

Population and Consumption Patterns

Have you ever thought that there were already too many people on the planet? Or that over-consumption wastes irreplaceable resources? Or that one should not promote large families?

If so, hang on. While it is true that world population is rising and will continue to rise for more than half a century and that we, collectively, will be hard-pressed to provide adequate resources for the increased population, Demography isn't a quick changing subject. Decisions made today will see ramifications only in 75 years.

Consider these facts:

- According to recent United Nations figures, the total population of the more developed regions of the world was 1,193.8 million in 2000. It will reach 1,219.7 million by 2050. The population appears flat because the rising U.S population covers the declining population of Europe and Japan.
- The United States' population is rising, but the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta calls our "intrinsic rate of natural increase" has been negative for over 30 years, and this applies to both white and black women.
- The population of Europe will decline by nearly 96 million people over the next 50 years, reaching an estimated 632 million. The population of Japan will fall from 127 million to 109.7 million. Since the United States, Europe and Japan account for most of the consumption in the world, the pressure on some natural resources won't be as great as it would be if their population was rising rapidly.
- The population of Russia will virtually collapse, falling from 145.6 million to 101.5 million by 2050.
- The population of China will continue rising to 2030, peaking at 1,450.5 million, but will decline to 1,395.2 million by 2050.
- About one-third of the expected population growth will occur in Africa, expect that estimates are revised to reflect the downward spiral of HIV/AIDS and political anarchy.
- Even areas of sustained population growth have rapidly falling birthrates. In India the birthrate fell by one-third between 1981 and 1997.

Phillip Longman directs his concern to the unsung hero of human societies: the family. Most economists treat families as mere tools for consuming the output of business or the purported benefits of government. In fact, no business or government institution can replace the functioning of a family. Without that functioning, society would cease to exist. Longman sees that is literally verging on extinction (nearly half the required rate for replacement) in Europe, Japan and Russia. And he asks questions few are asking. And they turn on two words.

Care. It will become more difficult in rapid population shift. Longman points out that there will be 35 million fewer children in the world by 2050, but 1.6 billion more elderly people. We can measure that by asking what portion of the population will be at least 60

years old in 2050. It has been less than 5 percent for most of human history. In forever-young America, the figure will hit 26.9 percent, the lowest of any of the developed economies. In Italy and Japan it will be 42.3 percent. In Germany it will be 38.1 percent.

These are massive changes. They will absorb the lifetime work of millions of younger people. It will strain or completely destroy institutional systems of retirement income and health care that depend on transfers from younger workers.

Nurture. This is what adult parents do for the next generation. Nurture will be increasingly problematic as young couples confront the competing demands of caring (or paying) for the elderly, paying off education debts and paying for expensive housing in the shrinking number of school districts where quality public education can be obtained.

This is about the human condition. Let's pray that we can find as much concern for human beings, as a species, as we can find for whales and birds, as species.

Source: *"Population situation is an emotional subject"* - Scott Burns
Houston Chronicle September 20, 2004