

OVERPOPULATION

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1. THE SITUATION IN THE UNITED STATES

If nations managed their policies in a purely rational manner, each one would have at all times an estimate of its optimum amount of population in the coming decades. In the United States, we have reached a fertility level of about 2.0 per couple, but increased immigration, legal and illegal, with usually larger family among immigrants, has raised this to about 2.1. Why has there been no public discussion of the best population for the U.S.?

We are constantly seeking means to handle problems of overcrowded highways, schools, airports, etc., but the role of rising population as a cause is ignored. In our past culture large families were a mark of merit. This was fine when we had room for westward expansion and before cars brought about urban sprawl. Now a much bigger population, having reached 300 million, causes more urban sprawl, more traffic congestion, and longer waiting lines.

On the other hand, from the traditional economic viewpoint we need an expanding working-age population. All capitalist systems depend on growth in spending – preferably consumer spending. Spending provides the need for more production, which means more jobs. More jobs means less unemployment and more income tax payments by corporations and by workers to balance the budget. So workers, businesses and the government all benefit economically from a growing working-age population.

Farmers in the U.S. have long depended on immigrant workers who are willing to do arduous seasonal jobs and accept low pay rates and poor working conditions.

The wealthy depend on immigrant workers to do household tasks.

Balancing the budget is going to be more important in coming years. Our senior population is becoming a bigger share of total population because of increasing life spans. Our over-65 senior population is an economic burden on the government, which will soon be paying more in Social Security and Medicare than it collects. And the increasing life span is made possible by the growth of new and more costly pharmaceuticals and medical procedures, expenditures that are largely borne by the government.

So in the U.S. we have a conflict of interests that is getting no attention. Our lifestyles are best served by a smaller population, but our economic interests require a steadily growing worker population.

Concern about climate change tips the balance in favor of a smaller population unless we will accept life styles where each of us uses much less energy.

2. THE SITUATION IN EUROPE

The population situation in Europe differs from that in the U.S. In many EU countries the influx of immigrants is not even enough to balance the fertility decline in native-born residents, which results in shrinking populations that will create economic problems in the not-so-distant future. The number of those over age 65 is predicted to increase by 58% by the year 2030 while the number age 15-64 will decrease by 6.8%

A Deutsche Bank report calculated that with current demographic trends, by 2050 there will be 75 pensioners for every 100 workers in the EU. Now there are only 35 pensioners per 100 workers.

The UK is an exception; its population is predicted to rise 5% by 2030, 2/3 of which being due to immigration. However, in Germany, Italy and Spain the fertility rate per woman is only 1.3 for the period 2000-2005.

But the positive side in Europe is that with fewer people there will be less strain on natural resources and it will be easier to meet its Kyoto target of reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

3. THE SITUATION IN THE DEVELOPING NATIONS

The underlying question is how many people these developing nations can support while the people are trying to attain the lifestyles they see in the industrial countries. Already countries in Africa, Asia and the Middle East are classified as water-stressed (Worldwatch *State of the World*, 2000). *Where will the additionally required energy come from if the developing countries quadruple their per capita energy use to approach that used in the U.S.?*

The high fertility rate in many of these nations has been coming down, but not yet to a level that ends population growth. And in most cases the present population level is more than can be supported by the available land and resources, using the local technology. More people are leaving the rural areas and crowding into the cities. In some countries, especially in Southeast Asia, many are supported by manufacturing goods for export to the U.S.

The living conditions in many of the developing countries have been deplorable for most of the people. For many years this situation has been documented by prestigious institutions like the World Bank and UNICEF. Thousands of children die each day from preventable causes that are related to malnutrition. Ecological damage results from cutting of trees for fuel and from cultivating unsuitable soils where good soils are in short supply. While other factors such as bad governance in many countries and worsening climate in the sub-Saharan region play a part, it seems clear that the main cause is simply too many people for the available land and water.

Chinese leaders foresaw this problem and instituted a one child per family program. They now say this family policy has resulted in there now being 300 million fewer Chinese people than there otherwise would have been. But even with this reduction in population growth rate, the population growth has exceeded the development rate and there is now a serious shortage of land and water.

The government of India also attempted to slow population growth by incentives and penalties but the measures it launched for the program met such strong popular resistance they were abandoned. Better technology has greatly increased the food supply but the problem of shortage of water is growing.

A realistic view of the world in this century is that the commonly stated objective of bringing the people of the developing nations up to the status of those in the industrial nations is an unrealistic objective. Their growing populations are a principal barrier to this. Should curbing population growth, generally called family planning, in the developing nations be a priority objective of humanitarian organizations?

4. THE GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

From a realistic global perspective it is clear that our present course will end in an unsustainable society. We are using natural resources, especially water, at a rate that exceeds our resources and polluting the atmosphere with greenhouse gases at a dangerous rate.

Among those studying the global problems expected in this century, the opinion is nearly unanimous that overpopulation is a major contributor to every one of them. The more people there are, the more carbon dioxide we are going to put into the atmosphere to hasten global warming and the sooner we will face a shortage of water and other natural resources.

In a realistic perspective, we should reduce our population everywhere by reducing the fertility rate. One child per family would be the best objective if we take into account all the probable ill effects we will have without a drastic reduction of population. But the two children per family policy is more achievable, so it is perhaps a better objective. This will eventually reduce population due to some couples preferring to have less than two children and to those being infertile.

For a sustainable society, one theoretical alternative to a population reduction is a technological breakthrough to enable us to produce energy without the use of fossil fuels. But for years we have spent vast sums in an unsuccessful effort to do this by means of nuclear fusion. Or we could go nearly all the way back to the days before we used petroleum, gas and coal for energy, a prospect that makes fertility reduction look benign by comparison.

Notes:

The UN report of population growth published in Feb. 2001: By 2025 the population of the poor countries is expected to have grown from 4.9 billion to 8.2 billion. The developed countries expected to hold at 1.2 billion with the U.S. being the most fertile of the developed countries.

Barbara Tuchmann Oct. 21, 1988 in the Christian Science Monitor: "Overpopulation is the darkest cloud on the horizon today yet the contribution of the present Administration to this problem is to withdraw financial support for birth control programs in Asia, in a policy that seems to me just plain dumb."

Lester Thurow in The Future of Capitalism, 1996: "As the number of people grows, the quality of the earth's environment will fall." "In the 21st century population in the poor countries will keep rising until they meet the limits of malnutrition."

Paul Kennedy in Preparing for the 21st Century, 1993: "The overall consensus – with the exception of a few revisionists – is that the projected growth in the world's population cannot be sustained with our current patterns and levels of consumption."

Paul Hawken in The Ecology of Commerce, 1993: "We may have already surpassed the point at which we can sustainably support the world's population using present standards of production and consumption."

Lester Brown in Full House, 1994: "The population growth that once slowed progress is now reversing it for much of humanity."

Vice President Al Gore said on Oct. 2, 1997 that overpopulation contributes to global warming and we should expand birth control programs in the developing countries.

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