

Population growth - too tough for Copenhagen?



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Much has been made in the run up to Copenhagen 2009 of the need for a global response to the very real problem of climate change. So far discussion has centred on the issues of reducing emissions through new technology and efficiency. However, when discussing the impact the human race is having on our planet there is another pillar to the discussion which is rarely talked about by the politicians – the thorny issue of population growth.

Currently there are about 6.8 billion humans in the world, a figure which is expected by the United Nations (UN) to rise by an extra 2.3bn by 2050, ie an extra one third more than we have now. In the western world, news has largely focused on the fact that, in general, birth rates are flat or declining and population growth has been largely driven by immigration.

From an economic point of view, population growth has usually been seen as a positive – simplistically, more people means a larger workforce and more services required. While this may be a positive for a country as a whole, at an individual level it's not helpful unless gross domestic product (GDP) per capita also grows so that standards of living are actually rising. The overriding issue though is the finite resources of the planet. We run the very real risk of simply not being able to sustain the number of humans on the planet, particularly if climate change does lead to land being lost through desertification, floods and rising sea levels.

Human beings are essentially emissions producers through household, transport and business use. While levels of consumption in developed countries are clearly a core part of the problem, it is also undeniable that the more of us there are on the planet, the harder it will be to bring climate change under control. Cutting a country's emission levels will be much harder if there are a third more mouths to feed and people to be housed, particularly given that where population growth is happening is generally in the developing world where

standards of living are rising and diet is changing, both leading to more use of natural resources and power. Should we therefore also be seriously considering a sustainable population initiative as well as targeting reduction of emissions?

The question is fraught with difficulty. Having children is a basic human right and some religions are strongly against contraception. However, we run the risk of a Malthusian fate of global scale starvation and famine if the world's human population remains unchecked.

Technological developments have kept this scenario at bay for much longer than many thought possible and no doubt further technological advances will help offset some of the impact. For example some of the companies in the Henderson Industries of the Future Fund are likely to play a role here. These include companies such as **Plant Health Care**, which provides environmentally friendly biological products to boost plant growth and improve plants access to water and nutrients, and **Geberit**, a Swiss company whose sanitation products help use less water. However, at some stage we will have to admit that the earth is simply not able to provide for a limitless human population.

There are some ways to significantly slow population growth without reducing anyone's human rights. Arguably two of the most important influences on population growth are education and health and, within these, particularly, the education and health of women. The UN estimates that 40% of all pregnancies worldwide are unintended and over 200 million women in the world do not have access to contraception. The London School of Economics estimates that every £4 spent on family planning up until 2050 would reduce global CO2 emissions by over a ton. In contrast, £19, nearly 5 times as much, would have to be spent on low-carbon technologies in order to achieve the same result. UN data suggests that providing currently unmet family planning needs would reduce unintended births by 72%. This would in turn reduce the projected world population in 2050 by 0.5bn.

Along with better family planning provisions, improved overall healthcare is deemed beneficial, since families tend to have more children where child mortality is higher. Increased education of women has also been seen to reduce birth rates.

There are several reasons for this: education tends to increase the age of first marriage, and prevalence of marriage overall, and therefore (traditionally) decreases the number of years for child bearing. Incidences of children being used as labour or for old age support declines with education, mainly as educated women have a tendency towards more self-reliance and social and economic autonomy. Educated women also tend to expect higher standards for their children's education, which tends to mean increased costs; educated women are also more likely to have paid employment outside the home, and the loss of income resulting from having more children can be a deterrent. Our themes of Healthcare and Knowledge play into this, and stocks such as Woongjin Thinkbig, the Korean publisher and home tutoring company and Benesse, the Japanese correspondence education services provider, both benefit from the increasing importance of education in Asia.

Interestingly, in trying to tackle poverty while not mentioning population growth as a problem, four of the UN's Millennium Development Goals are linked to these issues: Universal Education, Gender Equality, Child Health and Maternal Health, which is very encouraging. If international policymakers can link carbon neutral technology, efficiency and population growth together – and work together as a global community for the benefit of all rather than focusing on short term cost impacts – the world will surely be a better place for all of us and our descendants, however many you choose to have.

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