drawing a new wave of foreign investment, which can provide much needed jobs and infrastructure. However, much of that foreign investment is now coming from China. It's investments in the region have quintupled since 2010 supporting projects and virtually every Sub-Saharan country.

Critics say that Chinese investors often ignore environmental and worker safety issues. They also call them predatory, citing numerous examples where Chinese loans for infrastructure projects resulted in huge debt burdens, potentially giving China more leverage over governments in the region. But this trend is not unique. Chinese investments around the world draws similar criticisms. Despite this harmful trend, responsible foreign investment can be beneficial.

With the right investments in health and education. The young growing population of Sub-Saharan Africa can become more productive workers and more capable consumers, boosting domestic economies and establishing a thriving entrepreneurial middle-class in the future. But the region's future is still uncertain. It's ultimately up to how well the regions governments handle these important issues. Their policies and leadership will shape whether the growing population provides demographic dividends or leads to disaster.