

Is a Global Demographic Crisis Unavoidable?

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Theme: [Intelligence](#)

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“Throughout history, any profound political and social change was preceded by a philosophical revolution, at least among a significant section of the population.” —M. N. Roy (1887-1954), humanist and political figure from India, 1950.

“For social problems, to paraphrase the population doctrine of Thomas Malthus, have the unfortunate tendency to grow at a geometric ratio with the growth of the organism of which they are part, while the ability of man to cope with them, if it can be extended at all, grows only at an arithmetic ratio. —Which means that, if a society grows beyond its optimum size, its problems must eventually outrun the growth of those human faculties, which are necessary for dealing with them.” —Leopold Kohr (1909-1994), Austrian economist and philosopher, 1957.

“I am convinced that some political and social activities and practices of the Catholic organizations are detrimental and even dangerous for the community as a whole, here and everywhere. I mention here only the fight against birth control at a time when overpopulation in various countries has become a serious threat to the health of people and a grave obstacle to any attempt to organize peace on this planet.” —Albert Einstein (1879-1955), German-born physicist and professor, 1954.

When I was born, in 1939, the world’s population was around 2,240 million people. Twenty years later, in 1960, the world had a population of almost 3 billion, an increase of a third. At the turn of the century, in 2000, the 6 billion mark had already been crossed, as a result of the world’s population having doubled in only 40 years. And by 2020, the Planet was home to 7.8 billion people, and almost a quarter million more people are added to the world every day. This is the reality.

Will human population continue to explode exponentially in the coming years, and if so, will it cause serious transformations and crises? Average estimates and projections by the [United Nations Population Division](#) show that the earth’s population will reach almost 10 billion in 2050 and exceed 11 billion people in the year 2100. However, these average projections are based on hypotheses of a decline in fertility rates and an increase in life expectancy in many countries. This remains to be verified in fact.

Projections of future population growth are based on uncertain assumptions

The region of the world with the fastest population growth is also the region with the poorest countries, i.e., [Africa](#). Indeed, this continent is expected to have more than half of the world’s population growth by 2050, while population growth will be negative in 55 other countries, notably in several European countries.

The reason is relatively simple: unlike other regions of the world, which have experienced

significant declines in their fertility rates, those rates are still very high in Africa. For example, the average fertility rate in sub-Saharan Africa is 5.4 children per woman, compared to the world average of 2.5. Some African Muslim countries even have fertility rates of between 7 and 8 children per woman. (N.B. An index of the fertility rate of 2.1 children per woman is sufficient to replace the population).

Nevertheless, demographic projections are made in assuming that fertility rates overall will continue to decline in the future, under the influence of a greater literacy rate among women and more advances in family planning.

However, if fertility rates do not fall as predicted, and if governments do not get involved in finding solutions, while infant mortality continues to drop dramatically and life expectancy continues to rise, then, what will happen? Well, in the year 2100, there would not be 11 billion inhabitants in the world, as it is now logically expected, but the world population could reach astronomical levels, with figures that could range between 15 and 27 billion people at the end of the present century—that is to say in only 80 years.

Overpopulation can lead to major transformations and crises

Many major transformations and crises could result from such a demographic explosion.

To begin with, the [climate crisis](#) would almost certainly worsen, because it is, in part, linked to human activity, due to the high levels of CO₂ in the atmosphere generated by industrial production, thus resulting in a greenhouse effect and global warming. More generally, such overcrowding would likely accentuate the ecological footprint of otherwise required production, and it would bring to the foreground the issue of the carrying capacity of the environment.

Secondly, rivalries and escalating [conflicts](#) over resources could intensify, given the shortages already observed, for example in the supply of drinking water. We currently observe several conflicts resulting from the loss of influence of international institutions, which were specifically created to prevent them.

Third, a high level of overcrowding may also hamper progress in the fight against [poverty](#), hunger, and malnutrition in many countries. Similarly, the coverage and quality of health and education systems for a booming population could suffer.

Fourth, more advanced countries, in Europe and in North America, for instance, could feel destabilized by more or less controlled waves of [immigration](#) from poor and overcrowded countries, a phenomenon which, in turn, would pose many societal problems. Indeed, a certain number of countries have no choice but to offload their surplus population to other countries with limited capacities to integrate them. More worrisome perhaps are the instances when some [leaders](#) even use the surplus population in their countries as a weapon to blackmail other countries and threaten their stability and prosperity.

Fifth, generating economic growth rates high enough to meet the needs of a booming population would pose special challenges to countries and their governments. The economic and financial [globalization](#) of the past quarter century has already been questioned because its benefits have not been distributed equitably.

Conclusion

There is a lot of concern nowadays about the climate crisis. Perhaps a strong emphasis should also be placed on the upcoming demographic crisis, since the former is, in part, the result of the latter.

Land and resources on our Planet Earth are not unlimited, despite all the ingenuity that the human mind can deploy to cope with such scarcities.

The juxtaposition of global warming and overpopulation in certain parts of the world will be accompanied by frequent and devastating droughts impacting agriculture, while the disappearance of marine species will reduce the expected yields of commercial fishing.

Rising sea levels will also jeopardize human habitat in areas bordering certain heavily populated regions, which could force the migration of entire populations. This, in turn, could likely cause social and political tensions in many other countries.

All this to say that there is no guarantee that the economic, social and political progress recorded in the world during the last three quarters of a century—through the expansion of international trade and technological innovations—will proceed at the same rate in the future. This is not impossible, but the precautionary principle would require that the world be prepared to solve the great economic and environmental problems to come, or adapt to them.

An important international conference on this issue would be timely and would undoubtedly be very useful in raising awareness among leaders and populations of the challenges to come.

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