

FROM THE UNITED NATIONS

POPULATION, WOMEN AND RESOURCES

An important current issue in studying population demographics is how well can our world adapt to 3 billion additional people? The recent UN biennial population report projects the world's population, currently at 7 billion, to rise to 10 billion by the end of the century. It goes without saying, that the additional people will be from the poorest countries least able to cope with providing the basics; water, food, housing and health services..

The engine of demographic change is the "fertility rate" i.e. the number of children a woman can expect to have during their lifetime. Fertility rates have been declining everywhere. The previous 2008 projection estimated the world's population to stabilize at 9 billion. In the poorest countries, with high fertility rates, the decline was slower than expected. This is due, in part, because the African governments did almost nothing to teach or support family planning. The increase in population in some of these countries is enormous. In Mali, for example, a population of 16 million is estimated to go up to 20 million in 2030. Malawi, a country of 15 million today could grow to 37 million.

In order for populations to stabilize, the fertility rate must fall below the "replacement rate" of 2 at which the population reproduces itself. Many developed countries like Japan and in Europe are well below the replacement level and are in fact losing population, which can also create problems.

A vital point is that small variations in fertility can produce major differences in the size of populations over the long run. For example, if women, on average, have either half a child more or half a child less, the population projected for 2100 rises to 16 billion or falls to 6 billion. The fact that small differences in fertility have large demographic consequences underscores the critical importance of current actions for the future of the world's population. The demographic future is not written in stone nor is demography destiny. Of vital importance is: How we handle these serious issue now?

The key to stabilizing the world's population lies in the condition and status of women. Family planning and the empowerment of women is important and can be tremendously helped by locally educated women who teach the importance of family planning, and the ultimate outcome of such teaching in terms of human rights and social justice. The teachings are essential!!

Women must be allowed to have the children they want since it is part of their cultural heritage. However, preventing unintended pregnancies will reduce maternal death by 25 percent and save the lives of 150,000 women and girls each year. Girls who go to school marry later and often since they marry later have fewer and healthier children. Presently, 200 million women worldwide want and need contraception but lack access to family planning services. This is due to the unavailability of local educated women who are currently teaching women how to avoid pregnancy (e.g., intercourse just before and after menstruation is generally a safe period) Since the burden of contraception

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currently lies solely with women, the current medical development in China of a male contraceptive is attracting a great deal of attention. According to UN statistics three-quarters of married American women use modern contraceptive, a mere seven percent do so in Central Africa.

A perennial question is the ability of the planet to support a rising population. Is there enough food, water, and resources? Can the earth cope with increased environmental stress? The environmental impact of the current western life style with their high energy use as well as their ecological footprint is much larger in rich countries than in poor countries. The issue here is not population but consumption patterns, the need to reduce our impact on the planet. An example, is food availability. Currently, there is enough food to feed everyone. In the 2009-2010 crop year the current grain production could feed 11 billion people. Still, nearly one billion are chronically hungry. Why? One third of grain is consumed by domestic animals. More than one sixth goes into industrial products like biofuel. Less than half of the world cereal production feeds humans. There is also rising food prices and speculation which is difficult for the poor. The world chooses to feed its machines and domestic animals before it feeds its people.

Dr. Joel Cohen, a professor of population biology has spent decades exploring the issue of how the earth can carry the current capacity. He concludes that the question can not be answered with current knowledge. It depends on what kind of life style we choose and want and importantly on the possibilities of scientific and technological innovations. For example, in the past food production was greatly increased with the green revolution. In the future genetically modified food may play an important role. Dr. Cohen looked at the many estimates of the earth's carrying capacity. Many of them were in the range of 8 to 16 billion. The uncertainties of climate change and scientific discoveries may change all that. The number of people does matter but how people consume and use resources matters more. A major challenge for the future is to drastically improve the condition of women, raise the consciousness of men, get more people out of poverty and reduce our impact on the planet. Here are causes we as humanists should rally around.

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