

7 BILLION AND COUNTING

What Global Population Growth Means for People and the Planet

The world's population will reach 7 billion people on Oct. 31, 2011, and according to United Nations projections, we are on pace to add 3 billion or more by the end of this century. Already, millions of women in developing countries are unable to determine the size of their families because they lack access to contraception. Worldwide, the largest group of young people in history is entering their reproductive years. The decisions and policies we make today, and the options available to these young people, will ultimately determine whether our numbers climb to anywhere from 8 billion to 11 billion by 2050.



POPULATION GROWTH WILL CONTINUE

The rate of growth is slowing, but the population is still increasing. World population hit 1 billion people in 1804. It took 123 years to add the next billion, but less than a century to pass the next four billion—from 2 billion people in 1927 to 6 billion people in 1999. The number of people on the planet has doubled since 1960. While the rate of population growth has slowed in most parts of the world, the overall number of people continues to grow. We increase by nearly 80 million people every year—the numerical equivalent of adding another U.S. to the world every four years.¹

World population could reach between 8.1 billion and 10.6 billion by 2050, and 15.8 billion by 2100, according to United Nations projections. The UN releases three projections that each rely on different sets of assumptions on fertility and aging. Under the UN's slow-growth scenario, population could peak at 8.1 billion in 2045 and begin declining to reach 6.1 billion in 2100. However, under the UN's high-growth scenario, world population could reach 15 billion this century and continue growing. The long-term medium projection suggests population will reach 10.1 billion by 2100.²

THE AMOUNT OF GROWTH IS HARD TO PREDICT

There is no certainty about future population trends. Demographic projections are often mistaken for predictions, but they only show us what would happen if today's demographic trends follow specific paths. Population is closely tied to fertility rate, or the number

of children a woman has over the course of her lifetime, and the future of fertility in different countries varies widely and is hard to predict.

The medium projection of 9.3 billion by 2050 assumes a dramatic decline in fertility rates across the world, converging to 2.1 children per woman.

Reaching such low fertility levels would require near-universal access to essential reproductive health services, including contraception. The projections do not account for the reality that in many countries women are not getting the family planning services they want. More than 215 million women in developing countries have an unmet need for contraception. This means they would like to avoid pregnancy, but lack access to modern contraception. In nations such as Yemen, Afghanistan, and much of sub-Saharan Africa, women continue to have an average of more than 5 children.³ Until these women's family planning needs are met, the UN medium projection seems too optimistic.

MANY DEVELOPING COUNTRIES ARE GROWING RAPIDLY

Population in many developing countries could double in the next 40 years. The U.N. projections show striking changes in some countries' projected populations for 2050. Under the medium projection, the population of high-fertility countries would more than triple by 2100, increasing from 1.2 billion to 4.2 billion. Afghanistan, whose population is expected to grow from 31 million to 76 million by 2050, is among 40 countries which are projected



to more than double in the next 40 years. Nigeria's population is projected to jump by 150 percent by 2050, from 158 to 390 million. Uganda's population is expected to grow 184 percent by 2050, from 33 million to 94 million.⁴

Many of these increases in projected population are due to persistently high fertility rates. The projections assume that the average number of children per woman will begin falling in such countries, but this is far from certain. For example, Nigeria's fertility rate for 2010-2015 was previously projected to be 4.8 children per woman. It has now been revised to 5.4 because of a slower fertility decline and more rapid mortality decline than expected.⁵ This difference contributes to a much larger total population by 2050. Poor access to family planning and the low social status of women continue to drive high fertility in most of sub-Saharan Africa, and parts of the Middle East and South Asia. Even in countries where HIV/AIDS is causing higher death rates and lower life expectancies, population numbers are still increasing because of high fertility. Surveys show many women in developing countries are having more children than they would like, or are becoming pregnant when they would prefer to wait. The Guttmacher Institute estimates that around 60 percent of women in sub-Saharan Africa who want to avoid a pregnancy are not using a modern method of family planning.⁶

DEVELOPED COUNTRIES ARE GROWING MORE SLOWLY, AND SOME POPULATIONS ARE AGING

Most developed countries have an average family size of two children per woman or fewer, and are growing relatively slowly or declining in population. In some European countries, women have only 1.2 or 1.3 children, on average, and the continent's population is in gradual decline. Fertility rates in Japan, Korea and Russia have also declined to 1.4 children or less.⁷ Very low fertility in these countries is a new phenomenon, but some researchers believe it is linked to gender inequities and difficulty balancing work and family.

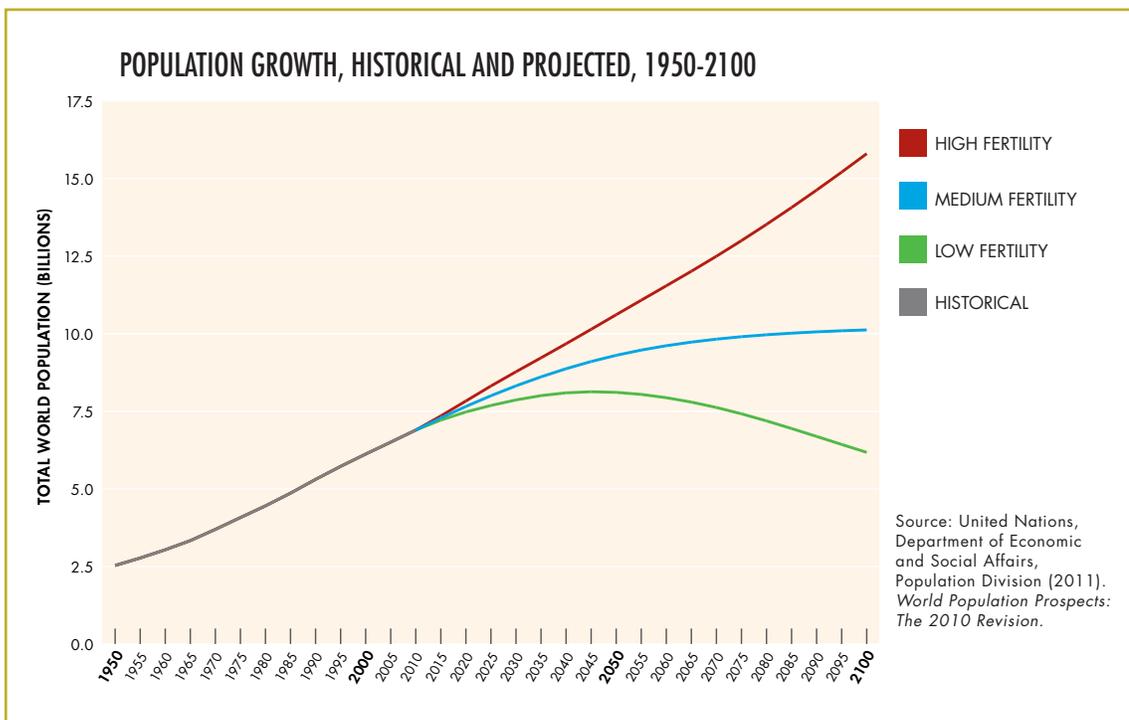
Concerns are emerging about population aging and the possibility of population decline in countries with low fertility. Population aging—defined as a rising average age within a population—is an inevitable result of longer life expectancies and lower birthrates. While it is positive that people are living longer, it also means governments and economies must prepare to support a larger number of older, dependent people.

POPULATION GROWTH AFFECTS PEOPLE AND THE PLANET

Many poor countries struggle to ensure access to health care, education, and economic opportunities in the face of rapid population growth. Government are often unprepared to meet the needs of disproportionately large populations of young people that result from this growth. Countries with the most rapidly growing populations are often also those least prepared. For example, Niger has the highest total fertility rates in the world, and currently has the third lowest registered Human Development Index and the third lowest adult literacy rate.⁸

Per capita supplies of both fresh water and cropland are falling as population grows. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that 925 million people worldwide were undernourished in 2010. That number has increased by nearly 15 million between 2002 and 2007, and by nearly 77 million since then.⁹ Continuing population growth also strains water resources. Today, around 2 billion people live in areas of water stress or scarcity, and this number is expected to rise. By 2035, around 3.6 billion people worldwide are projected to live in countries where water scarcity threatens public health and constrains food production and economic development.¹⁰

Population age structure can have significant impacts on countries' stability, governance, and social well-being. Rapid population growth may make many developing countries more vulnerable to civil conflict, especially when combined with high rates of urban population growth and shortages of cropland. Eighty percent of civil conflicts between 1970 and 1999 occurred in countries where 60 percent or more of the population was under age 30, and these countries are most likely to face autocratic governance.¹¹ Yemen, with a very young population that has nearly tripled since 1980, is a fragile state characterized by ongoing civil conflicts and weak



governance. The high fertility rates are not the cause of the security problems, but they complicate existing economic and resource challenges.

FAMILY PLANNING EMPOWERS WOMEN AND HELPS ADDRESS POPULATION GROWTH

The need for family planning services and contraceptives is growing more rapidly than ever. Already, more than 215 million women in developing countries would like to prevent pregnancy, but don't have effective contraception. Each year, the number of people in their reproductive years grows by more than 40 million. Couples increasingly desire fewer children and need effective contraception over longer periods of their lives. These two trends translate into an increasing demand for contraceptive information, devices and services.

Family planning saves women's and children's lives. Studies reveal that family planning reduces pregnancy-related death and disability. Contraceptives, such as condoms, are also effective in slowing the spread of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. The Guttmacher Institute estimates that fulfilling the unmet need for family planning could save 251,000 women's lives and 1.7 million newborns' lives. Increased child spacing alone could reduce infant mortality by up to one-third in some developing countries. Furthermore, 53 million unintended

pregnancies and 14.5 million unsafe abortions would be averted.¹²

Investments in family planning increase educational and economic opportunities for women and children, while decreasing family size and slowing population growth. Family planning programs have far-reaching benefits including strengthening health systems and increasing opportunities for women. Research shows that parents with fewer children invest more in each child than those with larger families, resulting in better educated and healthier children. Studies on educational achievement in Brazil, Nicaragua, and Venezuela have found that on average children from large families attain less schooling than children from smaller families.¹³

Smaller family sizes, in part due to voluntary family planning programs, played a critical role in the rapid economic growth of several East Asian nations, such as Korea and Thailand. Recent studies show that in these countries, fewer children meant families were able to save and invest more of their income, fueling economic growth. A decline in family size also may accelerate development in other countries still experiencing high birthrates.

Investments in family planning are cost-effective and yield enormous results. A recent study found that every dollar invested in international family planning

EVERY DOLLAR INVESTED IN FAMILY PLANNING SAVES

\$9 IN BOLIVIA,

\$8 IN INDONESIA,

\$4 IN ZAMBIA

programs could save several dollars in other development areas like education, water and sanitation, maternal health and immunization.¹⁴ In Brazil, the household effects of smaller families may have accounted for as much as a third of recent poverty reduction.¹⁵

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Governments and donors should devote adequate financial resources and technical support to meet the demand for family planning and reproductive health. For instance, as a donor the U.S. should lead international efforts to fulfill the unmet need for family planning by appropriating \$1 billion annually for international family planning programs.

Developing country governments should prioritize family planning and reproductive health in national development planning and budgeting. They should ensure that family planning and reproductive health play a key role in programs that advance sustainable development and help preserve the health of people and the environment.

Developing country governments and civil society should work to ensure the availability of education, jobs and health care, including reproductive health care, for their countries' growing numbers of young people.

ENDNOTES

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Population Action
INTERNATIONAL
HEALTHY FAMILIES HEALTHY PLANET

1300 19TH STREET NW
SECOND FLOOR
WASHINGTON, DC 20036 USA
(202) 557-3400
E-MAIL: PAI@POPACT.ORG

WWW.POPULATIONACTION.ORG

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