

7 BILLION: DEVELOPMENT DISASTER OR OPPORTUNITY?



Hania Zlotnik
and Fred Pearce



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[introduction]

7 billion people: Development disaster or development opportunity?

Every day the world adds 209.000 inhabitants and the UN expects the 7 billionth living human to be born on October 31th. Will we welcome him or her chanting peace on earth for everone? Or will the reality be gloomier, and will the explosive population growth erase all the positive effects of our efforts to reduce our carbon footprint? Will the youth from the South produce the dynamism and the workforce we need to absorb the aging populations in the North? Can, what we have so often seen as a major problem, present itself as a force for good in the future? And how do we connect all these questions with human rights – and particularly with women's rights?



Hania Zlotnik

World Population to reach 10 billion by 2100 if Fertility in all Countries Converges to Replacement Level

The current world population of close to 7 billion is projected to reach 10.1 billion in the next ninety years, reaching 9.3 billion by the middle of this century, according to the medium variant of the 2010 Revision of World Population Prospects, the official United Nations population projections prepared by the Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Much of this increase is projected to come from the high-fertility countries, which comprise 39 countries in Africa, nine in Asia, six in Oceania and four in Latin America.

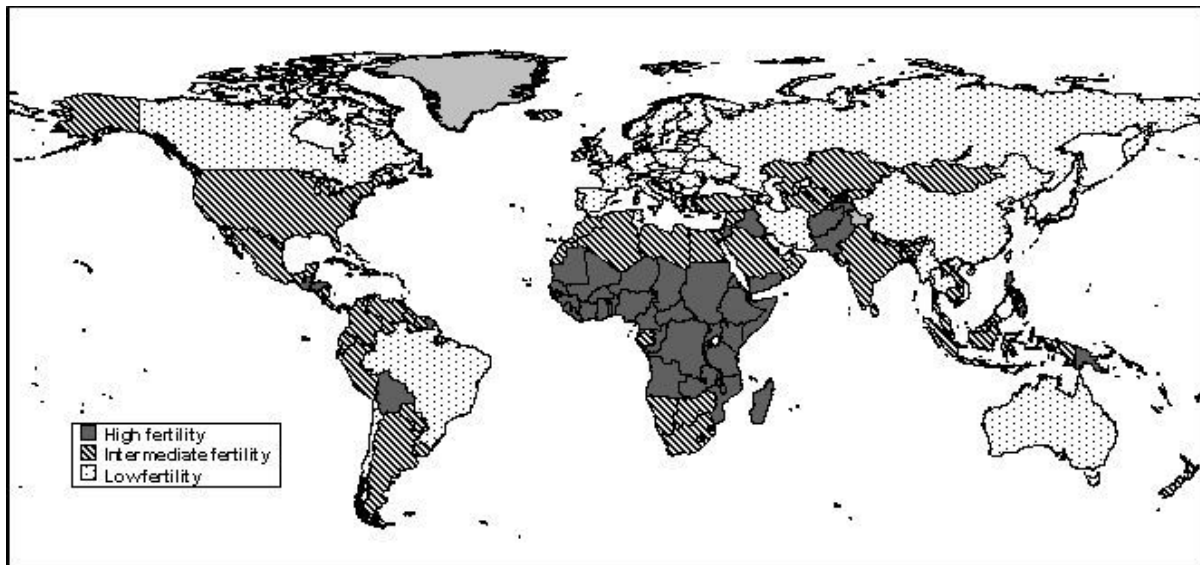
Small variations in fertility can produce major differences in the size of populations over the long run. The high projection variant, whose fertility is just half a child above that in the medium variant, produces a world population of 10.6 billion in 2050 and 15.8 billion in 2100. The low variant, whose fertility remains half a child below that of the medium, produces a population that reaches 8.1 billion in 2050 and declines towards the second half of this century to reach 6.2 billion in 2100. For long-term trends the medium variant is taken as reference.

The medium-variant projection for 2050 is more certain than for 2100 because people who will be 40 years and older in 2050 are already born. According to the medium variant, it will take 13 years to add the eighth billion, 18 years to add the ninth billion and 40 years to reach the tenth billion. According to the high variant, an additional billion would be added every 10 or 11 years for the rest of this century.

Current fertility levels vary markedly among countries. Today, 42 per cent of the world's population lives in low-fertility countries, that is, countries where women are not having enough children to ensure that, on average, each woman is replaced by a daughter who survives to the age of procreation. Another 40 per cent lives in intermediate-fertility countries where each woman is having, on average, between 1 and 1.5 daughters, and the remaining 18 per cent lives in high-fertility countries where the average woman has more than 1.5 daughters (see map).

High-fertility countries are mostly concentrated in Africa (39 out of the 55 countries in the continent have high fertility), but there are also nine in Asia, six in Oceania and four in Latin America. Low-fertility countries include all countries in Europe except Iceland and Ireland, 19 out of the 51 in Asia, 14 out of the 39 in the Americas, two in Africa (Mauritius and Tunisia) and one in Oceania (Australia).

Countries and areas classified by fertility level

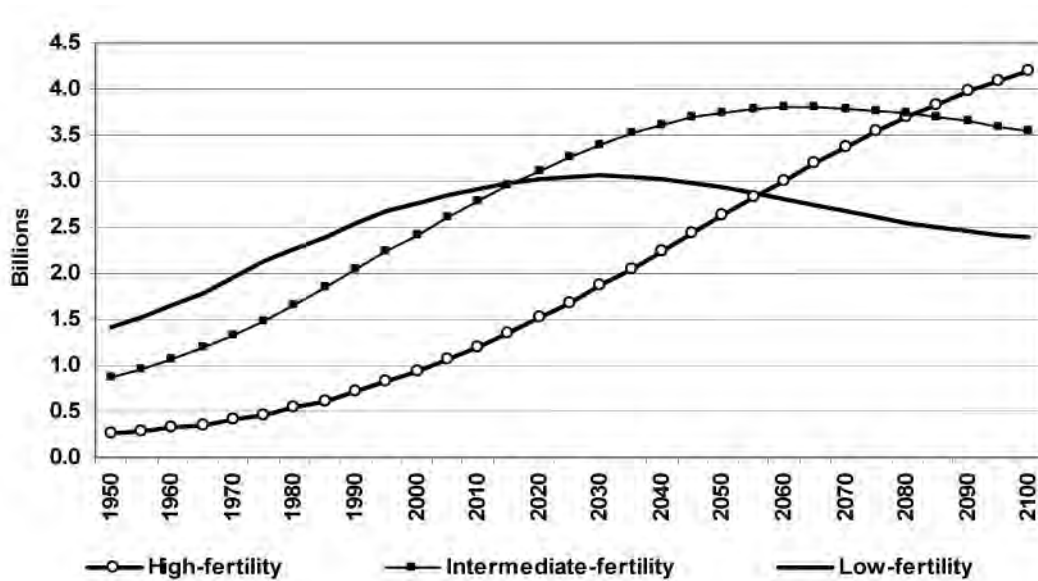


Note: The boundaries shown on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

Countries as varied as China, Brazil, the Russian Federation, Japan, Viet Nam, Germany, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Thailand and France, in order of population size, account for 75 per cent of the population living in low-fertility countries. Three-quarters of the population living in the intermediate-fertility countries is located in India, the United States of America, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Mexico and Egypt, in order of population size; and Pakistan, Nigeria, the Philippines, Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the United Republic of Tanzania, Sudan, Kenya, Uganda, Iraq, Afghanistan, Ghana, Yemen, Mozambique and Madagascar, in order of population size, account for 75 per cent of the population of high-fertility countries.

The highest potential for future population growth is in high-fertility countries. Between 2011 and 2100, the medium variant projects that the population of the high-fertility countries would more than triple, passing from 1.2 billion to 4.2 billion. During the same period, the population of the intermediate-fertility countries would increase by just 26 per cent, from 2.8 billion to 3.5 billion, while that of the low-fertility countries would decline by about 20 per cent, from 2.9 billion to 2.4 billion (figure I).

Figure I. Population for countries grouped by fertility level, medium variant, 1950 - 2100



Whereas the populations of both the low-fertility countries and the intermediate-fertility countries are projected to peak before the end of the century, that of the high-fertility countries would continue to increase during the whole period. According to the medium variant, the population of the low-fertility countries would reach a maximum around 2030 at 3.1 billion and that of the intermediate-fertility countries would peak around 2065 at 3.8 billion. Among the low-fertility countries, China is expected to see its population reach a maximum around 2030 at 1.4 billion and that of low-fertility Europe is projected to peak around 2020 at 0.74 billion. Among the intermediate-fertility countries, India's population would peak around 2060 at 1.7 billion.

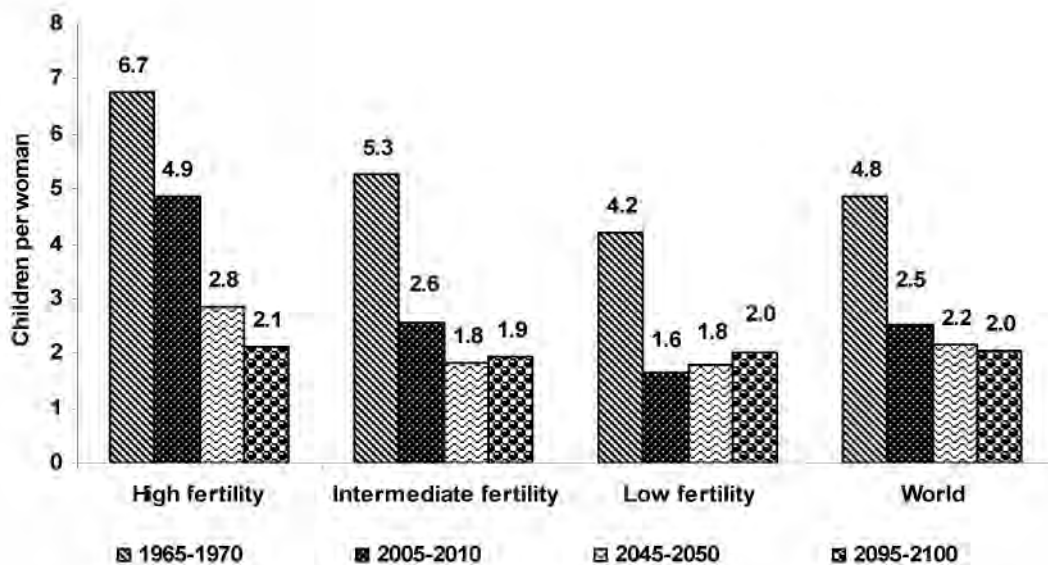
By the turn of the century, only the population of high-fertility countries would still be increasing. According to the medium variant, in 2095-2100, the populations of both the low-fertility countries and the intermediate-fertility countries would be declining at a rate of approximately 0.3 per cent per year. In sharp contrast, the population of the high-fertility countries would still be increasing at a rate of 0.5 per cent per year.

These projections hinge on the assumptions made about the future evolution of fertility. In the 2010 Revision, a probabilistic model was used to derive the future path of fertility in the medium variant. The model assumes an initial distribution of its stochastic component, which is modified later on the basis of information on past fertility trends. In this process, account is taken of past fertility trends in a given country plus the past experience of all other countries in the world. The model was used to generate 100,000 trajectories for future fertility for each country and the median values of those trajectories

determined the fertility path used in the medium variant. The model incorporated the additional assumption that, over the long run, replacement-level fertility would be reached (a level which, in low-mortality countries is close to 2.1 per children per woman).

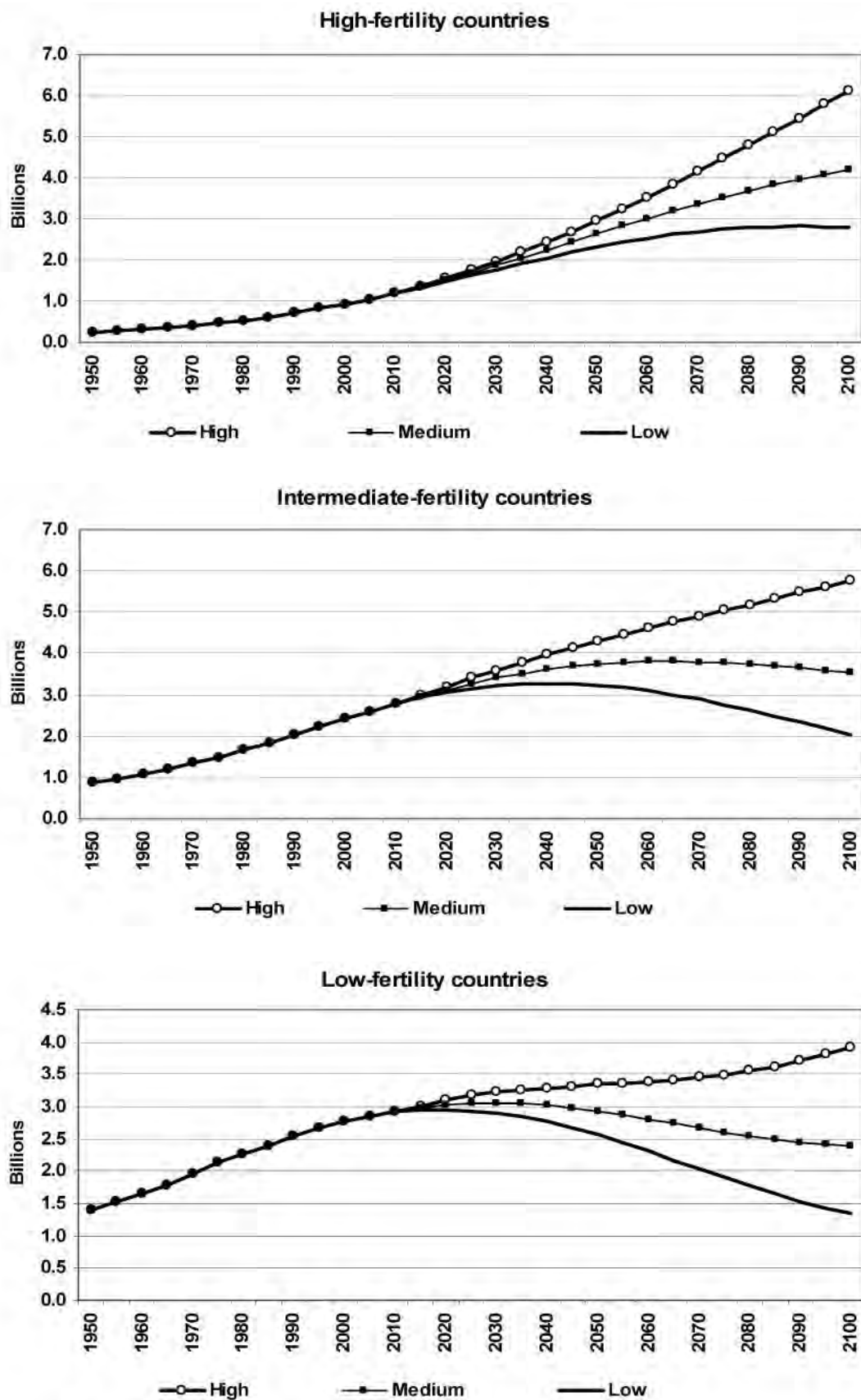
The future fertility paths in the medium variant differ markedly among the groups of countries classified by fertility level (figure II). For high-fertility countries, future fertility in the medium variant drops from 4.9 children per woman in 2005-2010 to 2.8 in 2045-2050 and reaches 2.1 children per woman in 2095-2100, implying that fertility remains above replacement level for the whole projection period. For intermediate-fertility countries, average fertility drops from 2.6 children per woman in 2005-2010 to 1.8 in 2045-2050, reaches a minimum around 2060 and then recuperates slowly to reach 1.9 children per woman in 2095-2100. For low-fertility countries, fertility increases over the projection period rising from 1.6 children per woman in 2005-2010 to 1.8 in 2045-2050 and to 2.0 in 2095-2100. Despite this increase, average fertility in the low-fertility countries remains below replacement level over the whole projection period.

Figure II. Total fertility for countries grouped by fertility level, medium variant, selected periods



Small differences in fertility levels sustained over long periods have a major impact on the future population. The low and high projection variants differ from the medium variant in that their fertility remains half a child below and half a child above that of the medium variant during 2010-2100. As a result, they produce smaller and larger projected populations than the medium variant and the difference between the two increases over time (figure III). In 2050, for instance, the difference between the population projected by the high and low variants for the high-fertility countries amounts to 0.6 billion (2.96 billion vs. 2.32 billion), but by 2100 that difference expands to 3.3 billion (6.1 billion vs. 2.8 billion). These results imply that, if the high-fertility countries of today do not achieve the reductions of fertility projected in the medium variant, they may well see their overall population increase four or five-fold by the turn of the century instead of just tripling. Even with the reductions of fertility projected in the medium variant, the population of 34 of the 58 high-fertility countries would triple by 2100.

Figure III. Population for countries grouped by fertility level, low, medium and high variants, 1950-2100



The difference between the population produced by the high and low variants is also large for the intermediate-fertility countries. It amounts to 1.1 billion in 2050 (4.3 billion in the high variant vs. 3.2 billion in the low variant) and grows to 3.8 billion in 2100 (5.8 billion vs. 2.0 billion). Although the fertility of the intermediate-fertility countries has dropped markedly since the late 1960s (from 5.3 children per woman to 2.6 children per woman in 2005-2010), there is considerable uncertainty about whether all of them will continue to reduce their fertility to below-replacement level, as projected in the medium variant. If fertility for this group of countries remains above replacement level, they might still experience a doubling of their population by 2100 as projected in the high variant. The reduction of population projected by the low variant would result from very deep reductions of fertility, to well below 1.5 children per woman.

For the low-fertility countries, the projected increase in fertility in the medium variant is based on the experience of low-fertility countries whose fertility has begun to rise, albeit slowly. The range of variation of the population in the low and high variants for this group of countries is from 2.6 billion to 3.3 billion in 2050 and from 1.3 billion to 3.9 billion in 2100. The values projected by the high variant would be reached if fertility rose above replacement level while remaining generally below 2.5 children per woman. The values projected by the low variant would result from maintaining fertility well below 1.6 children per woman from 2010 to 2100. The persistence of very low levels of fertility in this group of countries would speed up population decline and population ageing, outcomes that may not be beyond the realm of possibility.

Life expectancy is projected to increase in the three groups of countries considered. In 2005-2010, average life expectancy at birth was lowest among the high-fertility countries, at 56 years, mainly because many of them have generalized HIV / AIDS epidemics. Nevertheless, given the advances made in reducing the spread of the disease and the expansion of antiretroviral treatment, the projections assume a continued decline in mortality rates from HIV / AIDS as well as from other major causes of death. Therefore, the expectation of life among high-fertility countries rises to 69 years in 2045-2050 and to 77 in 2095-2100.

Among intermediate-fertility countries, average life expectancy was 68 years in 2005-2010 and is projected to rise to 77 years in 2045-2050 and 82 in 2095-2100. Low-fertility countries tend to have, as a group, higher average life expectancy. It was estimated at 74 years in 2005-2010 and is projected to rise to 80 years in 2045-2050 and to 86 years in 2095-2100. Globally, life expectancy is projected to increase from 68 years in 2005-2010 to 81 in 2095-2100.

Because declining fertility and increasing longevity lead to population ageing, population ageing is fastest in the low-fertility countries. Today, 11 per cent of the population of low-fertility countries is aged 65 years or over and just 34 per cent is under age 25. By 2050, according to the medium variant, 26 per cent of their population will be aged 65 or over and just 24 per cent will be below age 25. However, because fertility is projected to increase over the projection period, by 2100 the proportion under 25 increases to 27 per cent and that of those aged 65 or over rises minimally to 28 per cent.

Population ageing is slower among the intermediate-fertility countries, but results in a 2100 population similar in age structure as that of the low-fertility countries. The proportion of the population under age 25 passes from 47 per cent in 2010 to 26 per cent

in 2100 and that aged 65 or over rises from 6 per cent in 2010 to 26 per cent in 2100.

Population ageing is slowest among the high-fertility countries, which have still a very young population. In 2010, 62 per cent of their population was under age 25 and that proportion is projected to decline markedly to 48 per cent in 2050 and 35 per cent in 2100. At the same time, the proportion aged 65 or over is projected to rise from just over 3 per cent in 2010 to 6 per cent in 2050 and to 16 per cent in 2100.

For the results of World Population Prospects: The 2010 Revision, visit www.unpopulation.org





Fred Pearce

Population Bomb or Consumption Bomb?

The United Nations is jumping the gun in declaring the world's population will reach seven billion people next month. The moment could be several years away, say independent demographers, with 2013 the most likely date.

On 31 October, a new baby somewhere in the world will be feted as the seven billionth member of the human race. But behind the UN's patina of certainty – and its claim that the world has added an extra billion people in “barely 13 years” -- lies a fog of outdated and unreliable census data, suspicions of millions of “hidden babies” and unrecorded deaths, and huge uncertainty about the rate at which women are giving birth.

Wolfgang Lutz of the Vienna Institute of Demography says the UN is “under political pressure to disregard uncertainty and name a date” for seven billion. But he and colleague Sergei Scherbov estimate that the world probably won't reach seven billion until between January and April 2013, though it could be as late as 2020. The director of the UN population division Hania Zlotnik defended her data, but agreed that “an interval of a few months or even a year would be a reasonable range of uncertainty.”

The precise “day of seven billion” may not matter much. But the inaccuracies make it harder to answer a more important question: is human population set to peak within the next few decades, or will it carry on growing?

One problem for demographers is undercounting. Even developed countries reckon their censuses miss up to 3 per cent of people. Up to date figures have to adjust for both this and the changes since the last census. Some African countries have not had censuses for decades.

So adding extra people is routine. The big danger, Scherbov says, may be over-adjusting. The world has seen a dramatic decline in fertility in recent years, with the average woman having only 2.5 children, half as many children as her grandmother fifty years ago. There may often be fewer new arrivals than demographers assume.

Take China, the world's largest country. Raw census data suggest that the average woman has 1.2 children. State demographers believe its people are hiding tens of

millions of babies to evade the one-child policy, and estimates 1.8. But Zhongwei Zhou of the Australian National University in Canberra says other data in the 2010 census suggests the raw data may be nearer the truth. The UN currently plumps for 1.5.

Changing assumptions mean UN demographic data often veer wildly. Pakistan, the sixth biggest nation, has not had a census since 1998. In 2011, the UN reduced its estimate of the Pakistani population from 184.8 million to 176.7 million. Zlotnik said this followed a new estimate of a faster decline in fertility. [According to Pakistani demographer Mehtab Karim of the Pew Research Center in Washington DC, the UN for several years rejected the Pakistani government's estimates, opting for higher figures. But it backed down in 2011.]

For Bangladesh, the world's eighth most populous nation, the UN estimated the country's 2009 population at 162.2 million. But in 2010 it readjusted to 148.7 million, after assessing the results of a voter registration campaign. In Africa's biggest nation, Nigeria, a recent adjustment went the other way. The UN upped its estimate by 8 per cent following the country's 2006 census, which Lagos political scientist Bamgbose Adele says was "no way different from the past falsified ones in Nigeria". In Nigeria federal funding for provinces is based on their declared population.

Discrepancies in estimating current populations are amplified in long-term projections. Zhao says China's recent over-estimation of its fertility rate plays out in an over-estimate of its likely population in 2030 of as much as 100 million. But the most dramatic uncertainty is the demographic future of India. The UN estimates that its population will grow from the present 1.2 billion to 1.7 billion by 2050, making it substantially bigger than China. But Scherbov and Lutz predict 1.4 billion, with a possible range from 1.1 to 1.7 billion.

All this matters for the planet. Earlier this year, the UN unexpectedly raised its estimates of future population, suggesting that the world would have more than 10 billion people by 2100. But Scherbov says there is no demographic evidence to justify this gloomier prediction. It arose from "a new set of assumptions about future fertility." For instance, following what Zlotnik calls "a major change in methodology", the UN upped its estimate of the number of children Nigerian women will be having in 2050 from 2.41 to 3.41 children.

The UN says the world's population will still be rising in 2100. Scherbov says there is an 85-per-cent chance that the world's population will have peaked by then. But, like "peak oil", nobody knows for sure.

Still, we are in the middle of a demographic earthquake that is reshaping our world. It has been going on for a century and more. And it has massively increased the human footprint on the planet, triggering huge loss of other species and now global warming.

That earthquake, the peoplequake, has a way to go in reshaping our species. Ageing is the demographic bomb of the 21st century. Because I want to argue that it is no longer human numbers that are the main threat.

We are defusing the population bomb, but we have not begun to defuse the consumption bomb. Of course they are linked, but it is consumption – and how we produce what we consume – that is the real threat to the planet now.

And by concentrating on numbers of people we divert attention from that. We divert attention in a way that is all too convenient for us in the rich world who have largely given up growing our population, but have not given up increasing our consumption.

But first the good news. We are defusing the population bomb -- without draconian measures by big government, without crackdowns on our liberties.

What's more it is being solved by the world's poorest women, like this mother and farmer in Cameroon. The people often seen as villains in the population story are turning into heroes. She has one son and no plans for any more.

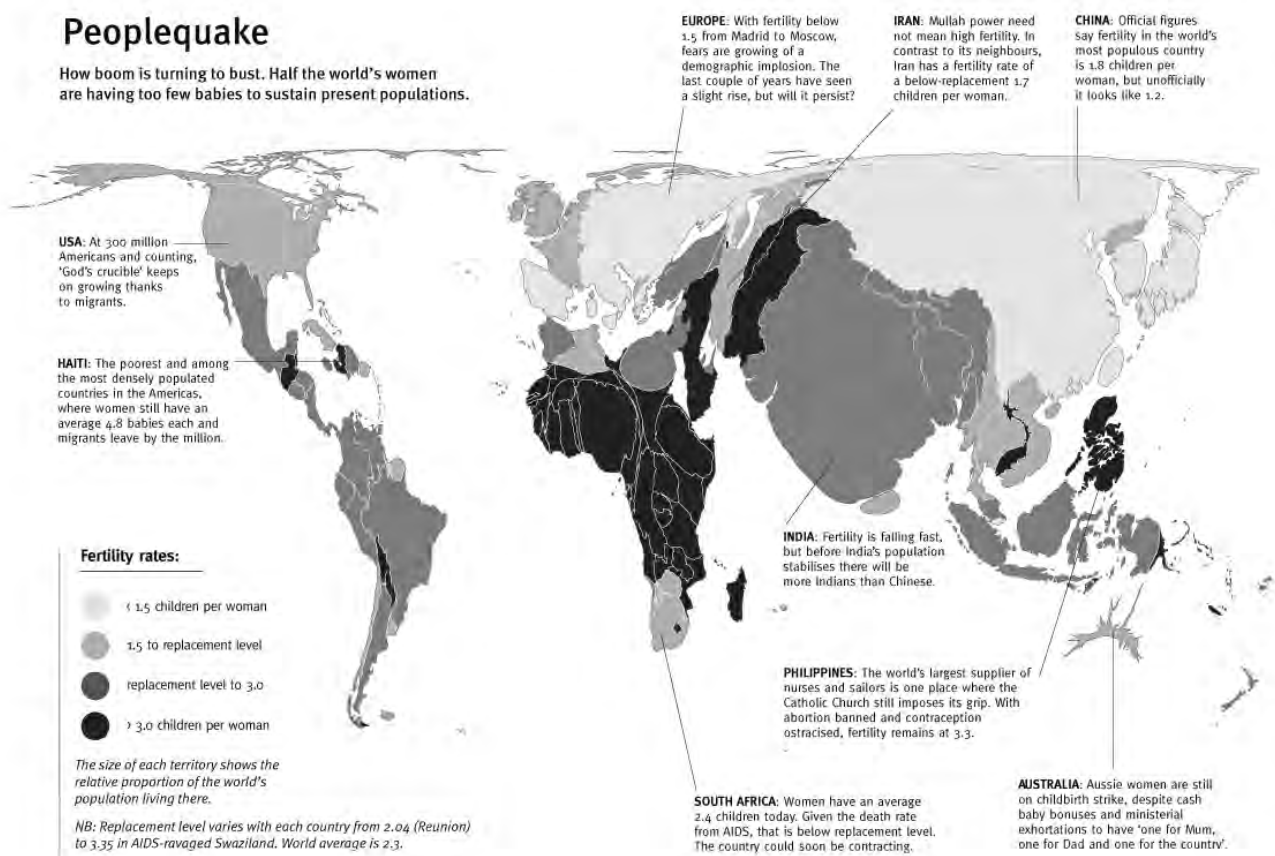
Here is the key stat. If you remember one thing from i say, remember this. Today's women have just half as many children as their mothers – an average of 2.6. Not just in the rich world. That's the global average today. It's a reproductive revolution going on round the world, right now. It's odd we don't hear more about it.

2.6 is getting close to the replacement level. Allowing for girls who don't make it to adulthood, women need to have around 2.3 children to keep up numbers. And in half the world now they are having that number or fewer.

Here is a map from my book showing that. Don't worry about the detail. The odd shape of the countries is because I have distorted country sizes to reflect their populations rather than their geographical area. So China and India are fat, the Americas look a bit skinny and Australia – well, I'm not sure what the cartographer did there.

Peoplequake

How boom is turning to bust. Half the world's women are having too few babies to sustain present populations.



Now look at the shading. The two darker shades are above replacement level. The darkest shade is where women have more than three children. Forty years ago, most of the world was in that category. Now only a handful of countries are.

The two lighter shades are countries with below replacement level fertility. It includes Europe, North America and the Caribbean, most of the Far East from Japan to Vietnam, and much of the Middle East from Algeria to Iran.

Yes, Iran. In the past 25 years, behind the veil, the number of children that Iranian women are having has crashed from eight to less than 2. To 1.7 in fact. Women in Teheran today have fewer children than their sisters in New York.

How much coercion has been involved in this change? A bit, especially in China. But the odd thing is that it may not make much difference any more.

For Chinese women round the world have gone the same way -- without compulsion. Here is a little-known fact. When Britain handed Hong Kong back to China in 1997, it had the lowest fertility in the world — below one child per woman. It was their choice. Governor Chris Patten was not running a one-child policy.

Family planning experts used to say that women only started having fewer children when they got educated or escaped poverty. Like us in Europe. Pessimists feared that if rising population stopped people getting rich they would get caught in a vicious cycle of poverty and large families. The poverty trap would become a demographic trap.

But tell that to Aisha, Miriam and Akhi – three women from three families who share a room in the capital Dhaka, where they worked in a backstreet sweatshop making clothes. They told me that, together, they had 22 brothers and sisters. I asked how many children they planned to have themselves. They told me they planned only six children between them. That, for me, was the global reproductive revolution summed up in one room. From 22 to 6 in a generation.

Bangladesh is one of the world's poorest nations. And still one of the most rural. Its girls are among the least educated, and mostly marry in their mid-teens. Yet they have on average just three children now.

India is even lower at 2.8, half the figure in 1980. In Brazil, hotbed of Catholicism, most women have two children. And nothing the priests say can stop millions of them getting sterilised. They joke in Brazil that if you get sterilised you only have to confess once. I think there may be truth in that.

What is going on? I think something very simple.

Women are having smaller families because, for the first time in history, they can. In the 20th century, the world has largely eradicated the diseases that used to mean most children died before growing up. Mothers no longer need to have five or six children to ensure the next generation. So they do not. Two or three is enough; and that is what they are doing.

There are holdouts, of course. In parts of the Middle East, traditional patriarchs still hold sway. In parts of rural Africa, women still have five or more children – as here in northern Nigeria. But in such places children has still useful in the fields. It's when people move to the cities that they become an economic burden.

We sometimes fear teaming megacities of the developing world. But actually urbanisation is part of the solution.

But the big story is that rich or poor, socialist or capitalist, Muslim or Catholic, secular or devout, with tough government birth control policies or none, most countries tell the same story. Small families are the new norm.

Now it is true that population growth has not ceased yet. We have close to 7 billion people today, and may end up with another two billion before the population bomb is finally defused.

But the good news is that we do not face ever-rising numbers. If fertility rates continue to fall, we will most likely see peak population by mid-century. After that, the world's population will probably begin shrinking. Not through plague or famine, but through choices freely made.

Because in most of the world, after fertility rates fall from 5 to 4 to 3 to 2 they carry on down some way. Probably because urban working women, faced with unhelpful partners, employers and governments find it hard to combine work with raising a family. And increasingly, if forced to choose, will pick the career.

What does this mean for the environment? Well, peak population is good news, of course. But don't put out the flags. Because another myth is that it is all those extra people that are wrecking the planet. It isn't. Not any more.

Rising consumption today is a far bigger threat to the environment than a rising head-count. And most of that extra consumption is still happening in rich countries that have long since given up growing their populations. Look at these numbers.

The world's richest half billion people – that's about 7 per cent of the global population -- are responsible for half the world's carbon dioxide emissions. Meanwhile the poor 50 per cent are responsible for just 7 per cent of emissions. So there is no way halting population growth in the poor world is going to have more than a very marginal effect on climate change.

Economists predict the world's economy will grow by 400 per cent by 2050. If so, only a tenth of that growth will be due to rising human numbers.

Yes, some of those extra poor people might one day become rich. And if they do – and I hope they do – their impact on the planet will be greater. But it is the world's consumption patterns we need to fix, not its reproductive habits. Every time we talk about too many babies in Africa or India, we are denying this fact.

Bottom line: The population bomb is being defused, by the women of the world and by people like the rikshawdriver I met in Manila, who had lots of girlfriends –but carried lots of condoms too. We in the rich world have not even begun to defuse the consumption bomb.

This paper is published at the occasion of the MO*conference with Hania Zlotnik and Fred Pearce, Monday November 7th, 2011, in Brussels.



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