

FACTSheet

Fewer or More? The Real Story of Global Population

The phrase “population crisis” once roused fears of uncontrollable growth in human numbers. However, now that many societies have improved women’s status and increased access to family planning, some analysts argue that if there is a population crisis it is because women are having too few children—a so-called “birth dearth.” A quick look at the demographic reality shows that the era of population growth is far from over—and high fertility rates are still prevalent in many developing countries.

Distinct Demographic Trends

■ **Demographic trends are diverse.** Some countries, most of them wealthy European nations, are experiencing very low fertility rates that could eventually lead to population decline. By contrast, the majority of the world’s population lives in countries whose high birthrates all but guarantee population growth for decades to come. The majority of the world’s least developed countries are facing burgeoning youth populations and rapid, unsustainable population growth rates.

■ **Projected population growth in least developed countries greatly exceeds projected decline in the more developed regions.** Developed countries such as the Russian Federation, Romania, Belarus, Ukraine and Bulgaria are projected to experience the most population decline, decreasing by 24 to 35 percent by 2050. In contrast, developing countries such as Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia, Niger, Uganda and Yemen are all projected to grow by more than 200 percent—some by almost 300 percent—by 2050.

World Population Still Growing Rapidly

■ **Global population is currently increasing at an annual rate of about 76 million people.** Under the United Nations most commonly cited “medium”

demographic projection, population is expected to reach 9.2 billion by 2050—an increase of 2.5 billion people. If fertility were to remain constant at the levels estimated for 2000-2005, the population of less developed regions would increase to 10.6 billion instead of the 7.9 billion projected by assuming that fertility declines. Assuming constant fertility as such, world population is then estimated to be 11.8 billion in 2050.

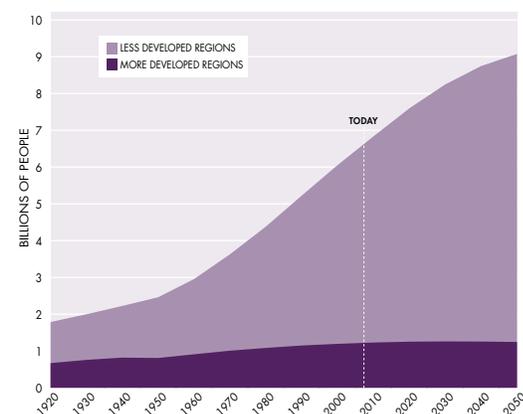
■ **Today, more than 6 billion of the world’s 6.7 billion people live in countries that are still growing.**

Although growth rates will decline overall, the vast majority of the world’s people will still live in countries with growing populations in 2050. Indeed, because of the large proportion of young people of reproductive age in the world today, population will continue to grow even if fertility rates are lower than in previous generations.

■ **One-half of the world’s population is under the age of 30.** In sub-Saharan Africa, half of the population is under age 20.

World population is increasing by the equivalent of the population of 10 Baltimores every month, by the entire population of Egypt every year and by a population greater than that of all of Europe every ten years.

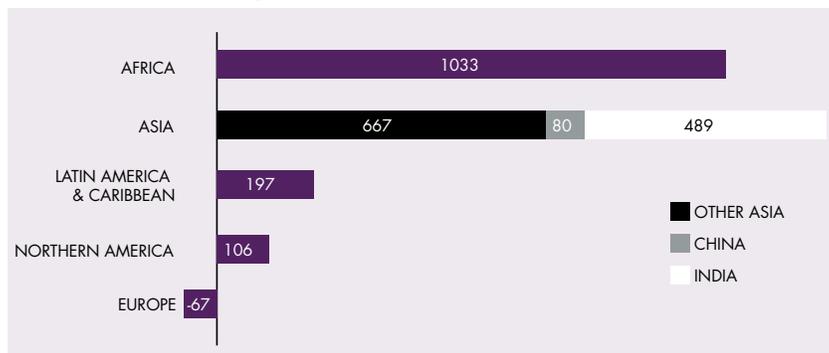
Population Growth in More and Less Developed Regions: Medium Projections



The proportion of growth in the less developed regions, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, has been much greater than the historical growth rates experienced in the more developed regions. Moreover, the expected growth in the less developed regions is expected to greatly exceed the expected moderate declines in the more developed regions.

Source: United Nations Population Division, 2007. World Population Prospects: The 2006 Revision. New York: United Nations.

Projected Population Growth or Decline, 2005-2050 (UN Medium Projection)



Every major world region is expected to experience population growth through the middle of this century with the exception of Europe, which will decline slightly. Africa and Asia are expected to grow dramatically, adding an estimated 2.3 billion people to the world's population.

Source: United Nations Population Division, 2007. World Population Prospects: The 2006 Revision. New York: United Nations.

Where is population growing most rapidly?

- **The total fertility rate in least developed countries averages 4.6 births per woman, as opposed to 1.6 in more developed regions.** For the period 2005-2010, 30 developing countries have birth rates greater than five children per woman. Niger, with an average of more than 7 births per woman, has the highest fertility rate in the world. By contrast, Belarus has one of the lowest fertility rates at 1.20 births per woman.
- **Kenya, Niger, Tanzania, and Uganda, among others, have all more than quintupled in population since 1950.** The two largest countries in sub-Saharan Africa, Nigeria and Ethiopia, have each more than quadrupled in population since 1950. All of these countries continue to grow at rapid rates, some doubling in as little as 25 years.
- **Rapid population growth is also occurring in some South Asian countries.** Afghanistan's population has more than tripled since 1950 and is currently projected to nearly triple again—to 79.4 million—by 2050. Similarly, Pakistan's population has quadrupled since 1950 and is projected to grow to nearly 292.2 million by 2050.
- **Population growth in sub-Saharan Africa and western Asia is occurring primarily in urban areas, where most new residential growth is in slums and other areas that typically lack adequate housing, sanitation, and access to clean water.** In 2007, for the first time in history,

the majority of the world's population will live in urban areas. While growth in some rural parts is being offset by migration to cities, many rural areas also continue to gain population due to continued high fertility.

What are the benefits of slower population growth?

- **Rapid population growth, which correlates closely with young populations, can undermine countries' stability, governance, and economic development.** For example, 86 percent of all civil conflicts from 1970-1999 occurred in very youthful countries. Similarly, nearly 90 percent of countries with very young populations had autocratic or weak democratic governments at the end of the 20th century.
- **Rapid population growth in poor and developing countries increases the burden on already strained financial and natural resources, thereby aggravating efforts to provide food, clean water, and basic health care for their citizens.** The 2006 Millennium Development Goals Report found that more people are going hungry in the developing world, even though the actual rates of hunger have declined. For example, in sub-Saharan Africa the number of chronically hungry people has skyrocketed from 88 million in 1970 to more than 200 million today.
- **Widely spaced births and smaller family size allows families and governments to invest more in each child—helping to ensure access to education and health care.** Over time, this raises household and government savings, improves productivity, and stimulates economic growth. Economists credit declining fertility, from the mid-1960s to the early 1990s, as a major contributor to sustained economic growth among the Asian Tigers—South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia and the former Hong Kong Territory.
- **Planned families and spaced births are healthier for women and their children.** Access to family planning services could prevent nearly a third of the 500,000 annual maternal deaths related to pregnancy in developing countries. Poor reproductive health conditions account for one-third of the disease burden among women of reproductive age worldwide.



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INTERNATIONAL

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Printed on 30% post-consumer recycled paper ■ © April 2007

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