# Population Growth

The current financial crisis is still being described as a spanner in the works brought on primarily by greed in mortgage-related investments and labyrinthine credit networks. However, there are strong indications that the current jolt is just the tip of the iceberg awaiting the global economy. It is more that a blip in an otherwise smoothly operating system, which can be remedied using purely capitalist measures, such as the $700-billion bailout package that has been set before the US senate. Rather, the threat of an economic meltdown must be taken in the broader context of a growing imbalance in economic and population growth.

Overpopulation is history's oldest environmental quandary, and it's the most instructive for making sense of today's debates about the economy, food crisis and climate change. According to the UN, the world's population currently stands at almost 7 billion and is set to cross the 8-billion mark by 2020. Population is growing by some 150 a minute.

Clearly, this is both a triumph and a threat. The numbers reflect the advance of human ingenuity in wresting survival from nature. Agriculture, medicine, science, industry have transformed the planet's ability to support human life to a degree that was unimagined even in our parents' generation.

On the other hand, while there's no way of knowing how much further we can go, we do already recognize the limits that lie in the capacity of the soil, the atmosphere and the regenerative forces that enable nature to continue supporting us. Either we learn to face them and care for them, or nature will re-instate the old methods of famine, pestilence and war to restore its own kind of balance. In that sense, we may already be at the threshold of a Malthusian nightmare – named after the 19th century English economist who was the first to raise the spectre of widespread poverty and starvation stemming from exponential population growth.

Within that context, it's interesting to note the changing balance of populations. In 1900, Europeans and North Americans made up 30 per cent of the world's population; by 2050, they are projected to constitute just 11 per cent. By contrast, the population of Asia is expected to remain steady at 60 per cent, while the number of Africans is projected to grow from 8 per cent in 1900 to almost 20 per cent by 2050.

The current financial crisis reveals just how skewed the world is. For every banker, broker and financial analyst who has lost his job in the ongoing economic mayhem, there are thousands in developing countries who try to extricate themselves from abject misery. Specifically, according to UNDP, the number of desperately poor people increases by a staggering 250,000 every day.

The burden of a rapid population has been recognized, particularly in terms of a global economy that can't catch up or of social nets that can't be set up fast enough for the burgeoning masses. Expanding populations in poor countries therefore resort to cutting down forests for firewood, for example, which impoverishes the soil. As coastlands lose their cover, the forests become savannas and eventually deserts.

Moreover, depletion of environmental resources affects economic capacity, which in turn comes to affect politics. Nothing is really disconnected in the longer term.

The technical side of the population issue and what can be done about it is difficult enough. To be sure, migration figures continue to mount despite the strict immigration laws in developed countries. But there is an underlying political argument, usually veiled, that makes it all much worse. For instance, it's hardly coincidental that the largest concentrations of voter support for France's Jean-Marie Le Pen, the leader of the ultra-nationalist party that preaches open racism, matches the regions with the highest concentrations of Arab immigrants; or that Austria's far right made alarmingly strong gains in last week's elections.

More worryingly, some European politicians have equated the race for economic power with population power, and are openly calling for population growth in Western countries so as not to be outbred by the immigrant communities.

But if population is still a political weapon, it is undoubtedly double-edged. Everybody – rich and poor alike – will be adversely affected unless it is seen as a global headache and an intrinsic part of mankind's new responsibility to preserve the sustaining balance of nature.

The deterioration of the world economy must serve to lend fresh urgency to sound population policies. And time is running out. For instance, the global population grew by almost 1000 souls in the time it took you to read this article.

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# The Millennium Development Goals

Has the world given up on the earth's poorest people? With almost a billion people hungry and nearly a thousand women dying in childbirth every day, many analysts wonder whether the United Nations priorities have shifted away from the "bottom billion".

At the end of last month, a largely new crop of world leaders gathered at the UN to commit themselves once more to the Millennium Development Goals that were set in 2000. These eight goals – each with one or more targets to be reached by 2015 – were designed as a series of stepping stones aimed at eradicating chronic poverty and improving access to education, healthcare and clean water. While development experts credit the goals with helping to broaden access to primary education and healthcare, its detractors maintain that the targets have not achieved the sort of comprehensive effect once hoped for.

The MDGs were regarded as unrealistic targets even when they were first introduced because they were set up essentially as shopping lists that disregarded, among others, economic development and the indirect cost of corruption.

According to the latest UN report on MDGs, which was released ahead of last month's high-level development summit, there were big success stories in Asia, particularly China, and depressingly familiar news of under-achievement from sub-Saharan Africa.

The sharp disparities in achievement are echoed in the Arab region, with its mixed bag of subregions. The high-income Gulf States are relatively well placed to achieve the MDGs, and even most middle-income Mashreq and Maghreb countries are expected to meet the major targets by 2015. However, the chinks in the armour that offset the regional averages are the

least-developed Arab countries – such as Yemen, Djibouti and Somalia – which were intended as the main beneficiaries when the goals were first formulated.

The motive force for the MDGs is, of course, donor money. Last month's meeting was unofficially dubbed the "rededication summit" and ended with a timely renewal of commitment and some additional aid, including $750 million by the World Bank towards achieving the education goal, and an increase of 20 percent in France's contribution to the Global Fund to fight HIV-AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria. In addition, France and Spain called for a global tax on financial transactions aimed at creating a fund for development financing, which was particularly well received by several NGOs.

But this falls far short of what's required. According to UN calculations, an additional $160 billion in development aid will be needed by 2015. More to the point, the UN is pressing its member states to honour their financial commitments at a time when the global economy is still haunted by the threat of a double-dip recession.

The UN is naturally alarmed that industrialized countries will now be even more inclined to renege on their pledges if they have to cut their budgets in order to ride another global financial crisis. Within that context, the Bretton Woods institutions presented a united front last month when the heads of both the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund warned countries not to abandon the bottom billion.

Under the agreement reached at the Millennium Summit, the world's richest 22 countries are supposed to donate 0.7 per cent of their overall national incomes to aid. But most of the aid has hovered around 0.45 per cent over the past decade and there are genuine concerns that the percentage could now slip further.

Aid to poor nations has slumped even as higher food prices and slowing global economic growth have made such assistance more urgent.

But money can't fix everything. Critics of the MDGs believe that too much emphasis is placed on raising new money and not enough on improving the efficiency with which it is delivered. It is also said that cash is poured into achieving the goals even where there are no checks and balances to monitor reliably where the money is going. Resources need to be combined with reform of governance, including improved targeting, equitable distribution of wealth and services, and accountability.

There is a reluctance to criticize the MDGs openly for fear of undermining the effort. To be sure, international coordination has been the great achievement of the Millennium Development Goals; all the major donor countries and international bodies have bought into them several times since 2000. However, even at the rededication summit, there was a sense that the revised goals and targets were agreed by the industrialized north to be applied in the developing south, with little room for local variations according to national priorities. Moreover, a shaky progress towards ending global poverty by 2015 continues to feed doubts; and many feel that the goalposts may need to be revised – especially if recession returns for a second bite – in order to help the bottom billion to converge with the rest of mankind on a more realistic timescale.

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