

The Coming Global Population Decline

Written by Richard Rousseau, Guest Contributor | 05 October 2012



It took tens of thousands of years for humanity to reach its first billion in 1804. But it took only 123 years to reach its second billion, 32 years to reach its third and another 15 years for its fourth. The seventh billion was attained only 13 years after the sixth.

Yet, the United Nations Population Division's figures released in May 2011 on Western states' aging workforce provided fresh evidence on the most important trend of our time: the global labor force will peak in 2050 or is already close to peaking in most major economies. If the Industrial Revolution was the main highlight of the 19th century, and competition between sociopolitical ideologies haunted the 20th, then the 21st will be an epoch fixated on the planet's depopulation, especially in the West and some new industrialized countries. The future humanity faces is not one of overpopulation, but of depopulation.

In most daily controversy, in most emerging economic, political, and social conflicts, the topic of depopulation is likely to be one of the underlying latent factors beneath the surface news. United Nations Statistics Division's medium variant projections forecasts that the planet will be inhabited by 11 billion humans by 2100, after which date the global population will level off, and even, some say, start to decline sharply. However, birthrates everywhere are falling at a faster rate than most international organizations had previously predicted, so that most demographers maintain that the UN low variant will, in the end, prove closer to the truth. The world's population is then projected to reach between eight and nine billion between 2040 and 2050. Then, if the trend holds, humanity will enter for the first time into sustained population decline.

There is hardly an academic conference in social sciences or a front-page story in today's newspapers that is not being connected closely or remotely by the depopulation trend. The Middle East's Arab Spring, American-European tension, Afghanistan, Iraq, Islamic terrorism, HIV/AIDS in Africa, Japan's world status, the economic recession in the European Union, all these phenomena are related to the issue of depopulation. In highly industrialized countries, issues of emerging labor shortages in some economic sectors (despite high unemployment rates), urban infrastructure, sustainability of private and public pension plans, immigration policy and public debt are also, at the bottom line, engendered by the impending depopulation.

In an increasing number of regions, depopulation has already begun and is a daily topic of discussion for public authorities. Chinese, Russian, and Brazilian birthrates have already dropped

below replacement level, while Indians are having far fewer children than before. Over the past twenty years, Russia's population has shrunk by 8 million people. Fifty-three out of the 211 designated regions that make up the European Union are experiencing population decline. In the mid-2000s Spain was aggressively courting Argentines to move to the Iberian Peninsula, in an effort to bring to life around 2,000 depopulated towns. Population decline means fewer consumers and fewer workers to support the payment of pensions for the elderly and thus insurance companies that cannot maintain profit margins and growth. For the developed world, population decline means inevitable economic decline.

The explanation for Germany's and France's irritability toward the Americans is to be found in the former's population decline. Thanks mostly to Hispanic new immigrants, the United States remains the only highly developed nation with a healthy birthrate, but because of this situation, the gap in prosperity and world influence between the old and new worlds is widening.

Australia, Canada, and New Zealand--all highly developed states--have also many reasons to worry about their birthrate, but their immigrant heritage makes it relatively easier to compensate for a low fertility. These countries' population and economy should keep on growing throughout the 21st century, inasmuch as they are willing to sustain and even increase the number of immigrants, and provide the funding for infrastructure and services needed to integrate them. However, these new immigrants, almost certainly from Asian and Hispanic descent, will eventually outnumber the European old stock.

In many ex-Soviet republics, nationalist policies and a sluggish economy make it harder to attract immigrants, and the few immigrants ready to settle in these countries are unlikely to support the cause of nationalism, to the chagrin of ethnic nationals. Likewise, in poorer countries, which immigrants tend to avoid, population decline is either under way or imminent. By 2050, many Mediterranean and Scandinavian countries may consist of half a dozen cities separated by scenery.

Depopulation is also helping to drive the international crises of our day. While most of Asia and Latin America are approaching the replacement rate of 2.1 births per woman, the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa remain the only two places in the world with high birthrates, partly due to these regions' high poverty, skewed wealth distribution, and the little control women have over their reproductive decisions.

The rapid increase of the Arab population within Israel's borders threatens to exceed the natural growth of the Jewish population within a few decades. The Bush administration hoped that the ousting of Saddam Hussein in 2003, through regime change in Iraq and the introduction of Western-type democracy to the region, would bring down the Arab fertility rate. It is difficult to make prediction on the impact the Arab Spring will have on Middle East birthrates. For their part, Europeans fear to see their homelands swamped by North African and Middle Eastern hordes, a fear that fuels anti-immigrant sentiment.

Population decline, just like the Industrial Revolution from 1750 to 1850, will challenge many societies. Although it will push some into relative decline, a shrinking world population has the potential to reduce disparities between the "First World" and the "Third World" and relieve pressures on the environment. At the beginning of the 2000s some European planners were talking about reforesting parts of the continent. Moreover, no depopulation trend lasts forever since it eventually flattens or reverses. If it would not be the case, according to one calculation, Japan would be emptied of Japanese person in 600 years.

Today's headlines on international issues have to be put in perspective by keeping in mind that a great demographic revolution lies beneath these surface events. Israeli paranoia over the Palestinians, Italy's demand for more help from German or French taxpayers, developed countries' demand for more financial resources from Asian exporters--all these are ultimately a reflection of an uneven depopulation trend. The world's population hit seven billion on October 31, 2011 but humanity is just not making babies like it used to.

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