**Population growth in the world**

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We don’t talk much about the world’s population growth nowadays, in spite of the world’s total population now having reached 7.8 billion, up from about 1.6 billion in 1900, and over 6 billion in 2000. At independence, or rather when the census was made in 1951, Pakistan had a total population of about 75 million, which included about 33.7 million in West Pakistan, which is today’s Pakistan, and 42 million in East Pakistan, which is today’s Bangladesh. Today, Pakistan has about 223 million people and an annual growth rate of about 2 percent (2019). Pakistan’s population will, according to UN forecasts, reach 350-400 million people by 2100.

If we look at the African continent, which also has a fast population growth, we find that the continent had a total population of about 177 million people in 1950 and it grew almost 8 times to more than 1.35 billion in 2020. By 2050, UN forecasts suggest that Africa’s population will continue to grow fast, and by 2100 reach well above 4 billion, constituting some 40 percent of the total world population. Asia’s population might by 2100, approach 5 billion, and Latin America, some 0.8 billion. Europe will have some 0.75 billion, and North America will have just below 0.5 billion. Australia and Oceania will have some 75 million people.

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As we see from these forecasts, the West’s proportion of the world population will have gone down markedly, also that of Latin America, while Asia’s and Africa’s populations will have grown in real numbers and as a proportion of the estimated world population of about 11 billion in 2100 (up from close to 8 billion in 2021).

Is this dramatic? Well, it depends on the eyes that see, and it depends on what countries and continents we talk about, whether it is a stagnation, decline or increase in population. In the interdependent world we already live in today, no country or region is in vacuum. But how things will be in the future depends on many things, especially food production and distribution, technologies that will be used, and more. Important will also be the quality of education and the access to education and other social services, and whether economic development has moved towards greater equality, especially in poor countries but also in rich countries. In today’s rich countries, it is likely that there will be a decline in per capita income and resource use, yet, hopefully with a more equal distribution within the countries, and a lower consumption of the world’s resources. Today’s resource consumption in the West is unreasonably high in absolute and relative terms compared to other countries, and it is unsustainable, especially if we think that the poorer countries should reach a higher standard of living. Well, as for the latter, the standard of living and quality of life may actually not necessarily decline if the resource consumption declines in the West. Many will argue that there are positive aspects to lower resource consumption and greater environmental harmony and equilibrium.

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Those of us who have studied demography and population issues recall Thomas Malthus (1766-1834), a British philosopher and economist, and in many ways the first demographer. His theories and predictions, indeed his pessimistic views, created tremendous debate. He thought that even if food production and distribution increased, it will inevitably be outrun by population growth, and again lead to shortage, famine, disease, conflict and war. This was called the Malthusian catastrophe or population trap. Malthus was a devout Christian and believed in the couple’s self-control (abstinence) to curb population growth. New-Malthusians advocate the use of contraceptives. Let me add that if Malthus had lived later, when the results in the Industrial Revolution and in medicine had been more visible, his views might have been modified or very much different.

Opposite to Malthus’ negative views are the positive views of Dr Hans Rosling (1948-2017), a Swedish professor of international health, with extensive work experience in developing countries, especially in Africa. He became a cherished and award-winning public speaker, opposing conventional wisdom in many fields of international development, underlining that most things in our world have become better in recent generations, not worse, as is too often claimed. Many of Rosling’s engaging and enlightening public lectures and shorter talks are available on YouTube. More detailed statistics and other material are available in his books, including a book published posthumously in 2018 with Ola Rosling and Anna Rosling Rönnlund, his son and daughter-in-law, entitled ‘Factfulness: The Reasons Why We Are Wrong about the World—and Why Things are Better than You Think’. Ola and Anna continue Hans Rosling’s important work through Gapminder Foundation.

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As for population growth, Rosling’s optimistic and realistic message is simple, notably that if people in developing countries are to get better living conditions, with better education, health and more, the family sizes will become smaller, yes, almost automatically because of the decisions people will make. He refers to Sweden in the early 1960s, when Rosling went to school, and the world’s population was about 3 billion (1 billion in the rich countries and 2 billion in the poor countries). In Sweden, people’s ambitions were to have further education, have a better house, purchase a car, yes a Volvo, if they could, and otherwise increase their standards. In developing countries, people’s ambitions were to feed the family better, get some or all the children into primary school, buy shoes and improve the basic everyday situation. Many of the terrible disparities from Rosling’s youth between the rich and poor countries are gone, but many still exist. Many people in poor countries live better than ever, with much lower child mortality than before, and then the number of newborns goes down, and the number of births and family size goes down. There are many good reasons for improving living standards and decreasing inequality in the world; one is simply reduced population growth. When people get better off, Rosling says that they will voluntarily decide on planning their families to be small with natural family planning and the use of contraceptives. Yet, Rosling also explains that people will live longer, and that will lead to a population growth in the world, but not beyond 11 billion, he claims, perhaps even a billion lower.

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True, a total world population of 11 billion people is no joke, and we need to plan and act well to make the globe a liveable place for all those, with much greater equality than today—and if we don’t, Rosling’s predictions will not come true. However, with better educated and more knowledgeable people, and greater political participation, there is a good chance that people will indeed shape the future to be better than the past. Of course, we also need to manage global warming and climate change, and other big issues, indeed pandemics which are likely to happen even after corona is over. We need to pollute less and be better caretakers and stewards of nature. We have already realised that this is necessary, and now it is a matter for politicians and the rest to implement the necessary regulations and changes in the public and private sectors.