

POPULATION POLICY

DO WE NEED ONE? IF SO WHAT?

PRICE 30P

Introduction

Global population in 2010 was estimated at 6,909 million people increasing at 79 million/year - a population the size of Germany's. Estimates suggest we use natural resources 50% faster than the planet can replace them. Numbers are likely to grow to 9,149 million by 2050 but could be 11,030 million unless present fertility rates decline. Seas are over-fished, forests cut down, biodiversity lost. The world is warming at a disturbing rate. Curbing fertility seems obvious.

The Natural World

In the natural world the environment controls population not the other way round. Wildlife on land and sea is limited by the food available. A herd of elephants will multiply in good years but only the fittest survive when drought comes. Early hunter gatherers faced the same fate. Despite developing spears and traps they too were limited by the bad years to around 6 million, a population less than one thousandth of that now.

Breaking the link

The key development in human history was man's discovery that he could grow his own food. It made permanent settlement possible initially in warm and watered river valleys such as the Tigris-Euphrates and Nile. Despite worries over food, from Pharaoh's dreams to Malthus' fear circa 1800 (when global population had reached a mere billion) that exponential growth in population would outstrip linear growth in food produced, man has continued to find ways to feed more people.

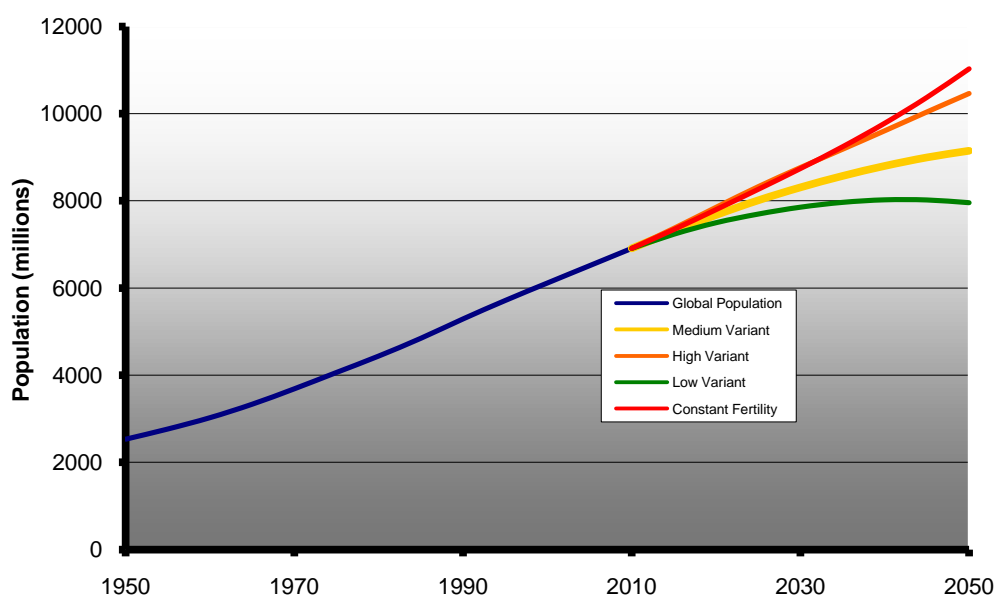
But it has been at a cost: Greater food production requires intensive farming and natural or synthetic chemicals to provide nutrients and deter pests, weeds and fungi. Some inevitably pollutes rivers. Irrigation requires dams that flood land, displacing people.

A second key development began in England around the middle of the 18th century. Leading farmers used science

to increase production and then fossil fuels to power mechanisation and grow more food with fewer people. Today barely 1% of the UK workforce produce food releasing the remainder to make cars, build roads, be doctors, entertainers and so on. Lifestyles are bountiful. Our consequent use of fossil fuels has exploded. So the planet faces 2 threats: pressure on space for food and pressure on sustainability from affluent lifestyles. In both, the multiplier of harm is population.

Why couples have children

Though, historically, contraception was difficult most couples have children for rational reasons. In underdeveloped countries children represented unpaid labour herding livestock, helping with the harvest, working in factories and so on. Children provided care in old age, sons a fighting force. In old testament times a barren wife was worthless. A landed lady's first duty was to bear an heir and spare. The more babies one had the



more chance some would survive childhood.

As countries develop these drivers change. Compulsory schooling, initially to age 12 (11 in country districts) in the UK reduced a child's value (though a summer holiday was retained so children could help with the harvest). As the leaving age rose children became a cost not an asset. Gender equality and better contraception from the 1960s gave women life style alternatives which

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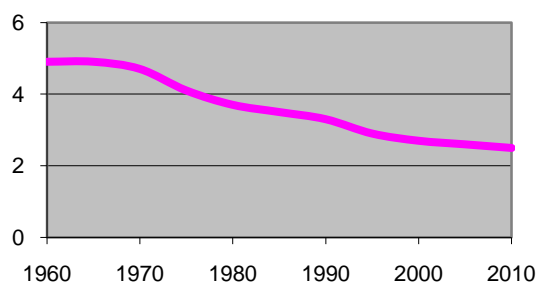
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mean motherhood became an optional extra instead of a natural assumption. Today 1 in 5 UK women are child-free, double the previous norm. The fertility rate, that is the number of children/women, dropped from 2.93 in 1964 to only 1.63 in 2001, though it rose to 1.94 more recently. Fertility needs to be 2.1/woman to maintain population size without immigration. Germany, Spain, and Italy are among countries who, at nearer 1.3/woman, are way below.

Where are we now?

The chart below shows that the global fertility rate has been reducing (from 4.9 children/woman in 1960 to 2.5 in 2008) still above replacement rate but not so much. The chart overleaf shows that despite this decline the global population continues its remorseless increase, partly because the number of potential mothers is still increasing and partly due to increased years of life.



Unhappily the trend in fertility is showing signs of reaching a plateau so the UN forecasts for 2050 still range from a high of 11 bn and accelerating to a low of 8 bn. Even under the UN's medium variant drought threatened Ethiopia for example, which increased its population from 18.4 million in 1950 to c. 85 M now, will double to 174 M by 2050 whilst India, 372 M in 1950 and 1214 M today could reach 1613 M in 2050.

Basis for the forecasts:

The chart overleaf shows 4 of the UN's forecasts. The medium variant assumes that countries with fertility rates above 1.85 will decline towards that level and stay there (some will by 2050, others not) while countries below 1.85 now will return to 1.85 or rise towards it by up to 0.3. A global fertility rate of 1.85 would mean a relatively slow decline in population. The high variant assumes the long term fertility rate becomes $1.85 + 0.5$, ie 2.35, the low variant $1.85 - 0.5$, ie 1.35. Frankly the latter is most unlikely. The medium, high and low forecasts all assume fertility rates decline. The constant fertility forecast assumes they continue as now.

Why are population policies so rare?

Despite the importance of population, most political leaders shy away from debating policy. Only China has acted. It has been able and prepared to coerce couples into having only one child. India tried but failed. Elsewhere France, Germany, Portugal and Russia have policies but these are to *increase* the birth rate sometimes with financial incentives to do so!

In a liberal democracy it is not easy for government to tell couples how many children they may have. Furthermore too fast a decline in fertility poses its own problems principally of caring for the elderly. Governments content themselves by believing that if women are educated and affluence rises the problem will solve itself.

What is not understood is that reducing fertility and achieving economic growth is a race. The faster wealth grows the quicker fertility falls. Malaysia and Ghana both became independent in 1957. Between 1960 and 2008 good government in Malaysia meant GDP/capita grew by 425% while fertility fell from 6.72 to 2.58. In Ghana, poor government meant GDP/capita rose by only 14% and fertility only fell from 6.84 to 4.31. The cost of providing infrastructure for extra people acts as a brake on economic growth.

It is true Africa has suffered from conflict but it is also true that population pressure has caused conflict, for example in Darfur, where Arab pastoralists could no longer co-exist with African farmers, and Ruanda.

A policy

No population policy will succeed without establishing some common ground - that having children is a privilege, not a right and that no couple has the right to as many children as they choose. It should be easier to get across that population is a multiplier of environmental harm and consequently a matter of simple prudence to reduce global population numbers. If the notion that reducing population is a 'good thing' can be accepted debate can move on to the pace it might be done. A "stop at 2" policy seems reasonable. Given recent trends this should restrain fertility to about 1.6 children/woman and (in the absence of immigration) halve the UK population in 100 years.

Such a policy could require that every couple be counselled after the birth of their second child and offered all necessary contraceptive advice and technology, free if necessary. The policy could become widespread across the developed world. Developing countries are more difficult but it is still feasible to advance the environmental argument and place family planning high on the aid agendas even to the point that other aid is conditional on some kind of family planning programme in the receiving country.

Probable outcome

It seems most unlikely that the 2050 global population will be less than the UN's medium variant figure, 9.149 bn (with further increases after that.). Even this will require initiatives by governments. Global warming and pressure on the planet will increase migration of peoples, many to more clement and better governed countries like the UK causing social and economic difficulties. The slower population grows the greater chance of peaceful adaption.