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## Seven billion and counting

By Andrew Jack



Mother and child: new city dwellers are swelling the ranks of slums such as Kibera in Nairobi

As the human race braces for the arrival of its seven billionth citizen this month, no one can say precisely who that child will be or exactly when it will be born. But the question of where it will take place is easier to answer, at least symbolically. It will be in a ramshackle hut in the suburbs of Nairobi, Kenya.

In the shadow of the Habitat agency, the UN's human settlements programme, Kibera – often dubbed the largest slum in Africa – is a location that will become increasingly familiar to the planet's future citizens. It is crowded, polluted and crime-ridden. It is also a magnet for hopeful migrants from rural parts of the country and elsewhere in Africa, moving to the capital in search of a better life.

Based on their best estimates, today's demographers predict a global equilibrium population of up to 10bn towards the latter half of the century, when the total number stabilises and starts to decline. Of the 3bn extra people added in the coming decades, most will be in developing countries, the majority in urban areas and many in Africa and the Indian subcontinent.

Joel Cohen, a demographics expert at the Laboratory of Populations at Rockefeller University in New York, charts the evolution of the global population from when

there were three Europeans for every sub-Saharan African in 1950, to five Africans for every European by 2100. “I do not think it takes a great deal of imagination to see the changes that will bring,” he says.

Economic and political changes, environmental and migratory pressures, debates about social redistribution and urban planning: many current balances will shift and pose important new challenges to policymakers, politicians and neighbour states. But these trends will vary greatly between different countries, ages, genders and social groups.

Looking at the fast-rising graph of the world’s inhabitants, it seems hard to believe the trend will even slow. Yet only two centuries ago – at about the time Thomas Malthus, the English scholar, was warning of pending famine, disease and war triggered by overpopulation – the earth’s inhabitants numbered fewer than 1bn people. Since then, the numbers have risen ever faster: doubling to the current 7bn in less than 50 years.

That expansion reflects remarkable human ingenuity and success. Ever more people have been supported by economic growth, while improved nutrition, sanitation and medical care has allowed them to live increasingly long lives. Life expectancy globally was around 46 years in 1950. Today it has risen to an average of nearly 70, and more than 80 in the richer countries.

This so-called demographic dividend has been reaped as a large, young cohort has moved into working age and boosted economic activity, investment and education. That process helped kick-start the growth of the “tiger” economies of east Asia in the latter half of the 20th century, for instance.

But the surge in numbers has also given pause for thought, with many believing that efforts to control further growth should now be ramped up. “We can probably handle 10bn people, but it will make things more difficult and come at a substantial cost,” says John Bongaarts, a vice-president of the Population Council, the non-profit organisation. “There is no reason to think we will go over a cliff, but the poor are getting hardest hit. If we could change to a slower trajectory, it would be better for humanity.”

The starting point for a debate about the world’s growing population is the number of babies being born. A primary reason to slow the growth is simple demand. The UN estimates that more than 200m women around the world currently want, but cannot gain access to, contraception – a shortfall that would cost \$3.5bn a year to close.

Delaying marriage and childbirth keeps young women healthier and in school longer, boosting their prospects. Pacing births and having fewer children also

reduces the costs of unwanted pregnancy and delivery, as well as immunisation and education to society at large.

In most industrialising countries, this demographic transition has taken place in recent decades. High infant mortality and the need for children to work and support their parents encourages high birth rates. But with improved healthcare, urbanisation, economic development and social support systems, fertility drops.

However, in some developing countries, notably in parts of Africa and south Asia, that pattern has not yet come about. There has been instead a “demographic drag”, with improvements in healthcare not matched by declining birth rates.

Without greater efforts to cut family size, poor countries such as Mali and Niger simply cannot grow their per capita income. Any economic growth will be outstripped by faster growth in population size. That puts extra pressure on land, contributing to deforestation and desertification, helping to fuel conflict as poverty and inequality grows.

Analysts have suggested that such competition for resources by a young and fast-growing population excluded from advancement was a major contributing factor to the Arab spring upheaval in the Middle East earlier this year. Others point to its influence in the genocide in Rwanda in the 1990s. At the very least, it spurs emigration, depriving countries in need of development of some of their most talented inhabitants.

“Family planning is one of the few interventions that is cost saving,” says Monica Kerrigan, deputy director of family planning at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the world’s largest philanthropic organisation. She points to the need for fresh partnerships among, and commitments by, governments, private and non-profit organisations, and sees considerable scope for newer technologies among contraceptive devices.

Indeed, today there is a renewed global commitment towards family planning. The Gates foundation has revitalised support, mirroring the pick-up in interest by government donors including the US, UK and Australia. At a high-profile meeting on the subject at the World Bank last month, a number of finance ministers embraced the importance of lowering fertility to accelerate the demographic transition and stimulate greater economic growth.

If greater prosperity and improved health are among the reasons to reduce family size, another is pressure on natural resources. “We are closer to the earth’s environmental constraints than people thought,” Bongaarts says. He highlights local tensions triggered by deforestation, food rights and energy prices, and fights over scarce water supplies.

On a global level, there are concerns about the links between rising populations and the loss of biodiversity; as well as the impact of energy consumption and carbon emissions on climate change, which itself is likely to put extra pressure on some of the world's most densely populated and fastest-growing regions.

Yet the world's greatest consumption and emissions come from the high- and middle-income countries where fertility is already much lower. In these countries, overpopulation is less important than underpopulation, as those of working age have to support an ever larger number of young and elderly dependents for healthcare, allowances and pensions. In Japan, the number of people aged over 60 is expected to rise from the current 31 per cent to 42 per cent by 2050.

David Bloom, professor of economics and demography at Harvard University's school of public health, argues that such fears for the greying population may be overdone, suggesting that the burden can be eased by factors including greater female workforce participation, higher savings rates, raised retirement ages, and migration.

The latter, however, is controversial. Projections suggest that to maintain a stable dependency ratio – the relative size of the working and non-working populations – Europe will have to admit a potentially destabilising 1.3bn migrants by 2050. The political and social backlash of such widespread immigration could be severe.

Cohen at Rockefeller University says: "Governments need to recognise that they are going to have to make greater efforts to plan for the integration, education and healthcare of more culturally diverse immigrants and to prepare for the influx of 2.5bn-3bn people moving to cities in poor countries over the next 40 years. That's 1m new urban people every five days."

The onus is on the wealthier countries to take the lead in modifying lifestyles and developing new technologies to tackle global warming and the depletion of natural resources. The consequences of inaction will fall significantly on the poor, who may ultimately be forced to develop their own innovative solutions to problems for which industrialised countries still have no ready answers.

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