The Facts of Global Depopulation

PRI Staff / August 1, 1999

[Editor’s note: The looming problem of depopulation was confirmed by the United Nations Population Division’s 1998 World Population Prospects. According to the “low variant projection,” which history has shown to be most accurate, the population of the world will begin to plummet in a little over four decades. Between 2040 and 2050, the world’s population will decrease by about 85 million. Thereafter, world population will decrease by roughly 25 percent each successive generation. The following is extracted from PRI’s fact Sheet No. 3, “The Facts of Global Depopulation.”]

Global Depopulation

The facts of global depopulation are especially devastating in the developed world, where the “net reproduction rate” (NRR) is down to about 0.7. This means that under present patterns of childbearing, the next generation will be about 30 percent smaller than the current one, and much older, on average.

The second half of the twentieth century has seen tremendous increases in living standards throughout the world. Improved diets and medical advances mean that people are living longer, healthier lives than ever before. This fortunate occurrence, combined with a striking decline in fertility levels, has led to the phenomenon of population aging. (Sources: US Bureau of the Census, World Population Profile: 1998; UN 1998 Revision World Population Estimates and Projections.)

Population Aging

Over the course of the next 25 years, the age structure of the world’s population will continue to shift upward, with older age groups comprising an increasingly large share of the world’s total population.
From now until 2025, the world’s population of elderly (defined as age 65 and above) will more than double. This age group (aged 65 and over) worldwide currently number 580 million. By 2050 they will number 1.97 billion (a 340% increase).

The Developed World

In the developed world, older people currently number 226 million. By 2050, they will number 376 million (a 176% increase). In the developing world, older people currently number 171 million. By 2050, older people will number 1.594 billion (a 932% increase) (UN 1998 Revision).

The number of youth (aged 15 and below) will increase by only 6 percent, while the number of children under age 5 will increase by less than 5 percent.

In short, the population of the world will become progressively older during the coming decades. Today, the world’s median age is 26.8 years. In 2025, it is projected to be 35.1 years. By 2050, the median age is projected to reach 43.5 years. (UN 1998 Revision World Population Estimates and Projections)

The Developing World

Until now, less developed regions have experienced much slower aging. However, by 2050, the proportion of older persons will increase three-fold to 21 per cent of the population, while the proportion of children will decline by more than one third to 20 per cent. By 2050, life expectancy is projected to reach a male/female average of 76 years, up from 65.4 years in 1998 (UN 1998 Revision).

Dying Europe

Europe is, and is projected to remain, the region of the world most affected by aging. By 2050, persons aged 65 and above will be two-and-a-half times as numerous as children 15 years and younger. One in every three persons will be 60 years of age or older. The median age is projected to increase from 37.1 years in 1998 to 47.4 by 2050 (UN 1998 Revision).

Other regions of the world most affected by aging are North America, Oceania, Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean, in that order. The population of the US will likely peak at
about 300 million by 2030, before declining (UN 1998 Revision).

Declining Fertility Rates

Global fertility decline is reflected in the dramatic increase in the number of countries that have experienced below-replacement level fertility since the 1990s. In 1990, between 50 and 60 nations had below-replacement level fertility rates (2.1 TFR). Between the years 1995 to 2000, 64 countries had below-replacement TFRs (UN 1998 Revision).

Low fertility countries are increasingly found in the world’s less developed regions. In the 1950’s, women in developing nations had 6 children on average. At the end of the twentieth century, this figure on average has been cut nearly in half (UN 1998 Revision). US Census Bureau projections for the next 25 years indicate that TFRs will continue to fall in China (where TFRs are already below replacement), and the rest of the world.

The HIV/AIDS Pandemic

The emergence of the global HIV/AIDS pandemic, and HIV/AIDS related mortalities, is also a major cause of underpopulation.

HIV/AIDS has raised mortality and slowed population growth in every world region. Over 40 million people have been infected with HIV since the beginning of the pandemic in the late 1970s, and over 11 million of these people have already died (UN 1998 Revision).

There are now 23 countries with 5 per cent or more of their low risk population infected with the virus, seriously affecting both their mortality rate and their projected populations (US Census Bureau, Population Projections Incorporating AIDS). The developed world is not immune to rising mortality. In Russia, for example, male life-expectancy has fallen by eight years during the 1990’s. The initial stages of depopulation in Eastern Europe and the New Independent States are the result of rising mortality in a majority of countries of the region (US Census Bureau).