Dear Colleague:

As the world welcomes its 6.5 billionth inhabitant, most experts and the media continue to ignore the birth dearth in favor of the overpopulation myth.

First of all, population growth has been slowing rapidly and this trend will continue. In recent decades, according to the Census Bureau, world population growth as a percentage hit a high in 1962 and 1963 at 2.19% and has been in long-term decline ever since. It was only 1.15% last year and is projected to be 0.46% in 2049. Population growth in absolute numbers is already dropping despite the increase in total world population. That number peaked in 1989, when the world added a net 88 million new souls, declined to 74.4 million last year, and will be only 42.2 million in 2049 despite the increase in total population to over 9 billion. Of course, since the experts believe life expectancy will continue its rise, this drop in population growth will come from an astounding further decline in families and births to extend the one the world has already seen since the ‘60s.
Historically, population experts have tended to overestimate their numbers, so it is likely that these numbers will be even lower than currently projected. The population controllers have won: The world has long been on the path to population decline and shows no signs of deviating from it. If AIDS is not brought under control, or if other rosy assumptions do not pan out, the Earth’s demographic future could resemble UNDP’s “low variant” projection: A peak at approximately 7.8 billion around 2040 and decline after that. One of five people in the world could over 65 by 2050 if this happens. UNDP assumes that fertility rates in Europe will rise to 1.85 children per woman and not drop below that elsewhere in the world despite long-term downward trends—an arbitrary assumption that means its projections tend to overinflation.

Some will find population decline a cause for celebration. But keep this in mind: The world’s population will age rapidly in that time, due to the few births. Most of the world, including its poor nations, will develop the same massive social security and health care problems that increasingly plague fast-aging First World nations in Western Europe and North America as well as Japan. The UNDP projects the median age of the world will go from 28 today to 38 by 2050. The proportion of the population over 65 will go from 7.4% to 16.1%, the oldest old—those over 80, who cannot work and usually require daily if not constant care from others—will more than triple from 1.3% to 4.3%. That’s a big bill for any society. At the same time, the proportion of the population of productive working age, defined as between ages 15 and 64, will go from 64.5% to 63.7%, while the next generation—those under 4—will go from 9.5% to a crippling 6.7%.

A Sep. 8, 2005 UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs press release said, “The reductions of fertility that developing countries began to experience in the 1970s and 1980s have opened up a ‘window of opportunity’ by producing reductions in the share of children in the population and increasing the proportions of persons of working age, says a new report issued today. Provided jobs are available for the rising number of workers, developing countries can reap the benefits of the increased production and the lower costs associated with the decreasing proportion of dependent children.”

This is true enough. But what happens when all those dependent-free workers retire? What then? That’s why the United States has an unfunded Social Security liability of $11 trillion and an unfunded Medicare and Medicaid liability of $68 trillion.

Despite decades of overpopulation hysteria, some experts this time around are not making sky-falling predictions about a world of 9 billion, even if they don’t highlight the problems
that will come with an aging world. In February 2005, when she announced the UNDP’s prediction of 6.5 billion by July, UNDP Director Dr. Hania Zlotnick said, “It is going to be a strain on the world, but it seems feasible. It doesn’t seem that there is a crisis coming. That doesn’t mean that some countries are not facing a crisis.”

She also noted that her agency’s standard “medium variant” projections depend on the global AIDS pandemic coming under control, a questionable postulate. “We cannot emphasize enough the huge impact of this disease,” she said. “We also have to emphasize that these projections in the long term are assuming that humanity is going to have success in combating the spread of this disease, by mostly behavioral change and prevention.”

The 1970s produced a lot of wrongheaded predictions: overpopulation catastrophe, the coming ice age, feminism’s ability to make people happier, the Soviet Union’s staying power, and good taste’s permanent passing. The concern is not overpopulation, but a birth dearth. That’s why the 6.5 billion figure is nothing to worry about, but the aging world is. At the very least, experts and the media should now promote higher birthrates as vigorously as they promoted population control, and there has been a small counter-cultural trend in that direction with Ben Wattenberg, Phillip Longman, Mark Steyn, PRI, and others trying to give more attention to this issue. That trend needs to grow as rapidly as a newborn child.

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