

SA Demography

October, which the Afrikaans poet Leipoldt called “die mooiste, mooiste maand”, saw the world’s 7th billion person being born and SA conducting its third census since 1994. It is thus appropriate to stand back from the hurly burly of daily politics, economics and markets and look at South African demography.

In demography one can predict some of the future, because it already exists.

The results of this year’s census should be available by November 2012. But demography does not just happen every ten years when there is a census. New demographic information becomes available all the time, for example from household surveys. Full time demographers pore over data and models all year round and we know more about SA demography today than probably at any other time in the past 100 years.

Looking back to 1911

SA’s first census was held 100 years ago in 1911. Then the total SA population was a touch short of 6 million people – 5 972 000.

Today SA’s population is estimated at 50.5 million, and some people would argue it is more. 50 odd million is eight and a half times the population in 1911, or an annual growth rate of 2.2% over the last 100 years. However, that hundred year number hides some important changes.

In the 35 years from 1911 to the end of the Second World War SA’s population growth was 1.9% per year. Then, in the 50 years from the Second World War to the new SA’s first census in 1996, it accelerated to 2.5% per year. That turned out to be the high point of population growth.

By 2001 it had declined to 1.33% per annum and demographers now (2011) estimate the population growth rate to be 1.1% per year and declining. The consensus forecasts is that population growth will be less than 1% as soon as 2014. All in all a huge change from the trend in the 1990s.

The main drivers of this decline has been lower fertility (number of children per female) and higher mortality. In 1970, South Africa’s fertility rate was 5.8 children (Mostert et al. 1998). In 2011 that number is estimated to have fallen to 2.3 children (Stats SA, various demographers).

Race composition

In 1911 Black people formed 67% of the total population, Whites 21%, Coloureds 9% and Indians 3%. Today it is estimated (and the Census will of course bring clarity) that Blacks form 79.5% of the population, Coloureds still 9%, Indians 2.5% and Whites 9%. Coloureds and Indians held steady in their proportion of the total population, Blacks increased strongly and Whites declined sharply – at 9%, they now make up less than half the 21% they formed in 1911.

Young people

Much more important than race, however, is the age composition of SA's population. The Census must confirm the estimates, but there is no doubt that SA has a very young population.

41% of the population is currently estimated to be below 20 years of age. A further 26% are between 20 and 35. Add the two together and literally two-thirds of the population is younger than 35 years of age.

No wonder that the new Parliamentary leader of the DA, Lindiwe Mazibuko, rejected criticism that she was too young for the job by arguing that most of the country's voters are her age and younger and she can appeal to them. She is 31 and the voters younger than 35 amount to about 46% of the electorate. As the younger cohorts turn 18 and become eligible to vote, that percentage will rise – the incoming cohorts are bigger than the outgoing cohorts. Of course, these numbers can vary depending on how many people register as voters and actually go and vote.

One's first reaction is that as these youngsters become older and move into the adult world, we will live in a very different society. The implications for jobs and unemployment, affirmative action, politics, social capital and so on will be profound. On reflection, however, and as always with social change, the implications may not be as profound as it may seem at first glance.

It is all in the change

Let us just "stare at the numbers" and see what they tell us.

The five-year age cohorts of people younger than 20 each consists of about 5 million people. That implies that roughly 1 million people a year will join the adult world at say age 20 or 21. At the other end, say at age 60, an average of 300 000 people will leave the adult world and become "senior adults". That leaves a net increase of about 700 000 for the group between 20 and 60 years of age.

This number must then be reduced by whatever one thinks the mortality number is for the age group 20 to 60. Mortality is a morbid topic but a very real one – it is the reason why life expectancy in SA has declined to a very low 54,9 years for males and 59,1 years for females.

We do not have a separate discreet number for mortality in the 20 to 60 age group, but it seems as if it could run at about 250 000 per annum. Thus the nett increase in that age category is about 450 000 per annum.

This number comes close to the number of 485 000 which one can calculate from various Labour Force Surveys for the growth in the 16 – 64 age cohort. Now we know what we are dealing with.

(Un)employment

How many of these people would want jobs? One can safely assume about 75% - not everybody enters the labour market. Many people raise a family, some simply drop out of the labour market, a privileged few are trust fund babies. If 75% of 485 000 people look for jobs, we are in need of about 350 000 jobs per annum.

Currently there are 13.3 million people working in SA. To create an extra 350 000 jobs imply growth in the labour market of 2.6%. Assuming an employment co-efficient of 0.6 it will require economic growth of 4.4%.

(The co-efficient simply means that for every 1% economic growth, jobs grow at 0,6%. The National Planning Commission found that SA enjoyed an employment co-efficient of between 0,6 and 0,7 during the decade 1997 to 2008.)

Even at 4.4% growth the economy will only take care of new job seekers coming into the market. It will do nothing about the 4.4 million unemployed that we already have. It is also very unlikely that the SA economy will consistently grow at 4.4% over the next couple of years.

Thus, many of the newcomers and currently unemployed will have to be absorbed in low-pay public works projects and community works programmes. These programmes will acquire greater importance in years to come, not less. They will become the swing factor between employment and unemployment.

It was the French philosopher Auguste Comte who said: "Demography is destiny". By next November, when this October's census results are released, we will know considerably more about our destiny. I cannot wait.