

As the FIFA Men's World Cup unfolds across North America, billions of people are tuning in to watch what is arguably the planet's most influential sporting event. A record 48 nations are competing in 108 matches across three countries for a prize pool approaching US\$900 million. The tournament is a celebration of athletic excellence, national pride and global culture.

But beyond the goals, trophies and drama lies another story—one that demographers find equally compelling.

The World Cup is more than a football tournament. It is a snapshot of humanity itself, offering a fascinating glimpse into how countries differ in size, age and population structure. Looking at the nations competing on football's biggest stage raises an intriguing question: how much do demographics influence success?

At first glance, the answer seems obvious. Bigger countries should have an advantage. More people mean a larger pool of potential athletes, increasing the likelihood of discovering elite talent. Likewise, countries with youthful populations might be expected to produce more top-level footballers than ageing societies.

Yet the World Cup consistently reminds us that demographic advantages, while important, are never enough on their own.

Consider population size. Brazil, home to more than 211 million people, appears to embody the demographic argument perfectly. It is one of the most populous nations in the tournament and also its most successful, having won the World Cup five times. Statistical analyses of international football often identify population size as a significant predictor of qualification and success. A larger population increases the odds of producing exceptional players.

But if population size were destiny, China and India would dominate world football. Together, they account for more than one-third of humanity. Yet both countries have struggled to establish themselves on football's biggest stage, with each having qualified for the men's World Cup only once.

The United States offers another example. With a population exceeding 340 million and immense economic resources, it might be expected to be a perennial contender. Instead, it has reached just one World Cup semi-final in its history.

Meanwhile, football is filled with examples of countries that dramatically outperform their demographic weight.

Uruguay remains perhaps the most remarkable case. With a population of only 3.4 million people, it has won the World Cup twice and consistently competes with nations many times its size. The country's footballing achievements are so disproportionate that they challenge any simplistic assumption that success is merely a numbers game.

Similarly, Curaçao, with a population of only 185,000, became the smallest nation ever to qualify for a World Cup. Its achievement highlights how talent can be nurtured across borders, with players developing professionally in leagues far from home.

These examples reveal an important truth: population size matters, but it does not determine outcomes. Institutions, culture, investment and opportunity often matter even more.

The same lesson emerges when we examine age.

One of the most captivating features of this year's tournament is the extraordinary range of ages represented on the field. Portugal's Cristiano Ronaldo continues to compete at 41, while Spain's teenage sensation Lamine Yamal arrives at just 18 years old after helping his country

win the European Championship.

Among participating nations, Côte d'Ivoire has brought the youngest squad, with a median age of 25.4 years. Iran, by contrast, fields the oldest team, with a median age of 31.3 years.

At first glance, these figures seem to reflect broader demographic realities. Côte d'Ivoire has one of the youngest populations in the world, with a median age of only 18.1 years. Iran's median population age is considerably older at 34.3.

Yet here too, the relationship is far from straightforward.

Japan provides a striking counterexample. It has the oldest population of any nation competing in the tournament, with a median age approaching 49 years. Yet its football squad remains youthful and highly competitive, with a median age of just 27.4 years—comfortably within the age range many analysts regard as the optimal balance between physical performance and experience.

The contrast illustrates a key demographic principle: national population structures influence opportunities, but they do not dictate outcomes.

Countries can compensate for demographic challenges through effective systems. Strong youth academies, investment in coaching, sports science and talent development can ensure a steady supply of elite athletes even as societies age. Conversely, countries with large youth populations may fail to convert demographic potential into sporting success if institutions and opportunities are lacking.

This distinction mirrors one of the most important debates in economic development.

For decades, demographers and economists have argued that prosperity depends not only on

the number of people in a country, but also on the composition of its population and the quality of its human capital. A youthful population can provide enormous opportunities, particularly when a large share of citizens are entering their working years.

This phenomenon is known as the demographic dividend.

Countries with expanding working-age populations often enjoy a period during which economic growth can accelerate. More workers relative to dependents can boost productivity, savings and investment. Many countries in Africa, Asia and the Pacific currently possess precisely this advantage.

Yet the demographic dividend is not automatic. It is an opportunity, not a guarantee.

Without investment in education, health, skills and employment, a youthful population can become a source of frustration rather than growth. Large numbers of young people entering adulthood without adequate opportunities may face unemployment, inequality and social instability.

The World Cup offers a powerful analogy. A country may have millions of young people with natural athletic ability, but talent alone does not produce champions. Success requires coaching, infrastructure, pathways to professional development and institutions capable of identifying and nurturing potential.

The same logic applies to national development.

Migration adds another layer to this story. Across much of Europe, immigration has become increasingly important in sustaining population growth and addressing labour shortages caused by ageing populations. Migrants often help replenish workforces, contribute new skills and support economic dynamism.

The World Cup reflects this reality as well. Many national teams feature players whose family histories span multiple countries and continents. Modern football, like modern economies, is shaped by the movement of people, ideas and opportunities across borders.

Yet migration, like youthfulness and population size, is not a magic solution. Its benefits depend on how effectively societies integrate newcomers and create pathways for participation and success.

Ultimately, the World Cup demonstrates a lesson that extends far beyond sport.

Demographics matter. Population size can expand the talent pool. A youthful population can create opportunities. Migration can inject vitality into ageing societies. These factors shape possibilities and influence outcomes.

But they are only the starting point.

Football history is filled with examples of nations that transformed modest demographic circumstances into extraordinary achievements through investment, culture and institutional strength. It is also filled with examples of countries that failed to capitalize on enormous demographic advantages.

The same pattern is visible in economic and social development around the world.

Too often, debates about demographics focus on numbers alone: birth rates, population growth, ageing and migration. These metrics are important, but they tell only part of the story. The more important question is what societies do with the people they have.

As billions watch the World Cup over the coming weeks, they will witness nations of vastly different sizes, ages and histories competing on remarkably equal terms. Some will exceed

expectations. Others will fall short despite apparent advantages.

The reason is simple. Demographics create potential; investment unlocks it.

If the World Cup offers a lesson for policymakers, economists and citizens alike, it is that success—whether measured in goals scored or prosperity achieved—is rarely determined by numbers alone. The countries that thrive are not necessarily those with the largest populations or the youngest citizens. They are the ones that invest most effectively in developing human potential.

On the football pitch and beyond, people remain every nation's greatest asset.