

# **Has Leadership Stalled Fertility Decline in Uganda?**

**By**

**James Ntozi, Charles Lwanga, Patricia Ndugga, Michael Mugisha, Allen Kabagenyi, Gideon Rutaremwa and Cyprian Misinde.**

**Department of Population Studies, Makerere University, Uganda.**

## **Abstract:**

Uganda has experienced several decades of high and constant fertility in the past. Recently, the country has witnessed phenomenal economic growth rates and substantial contraceptive uptake. Despite these developments, Uganda unlike many other sub-Saharan African countries in similar situation, has continued to witness stalled fertility. It is claimed that the public statements made by the political, religious and cultural leadership have encouraged the population to continue with high fertility. Research using qualitative methods has investigated the lack of interest among the political, cultural and religious leadership in reducing the fertility. Results show that stalled fertility transition in the country is due to several factors, including pronatalist leadership. The paper shows how leadership factor has played an important role in frustrating the expected fertility decline. It is proposed that programmes to sensitize leadership be intensified to enable them change their messages in favour of fertility decline.

## **Introduction**

Studies have defined a fertility stall as no statistically significant decline in the TFR between two successive observations, using TFR from data aggregated over three years preceding each of the two most recent surveys (Bongaarts 2008). In addition, Bongaarts (2008) argues that countries with limited decline of utmost 0.25 births per women are considered among those with stalled fertility. In other words, a fertility stall refers to a fertility pattern where total fertility rate fails to decline between two surveys in a mid-transitional country. Overall, fertility stalling is believed to be due to several factors among which are the changes in the proximate determinants of fertility (Westoff and Cross, 2006), a large unmet need gap resulting from the loss of focus on family planning programmes in the development agenda of these countries following new health challenges such as HIV/AIDS (Agyei Mensah, 2007), impact of infant and child mortality (Westoff and Cross, 2006) and changes in the level of contraceptive use as reflected in changes in women's education and urbanization.

One of the factors that influence fertility to decline, stall or increase, but that has not been adequately investigated is political, religious and cultural leadership. For instance, some studies have linked fertility stall with religious leadership. Somalia, Afghanistan, Yemen, Gaza Strip, Palestinian held Territories have among the highest

fertility rates in the world due to pronatalist religious leadership (Kaufmann 2009, Jenkins 2007 and Fargues 2000). Cleland and Lush (1997) found that religious leadership in Pakistan has resisted birth control more than in Bangladesh with a result of higher fertility in Pakistan than Bangladesh. In Pakistan and Afghanistan local religious leadership exercise great influence over couples' views on contraception and in Taliban dominated Southern Afghanistan, couples adhere to the views of their imams.

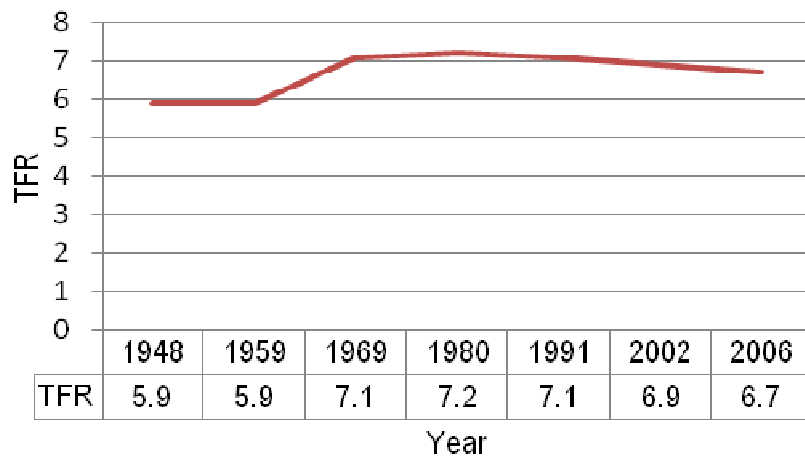
The opposition of the Vatican and Roman Catholic Clergy to modern contraception is well known and is claimed to have stalled fertility decline in some developing countries. Alam and Leete (1993) observed that despite major education development, urbanization and modernization, fertility decline in Philippines stalled for several years after 1975 due to the government reluctance to adopt aggressive family planning owing to the political leaders being hindered by the pronatalist influence of the powerful Roman Catholic Church.

In Malaysia, in spite of increased education, urbanization and living standards, fertility begun to rise among the Malay community in contrast to the Indian and Chinese communities after 1975 (Leete 1996 and Cleland 1993). The probable reason was resurgence of Islamic values and marked shift in the government policy to promote the population growth of the Malays. In contrast, Sharan et al, (2002) attributed fertility declines in Kenya and Rwanda to political leadership supporting implementation of aggressive family planning programmes.

### **Fertility Stalling in Uganda**

Uganda is one of the African countries where fertility has been persistently high. Since 1969, fertility has remained high though recent trends show some signs of a declining trend (Sneeringer 2009 & Garenne 2008). The Uganda demographic and health surveys (UDHS) and censuses of population and housing provide the most reliable information on national fertility levels. As indicated in Figure 1, the trend is that from 1969 to about 1991, the level of fertility in Uganda averaged to about 7.1 children per woman while in 2002 and 2006 it was 6.9 and 6.7 respectively (UBOS 2006 and UBOS and Macro International 2007). According to the UDHS of 2001 & 2006 and Kazuyo (2010), fertility rates have been relatively lower in urban than in rural areas. During 2001- 2006 period, the average annual decline in fertility was about 0.04 births per year, much below what Bongaarts (2008) suggested to constitute real decline. This trend in fertility indicates that overall fertility has stagnated in Uganda, which is an average of stalled or increasing fertility in rural areas and decline in the urban centres.

Figure 1: Uganda's Fertility Stall for Decades



This stall in fertility is witnessed against the backdrop of recent economic growth as high as 7% per annum, which was expected to lead to substantial fertility decline as witnessed in some other African countries, notably the neighbouring Kenya. It is claimed that the public statements made by the political, cultural and religious leadership of the country on fertility, population growth and family planning have encouraged the population to continue with high fertility. The purpose of this paper is to explore the claim that leadership has contributed to fertility stall in the country.

### **Methodology:**

The data on which this paper is based were collected using document review and field assessments. Extensive documentary reviews were made on stalled fertility and leadership, along other factors. Field assessments were undertaken in the four regions of Uganda each represented by a district and these are Kanungu in the west, Gulu in the north, Katakwi in the east and Luwero in central Uganda. In addition, Kampala Metropolitan City was included because of its special nature as the research team wanted to get the experience of an urban setting. Issues probed centred on several variables of fertility including leadership factor.

Information was generated using a total of 20 key informant interviews and 20 focus group discussions in the selected four rural and one urban districts. The key informant interviews were administered to political leaders, religious leaders and government technocrats. The interviews focused on soliciting first-hand personal perspective and community perception from the study participants regarding the leadership factor among other factors of fertility. Furthermore, in each district, four focus group discussions (FGDs) targeting women and men in the age groups 20-34 years (the youth) and 40-60 years (the old) were conducted. Two research assistants working as moderator and note-taker under the guidance of a supervisor conducted the discussions in each district. Males and females were interviewed separately in an effort to increase respondent participation during the discussions and to discern differences in respondents' perspectives by gender concerns. Informed consent was obtained before the interviews. During the FGDs, respondents were asked to offer their answers in general terms (for instance, perception of people in the community as a whole instead of their personal perception only). All interviews were conducted in the local language spoken in the study area and the respondents were native speakers. Field notes were transcribed and entered into computers that generated the results.

### **Results**

The study results are presented in three headings, namely political leadership, religious leadership and cultural leadership.

#### ***Political Leadership:***

The position of several Uganda political leaders in advocating for many children may have greatly influence people's perception with regard to the number of children they

were supposed to produce. The most outstanding example is where a district leader offered incentives in kind to women who produced more children. As part of restocking of animals programme to women in his district, the Luwero district political head, known as LC5 Chairperson, offered a piglet to women who had single births and a calf to women who had twins or other multiple births, each time the event happened. When interviewed focus group discussion participants in this district had this to say:

*“In our community political leaders, for instance our district LC5 chairman support having many children and is against the use of contraceptives. It is on record that he gives out incentives like piglets and calves to those who produce children. Also culturally, the chairman being a Muganda by tribe wants Buganda Kingdom population to grow and the only way, it can grow and utilize her vacant land is by having a big population. Besides, many of these leaders perceive having children as a source of future voters. However, technocrats in the district support producing fewer children due to the problems linked to having many children.”*

From the above statements, FDG participants indicated that rapid growth of population in his area and getting more voters were the main reasons behind this leader's actions. What is also interesting is that the government technocrats in the district were not with him, which may explain why the fertility level in this district has not increased recently as much as the LC5 Chairman wanted it.

This political leader was also interviewed as a key informant and he stood by his views and emphasized the need for a large family arguing that when you are few, you may not be heard by others at all levels. He boasted of his actions enticing many women in the district, the majority of whom were poor, to produce many children because animals were a source of wealth. It is claimed a total of 575 calves and many piglets were given out to entice women to produce more children. He claimed that in the process, couples were able to reduce their poverty through this route of having many children who also provide cheap household labour as well as ensuring household food security.

The issue of land also cropped up in the responses. In Luwero district, some leaders advocate for population growth because some households have too much unoccupied land which is not utilized and could attract other tribes to buy and use it. The LC5 Chairperson of Luwero district supported this view for his district as follows:

*“Besides, having few children creates space for those who want to undermine us. One day, if we are not careful, we may be taken up by migrants from other parts of East African sub-region”.*

Apparently, this Chairman's message was listened to by his district population who brought out the issue of occupying the vacant land before outsiders occupied it. The male FGDs in the same district had this to say:

*“There is suspicion that when you are few, intruders may take away your unoccupied land”, (Luwero male FGDs).*

A similar response came from Northern Uganda which recently was under a civil conflict for 2 decades that left many areas vacant and the political leaders have been preaching pronatalist messages.

*“To avoid having intruders grab our land, we need to produce children that can adequately occupy this land, after all we still have a lot of vacant land”* (women FGD of Gulu).

This is a message from political leaders who see the vacant land due to war to be occupied by the indigenous people through rapid population growth before people from other ethnic groups in Uganda grab it. It was also reported by one of key informants in Gulu that a district leader in the area known as Resident District Commissioner (RDC) and representing the country’s President in the district, went on a local radio and called upon people in the district to produce many children by giving the following reason:

*“Several Acholis died during the war and yet we have a lot of vacant land”* (Gulu women FGD).

Another issue talked about by the political leaders was that the high population growth would increase votes for the politicians.

*“Population growth would increase the number of voters - that’s why leaders support it so much since if there aren’t people in a constituency then who will vote for them. They also say that Government always gives support to communities with large populations, so it would be good for people to produce many children so as to attract more Government support”* (Gulu women FGD).

The other reason given in the above statement was that the politicians encouraged high fertility and population growth to get their areas increase their percentage of the country’s total population in order to access a larger share of the national cake through regular government subversions, since grants from the national governments are given on the basis of the area population. This political motive is common among politicians of developing countries. It is well known that some states in Nigeria inflate their population sizes to access a bigger share of resources from the federal government (Hanks 2006; Izugbara and Ezech 2010, Obono, 2001).

Other issues raised by political leaders in Uganda included the need to create domestic market which will induce aggregate demand forcing supply of goods and services to follow, which would lead to achievement of socioeconomic development. It was observed that having few children would lead to having few people in the community or country and this would deter development.

*“You know when you have a problem you think fast and get more developed. And besides, there is need for market of our goods, why take goods to AGOA (meaning*

*USA market) when we can create our own market here? Having market is in its self development”,* said the LC5 Chairman of Luwero district.

This view of the district leader is shared by the Uganda President who was quoted by the World-Watch Institute referring to high population growth as ‘a great resource for development’ (<http://www.worldwatch.org/node/4525>). He explained that a huge population was necessary to provide the needed human resources and demand for goods from the expected growing Uganda industries. His position may explain why family planning programme is not well funded by government and relies heavily on the donor funds, which at times fail to arrive in time. This situation has led to the family planning keeping most of their activities in the urban centres where modern contraceptives uptake in 2006 was fairly high at 37% compared to the use of contraceptives (15%) in the rural areas, resulting into persistence of high fertility in the last 25 years this political leader has been at the helm of the country.

Talking at a recent political rally about the subject of fertility, the Uganda President declared to the rally attendants including men and women:

“Your job is to produce children for the government to educate free at primary and secondary schools as well as university”.

This statement leaves no doubt what the government wants the population to do: produce more children and leave their education to government through universal primary and secondary schools. The government also promised free university education through loans, which the government may fail to deliver, given the current hard economic situation in the country. Unfortunately, the President did not mention other essentials of life, such as food, shelter, clothing and health, which the country has no capacity to deliver adequately.

The above arguments by politicians of vacant land, need for human resources and expanded markets for locally produced goods are not new and were part of the debate in the 1974 Bucharest UN Population conference when most African leaders used them when opposing the proponents of family planning. The African leaders at the time argued that there was no likelihood of population explosion in Africa in the near future since many parts of the continent were vacant and needed high fertility and high population growth to populate the land and utilize the natural resources for the development of Africa (UN, 1974). It took 2 decades of advocacy (until 1994 UN CPD of Cairo) for some African leaders to see the reality and change their minds and start implementing population policies and programmes that would result into the decline of fertility in their countries.

### ***Religious Leadership:***

Almost the whole population of Uganda belongs to one religion or other. According to the 2002 census of population and housing, over 80% of the population was Christian and 12% Muslim. This means that religion plays an important role in most people’s lives, especially in the rural areas. In all rural areas, religious leaders are

considered opinion makers and highly respected as messengers of God. Hence, their messages are often listened to without question.

The clergy of the Roman Catholic Church has always advised their congregations to follow the Vatican position on family planning, namely use of natural family planning methods. Unfortunately, a high percentage of women belonging to the Catholic Church are uneducated and hence have no ability to successfully use the natural family planning methods. A women's FGD in Gulu, a district with very high proportion of its population Roman Catholic had this to say:

*"Religious leaders tell us to produce many children because children are a gift from God; at times you go to a priest and tell him that you are breastfeeding a 6 months baby, but have suddenly realised you are pregnant; but the priest will never encourage you to terminate the pregnancy saying that the next child may become the next president. Religious leaders also advise us to produce more children because many people died in the time of insurgency and we need to replace the lost ones".*

The Protestant Churches in Uganda do not have strong stand against or for family planning. A statement from one Anglican priest may reflect the Church's view of high fertility.

*"We often advise people to have reasonable family size that they can adequately take care of in terms of shelter, clothing, food and education. We do not specify the number of children couples should have, it is up to them to decide. My wife and I have 13 children and we have suffered looking after these children. So I do not advise people to have a large family size for purposes of prestige or lineage. People who had many children suffered during the insurgencies, so many learnt a lesson and so did the children"* (Head of an arch deaconary of the Church of Uganda).

This opinion shows that the Church does not recommend to its members a certain number of children to produce. The confession of this clergyman to have produced 13 children means that he never applied any family planning method, implying he produced as many children as God allowed him. As a role model for his followers, he must have many of his followers emulate his action and end up with many children too. Yet some dioceses of this church have active family planning programmes, like Kinkizi diocese supported by UNFPA and Ankole diocese formerly funded by the USAID.

The Muslim leaders interviewed indicated that their followers believed that each child comes with luck, which suggests that the more children produced the more lucky opportunities come to the parent. This thinking is pronatalist. A Sheikh Imam who said that he had been telling Moslems to produce 6 children who are a manageable number of children had this to say:

*"In my opinion, a woman should produce like 6 children. This number can be looked after well and also be taken to good schools at the same time. Also they enable one to carry on other socioeconomic development and the mother can look healthy. Religions other than Moslems do take the message as important but Muslims think that many children mean much wealth. Whenever, I have radio shows about this*



matter, members of other religions call the station more than Muslims. I also go to churches and sensitize them about their issues, the only problem is that we lack facilitation and transportation”.

Although this Moslem leader’s view is liberal, six children are too many for an average Uganda family which is generally poor and cannot afford to provide a decent standard of living for this family size.

Another underlying explanation of religious leaders’ desire for many children is that they want to increase the number of followers and large families meet this objective. It is planned that large families would increase the religion’s bargaining power nationally on a number of issues from the authority and bring in more offerings to the churches and mosques. Hence, large families are lauded as a sign of faithfulness to the religious teachings. An Anglican Bishop observed:

“Some of the small religious communities see high fertility as a way of increasing their numbers and they encourage their followers to have so many wives because they know if you produce, that’s one way of increasing their numbers to outcompete us the traditional religions that have been in existence for long time.”

**Cultural Leadership:**

The concerns of cultural leaders has been sustaining the family lineage and expanding the clan. For instance, in the areas of Uganda that experienced prolonged wars, civil conflicts and cattle rustling, it was not surprising to find the cultural leaders encouraging couples to produce many children to replace those who died during the civil war. This view is reflected in what was said in Gulu district:

*“During the war, more males than females died and this is one of the reasons why our cultural leaders are advising couples to replace those who died,”* (the LC3 chairperson in Gulu).

In the largest and most powerful Kingdom of Buganda, some radio presenters have been sending messages to the population to produce many children to increase the population of the Kingdom. The Kingdom’s mouth piece, Central Broadcasting Service (CBS) has been using the bell - *locally known as Kengele*, to encourage people to have more children; a case in point is the *Kalisoliso programme* aired on the radio in the morning for 25 minutes (7.30 am – 7.55 am) every working day. Presenters begin the programme by reading out the names of couples who have given birth to children and thereafter ring the bell to encourage them to produce many more children for the Kingdom of Buganda. Surprisingly, these are pronatalist messages from an institution supported by development partners to promote family planning.

However, these messages are in contrast to the regular messages from the Queen (Nabagereka) of Buganda calling upon the families in the Kingdom to use family planning services so as to produce few children whom they can look after well. Referring to the Queen’s messages, one women FGD in Kampala explained:

“Our Queen has advised us to follow her example and produce few children we can manage to educate well, dress decently and give adequate food and health; we shall therefore not follow what other leaders are saying”.

This implies that given more positive statements and examples from leaders, especially women looked at as good role models, the pronatalist messages would be listened to by fewer people.

The cultural leaders in Eastern Uganda also support having many children arguing that people need to fill up the vast land in Teso (part of the Eastern region) and replace the people who were lost during the insurgencies and to HIV/AIDS. They claim parts of Teso especially those bordering Karamoja, which were sparsely populated due to cattle rustling by the Karamojong (nomads in northeastern Uganda known to rustle cattle from and kill neighbours), hence the need to fill them up.

*“For those who want many children say it is because we lost many people in the clan hence there is need to replace the dead. There are also those with plenty of land who need many children to till the land. Others want many children for wealth especially if girls get married and when they prosper with good jobs then parents benefit directly” (Katakwi FGD Men aged 20-34).*

*“Cultural leaders encourage us to produce many children, they always use a slogan “Emuria Oliyai” which means we should produce very many to enlarge the clan” (FGD Men aged 40-60 years in Katakwi).*

The people of Teso (Iteso) also believe that the more children one bears the greater the chances of becoming wealthy in future as children bring wealth to their respective families. This view was expressed by the old women, perhaps explaining why they produced so many children:

*“Traditional/cultural leaders believe that the more children one has, the higher the prestige and status one gets in the community. They claim a woman who has more children is better as she expands the clan and lineage” (FGD women of Katakwi district of 40-60 years old).*

### **Conclusion:**

The study has indicated that political, religious and cultural leaders in Uganda have used their hold on the population to influence many aspects of people’s lives including fertility. This is because the leaders are highly respected and looked upon

as models and their messages implemented at times without question by the rural, poor, uneducated and unemployed. Since the politicians, many religious leaders and some cultural institutions are pronatalist, the fertility levels have tended to stall. It has not been the same among the urban, wealthy, educated and well employed whose fertility has been declining consistently.

### **Recommendations:**

In order to get fertility among the rural, poor, uneducated and unemployed in Uganda start declining, it will be necessary to adopt strategies that focus on leaders. First, the political class needs to be educated to appreciate the benefits of fertility decline and low population growth. To do this will need real engagement with the President, Cabinet ministers, Parliamentarians and community leaders and convince them to join the side of low fertility. Experience in Kenya and Rwanda has showed that once the political leadership commits itself to reduce fertility as part of socioeconomic development, the population would follow suit.

Secondly, there is need for a strategy to mobilize enough funds to support rural family planning activities to the level HIV/AIDS programmes have been supported. Up to now, funding of family planning activities is grossly inadequate and hence has not been effective. The supported programme must bring everyone on board by making it multisectoral, like the HIV/AIDS programme was before it succeeded.

Thirdly, the rural areas must be targeted to reach the underserved population. For instance, the religious leaders and institutions which reach all corners of Uganda should be used to reach the underserved in remote areas.

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