



ASK AN EXPERT: GEOGRAPHY

The new world is on the ascent

How global is the issue of population growth?

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HUMAN population is a global phenomenon and changes have often been cause for concern.

In 1798, Thomas Malthus' *Essay on the Principle of Population* examined the balance between population and food production in England.

In the 1960s and '70s, authors such as Paul Ehrlich in *The Population Bomb* focused on the rate of world population growth and the need to reduce births because of the limited carrying capacity of the Earth.

Today the main issue for many countries is an ageing population.

Global population growth has been rapid. From about 1 billion people in 1800, our planet now supports about 6.5 billion. Between 1960 and 1999 the world added 3 billion people, with the last billion being added in only 12 years. Annually, global population is growing by some 75 million, although the rate of growth is now declining.

These changes have been attributed to improvements in food production, education, medicine and hygiene, which

resulted in rapidly decreasing death rates, especially among infants and young children, and increased life expectancy.

Most of the global population growth is taking place in developing countries. In 2005, world population growth was at 1.2 per cent with an average of 1.5 per cent for developing countries and 0.1 per cent for developed nations. By 2025, with an estimated 7.9 billion people in the world, some 6.7 billion will be in developing countries with 1.3 billion in developed nations. But there are considerable regional differences within both.

The greatest population increase is occurring in Africa and the Middle East, where many countries experience at least 2 per cent annual growth.

At the other end of the spectrum in the developing world, China's population growth is only 0.59 per cent (although in terms of total numbers this will still lead to some 1.4 billion people by 2025).

Developed nations typically have low growth rates, particularly those in Europe where it is minimal, such as



Sweden with 0.1 per cent, or declining, as with Germany with minus 0.2 per cent.

In some developed countries, such as the United States and Australia, population growth is about 1.3 per cent, primarily owing to immigration. But its populations will still take more than 90 years to double.

Despite continued global population growth, global fertility rates (the average number of children born per woman) are declining. The world fertility rate is now 2.7, down from 3.4 children per woman in 1990. Declines in fertility have coincided with improvements in living conditions, greater access to education, particularly for women, improved health care

and access to contraception.

Women in most regions are choosing to have fewer children but there is a substantial difference between those in developed and developing countries, with fertility rates of 1.6 and 3.0 children respectively. It is anticipated that fertility rates in developing regions will con-

tinue to fall, particularly with increasing rural-urban migration. In the cities a child is more likely to be an economic burden than an asset and there is better access to health services and family planning programs.

A fertility rate of 2.1 children per woman is required for the natural replacement of the population in the long term.

These global population changes have many implications. First, there are significant changes in the regional distribution of population. Since Asia contains the world's two most populous countries by far (China and India with more than a billion people each), it is not surprising that Asia will continue to account for the majority of the world's people.

The United Nations estimates that this region will account for 59.1 per cent of the world's population in 2050 (down slightly from 60.8 per cent in 2000).

Africa is anticipated to increase its global share of people from 12.9 per cent to 19.8 per

cent, with a small increase expected in South America (8.6 to 9.1 per cent).

The biggest percentage loss of population is expected in Europe, which has experienced a significant decline in its percentage of global population from a peak of 24.7 per cent in 1900 to 12.0 per cent in 2000 and an anticipated 7.0 per cent in 2050.

North America will experience a small decrease in its percentage share of population from 5.1 per cent in 2000 to 4.4 per cent in 2050. An increased proportion of the world will be living in countries currently considered less developed (from 81 per cent in 2000 to an estimated 86 per cent in 2050).

Second, declining fertility rates will result in a significant change to global population structure. Children (0-14 years) now make up about 30 per cent of the world's population, outnumbering all other age groups.

That will decrease to about 20 per cent by 2050. This will be offset by an increase in the world's elderly population (65 years-plus) from 7 per cent to almost 17 per cent in 2050. One out of every 10 people is now 60 years or older; by 2050 this will be one in five.

Because of increases in life expectancy, this is not just occurring in the developed world but also in the developing world, where the rate of change is faster; the old-age dependency ratio will double in more developed countries but triple in less developed regions. For example, Australia's number of elderly is forecast to increase from 13 per cent to 25 per cent by 2050, while China's will rise from 10 per cent to 31 per cent.

Changes in human population raise many questions. How many people can the Earth support in a sustainable manner? Should we consider not only the size of global population and its rate of increase but also its distribution and use of resources? What socio-economic impacts will an ageing population have on our society? Do we need to rethink our

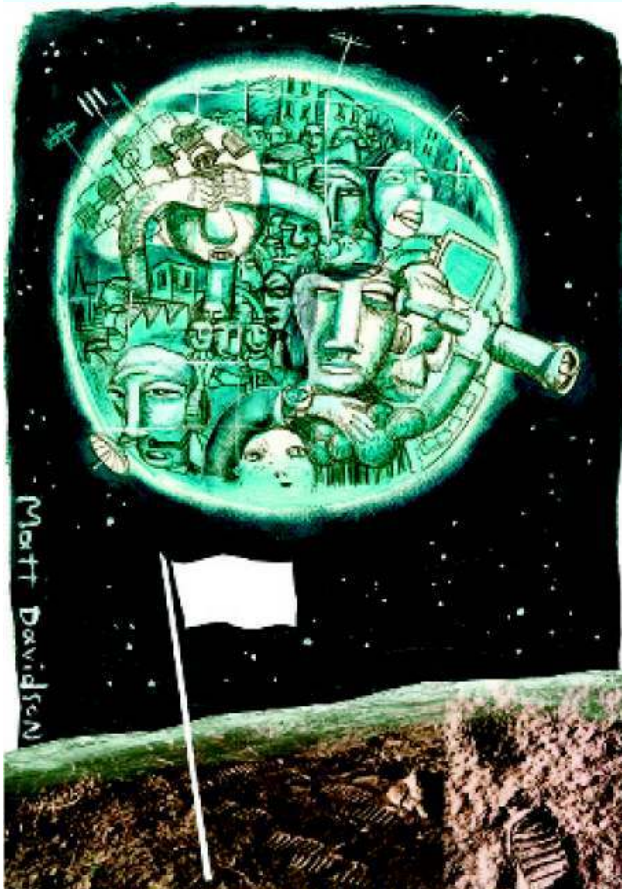


expectations of older persons and their contributions to society?

How can we cater for these demographic changes? Will there be greater global movement of people in response to these changes?

Debating these issues is all part of the challenge for VCE geography students.

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