

The lonely planet

DEPOPULATION: Haunted by fears of what teeming masses of humanity will do to this planet? Don't be, writes JOHN IBBITSON from Washington, because relief is on the way. Fertility rates are falling almost everywhere and experts now feel global population growth will halt within a generation. The trouble is, that's not necessarily a good thing

By JOHN IBBITSON

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Imagine a world of lonely children. They are lonely because there are so few of them. They long for brothers or sisters, cousins, classmates, friends. They share the world with old, tired people, who are dying slowly, selfishly.

The old people are lonely too, and they are poor. Because there are so few young people, pension funds are drying up, jobs are going begging for want of workers, knowledge is stagnating for want of innovative young minds, economies are shrinking for want of consumers.

Is this a sad world? In many ways, no. Hunger has largely disappeared. The environment is rebounding. Europe, though rapidly growing empty, has never looked more quaint. Best of all, much of the developing world has been developed.

Unless things go badly. Maybe Europe struggles with race riots. Maybe Japan is bankrupt. Maybe China has started to gobble up eastern Russia. Maybe the Hispanic president of the United States has decreed Spanish as America's second language. Maybe the French language in Canada is about to disappear.

Why imagine any of this? Because what is perhaps the most common assumption of modern times, that the world's population is exploding, is no longer true.

We all know that women in the West long ago stopped producing the 2.1 babies apiece that are needed to maintain population stability. This month, Statistics Canada will release the first hard data culled from the 2001 census on the state of the nation's inhabitants. It will portray Canadians, especially those born here, as a people who are growing ever older and bearing too few children to sustain their numbers.

Now, the developing world is embracing the trend. Sasigarn Eampornchai, a 30-year-old diplomatic staff worker in Bangkok, says her mother had four children, but "I am not going to have any." She is single, and has decided that, even if she marries, "it is too difficult to bring up a child" in today's troubled economic climate.

This in teeming Thailand, whose population has tripled from 19 million to 60 million in the past 50 years? But for years the government has plastered the countryside with propaganda advocating smaller families. "It used to be normal to have lots of children," Eampornchai says. "Now, it is normal not to."

According to the latest data from the United Nations Population Division, the birth rate in many countries we still think are baby-booming has fallen very near, if not below, the replacement level. China. Brazil. Practically the entire Caribbean.

Elsewhere, former population factories such as India, Indonesia and even Bangladesh are plummeting toward population stability. Only in sub-Saharan Africa and the Islamic Middle East are birth rates still high, and even here they are starting to drop, even plunge.

In as little as 40 years, growth could halt and the planet's population start to decline. Like all trends, that decline will be long-term and, at least for a while, inexorable. The world will be gripped by depopulation.

The aging and shrinking of humanity "will become the transcendent political and economic issue of the 21st century," says Peter G. Peterson, chairman of the Council on Foreign Relations and the Institute for International Economics.

"This is not a crisis as speculative as, say, global warming, which we have spent a lot of time talking about," adds Peterson, who served U.S. secretary of commerce under Richard Nixon. After all, he says, "the people have already been born."

In some places, the shrinking has begun. The number of Russians is already in steep decline. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the fertility rate plunged, from 1.9 in 1975 to 1.1 now. At the same time, the health infrastructure deteriorated and the Russian male's notorious fondness for cigarettes and vodka lowered his life expectancy to 60.

From 1992 to last year, the population slipped from 148 million to 145 million, and is expected to decline by 12 million more in the next 15 years. At this rate, Russia estimates it will have only 85 million people by 2055. More drastic estimates put it at 55 million. And next door to that vast, empty land will be 1.2 billion Chinese.

"The fact of population decline will colour all sorts of social, political and economic aspects of life in ways that will be both subtle and direct," says Nicholas Eberstadt, a political economist at Harvard University and a consultant to the World Bank and U.S. State Department. "It will be the overarching context to everything in life."

It is already the overarching context of life in Japan, which never had a baby boom, because of the ravages of the Second World War, and whose fertility rate is now a mere 1.3 children per woman.

As a result, the Japanese population will start to decline by 2007. Unless Japanese women start having more babies -- many, many more babies -- the country will lose 30 per cent of its population by 2050. By 2100, it will have declined by half. To extrapolate to the ridiculous: If current population trends in Japan continue unabated, according to one estimate, by 3000 a mere 500 Japanese will remain.

The solution, of course, is immigration. But Japanese obsession with racial purity is deeply rooted; it is difficult to emigrate there and almost impossible to obtain citizenship. And to sustain its population, Japan would need to open the floodgates. By 2040, the Japanese will be losing 800,000 people a year.

Japan is not alone. German researchers predicted last year that, unless immigration limits were lifted, their population would decline from 82 million to 60 million by 2050. By then, the number of Italians will have fallen from 57.5 million to 43 million, and Bulgaria's population from 7.7 to 4.5 million.

Fine, but there are two worlds: a developed world, where the birth rate is low, and much, much larger developing world, where the birth rate remains high. Right?

Nope.

Throughout the developing world, fertility rates are dropping rapidly. Some of the world's most populous countries are at, or below, the magic replacement rate of 2.1 children per woman needed to keep a population from going into decline. China (because of Draconian family-planning policies): 1.8; Thailand (because of more enlightened family planning): 2.0 and dropping fast; Brazil (for reasons no one can quite fathom): 2.2.

Nat Eampornchai says years of government campaigning paid off and even Thai couples keen to have kids got the message. "The concept of having two children for each family was very popular."

Now, populations are being brought under control in many parts of Asia. Birth rates in prosperous southern India are declining so rapidly that, by 2015, the national figure is expected to be comparable to Europe's today. Indonesia will reach replacement rate by around 2005; the Philippines by around 2015. Taiwan is already at 1.8.

The same is happening in Latin America. In the past quarter-century, the fertility rate in Mexico has gone from 5.3 to 2.5, in Colombia from 4.3 to 2.6, in Guyana from 4.0 to 2.3. Even in regions where fertility rates remain high -- the Islamic Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa -- there are marked signs of a slowdown. Syria's birth rate has declined in 20 years from 7.4 to 3.7. Algeria's has gone from 7.2 to 2.8. Kenya, once considered out of control, has gone from 7.9 to 4.2. As well, Africa faces an especially sorrowful form of population control: the scourge of HIV-AIDS.

The drop is such that demographers are now debating when the worldwide population will plateau, and when we may actually start to see global population decline.

The UN's official projection sees the global figure, now 6 billion, expanding rapidly until 2040, when it will hit 9 billion, and then growing much more slowly until it stabilizes at 11 billion in 2100.

That scenario is called the "medium variant," but the UN also has a more extreme "low variant" that assumes birth rates continue to decline rapidly. It sees the global population topping out at only 8 billion, around 2040, and then starting to shrink.

This is by no means an academic debate. The United Nations, the World Bank and hundreds of governmental and non-governmental agencies spend billions on family-planning assistance to developing countries, predicated in part on the assumption that global overpopulation is a real and pressing issue. But if in fact the population is stabilizing, is all that aid necessary?

That such questions should even be asked deeply worries Stan Bernstein, senior resident adviser to the UN Population Fund. First off, he doesn't buy the low-variant projections. Yes, only last week a delegation informed the UN that Iran had officially reached replacement fertility rate. But other countries, such as Nigeria and parts of Latin America, are not having great success.

Obsessing on fertility rates, Bernstein says, ignores the larger issue. It is not simply how many babies a woman has, but the quality of care she receives in planning for and raising her family.

Regardless of what happens by 2050, he says, before then "we are talking about adding three billion people more than we have now." And "just focusing on a number doesn't tell the story. It doesn't capture its diversity, and it forgets the fact that, of the 6.1 billion people we have now, half of them are living at under \$2 a day."

In some ways, of course, depopulation will be a boon. In overcrowded Japan, "low population density means more space -- more available land, greenery, and housing," Makoto Atoh, deputy director-general of the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, noted recently. "These benefits might even create a spiritually affluent society."

But not a materially affluent one. Japan's economy has been stagnant or in recession for a decade. "I can't help but wonder whether Japan's industries and the economy can take" losing 800,000 people a year, Atoh worries. "Economic management would be hard, economic growth would plummet, and living standards would worsen."

It's no secret why the world's population exploded in the 20th century. Women kept having babies at the same rate they had always had babies. But vastly improved nutrition, sanitation and medical care both lowered the infant-mortality rate and extended life spans.

The reasons for the impending depopulation are more complex. The ongoing rural-to-urban migration has something to do with it. (Children are a help on the farm, a hindrance in town.) Improving economies and literacy rates around the world make parents aware of the cost of large families and the birth-control techniques for avoiding them.

But the biggest cause must surely be the growing empowerment of women. As women become better educated, as they are able to make choices about how much emphasis to put on career and how much on family, they invariably decide to marry later and to have fewer children. From Tijuana to Taipei, the most reliable sign of a maturing economy is a decreasing birth rate, which also means that women in that society are gaining control over their bodies and their lives.

"It is a combination of economy and society," concludes Nat Eampornchai in Bangkok. Many of her friends, she adds, are childless and most plan to limit themselves to families of one or two. There is just no time. "We go to school more and we work more, and by the time we're ready for a child, we're already 30."

Even in places where economic and social development lag, reproduction is falling off. Bangladesh is one of the world's poorer nations, but the fertility rate has dropped from 5.7 in 1975 to 3.5 today, en route to an expected 2.1 in 2025.

"I have argued," says Eberstadt, the Harvard economist, "that the people who would best explain this change are not social scientists but novelists, because novelists are much more in touch with the Zeitgeist, with the spirit of the times, with individual motivations."

But Valerie De Fillipo, director of the international arm of the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, sees the declining fertility rates as "a success story," proving that international efforts to provide couples with reproductive choices are bearing fruit. "Individual choice on a global scale contributes to a better environment for all of us. But it doesn't in any way inspire complacency," she says. "It is just another statement that access to family planning is a key and critical issue in sustainable development."

Among developed countries, the United States has the healthiest fertility rate, steady at about 2.1. Afro-Americans' family sizes have dropped greatly over the past decade, because of increasing black affluence as well as campaigns to discourage teenaged pregnancy. Latino birth rates, however, remain high, pushing Hispanics past blacks as the largest non-European population in the country.

In Canada, however, deaths will outnumber births by 2025. By then, thanks to our open-door immigration policies, the population will have grown from 30.7 million to 36 million. But that growth will be concentrated in Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia. Other areas are expected to remain stagnant or decline, like Saskatchewan, Newfoundland and perhaps New Brunswick.

Quebec is in particular trouble. It accounts for about one-fifth of Canada's population, but receives only 12 per cent of its immigrants. It also has a very low birth rate, and expects an absolute decline in population by 2018.

What will it be like to live in a world that is losing people every day? Ever the extremist, Pat Buchanan predicts the end is near for Western civilization.

Back in 1960, observes the perennial presidential candidate and conservative gadfly in his new bestseller, *The Death of the West*, people of European origin represented one-quarter of the world's population. Today, it's one-sixth, and will slip to one-tenth by 2050. "Western women are terminating their pregnancies at a rate that represents autogenocide for peoples of European ancestry," he declares. His solution: ban non-European immigrants from European-based nations, and promote a spiritual revival that will increase fecundity.

It is to laugh. But Europe, Russia and Japan have some difficult choices ahead. They can either try to run their countries with dramatically shrunken populations, or they can embrace immigration -- something that doesn't sit well with many Europeans. The issue colours elections and gives life to extreme right-wing parties.

News item: Spain was gripped last month by the death of an Ecuadorean immigrant -- he drowned after being thrown into Barcelona's harbour by a bouncer who refused to let him enter a bar. The number of immigrants in Spain has doubled in the past six years to one million, leading to much social tension.

News item: Two Oslo youths described as neo-Nazis were convicted last month in the slaying of Benjamin Hermansen, a 15-year-old Norwegian of Ghanaian descent who was killed because he was black.

Friction like this will only increase, as the need to bring in newcomers to bolster sagging populations clashes with Europeans' ancient sense of civilization and identity.

The immigrants may not wait for the Europeans to make up their minds. "Around 1900, Africa's population was a third that of Europe's," observes Thomas Homer Dixon, director of the Centre for the Study of Peace and Conflict at the University of Toronto. "Today, they're roughly equivalent. By 2050, Africa's population is projected to be three times that of Europe."

Even though fertility rates are coming under control, populations in Third World countries will continue to swell as the burgeoning generation of the young enters its reproductive years. Resources will dwindle, and the temptation to move to increasingly empty Europe, invited or not, will become irresistible.

"We're seeing riots outside the Chunnel in France. We're seeing dead bodies wash up on Spanish shores. Lots of people and already trying to get in, and that's only the beginning of what we're going to see, which for these societies will be very destabilizing," Homer Dixon predicts.

The United States also struggles with racial tensions. Increasing Hispanic immigration has prompted

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/GIS;Servlets.HTMLTemplate?tf=tgam/common/Se...> 04/03/02

some whites to demand a constitutional amendment declaring that English is the only official language in the United States. Prompted by groups such as English First, Pro-English and U.S. English, 24 states have laws requiring that government business be conducted in English.

Nonetheless, U.S. society is robust, as is its birth rate. And a high tolerance for immigrants -- perhaps the single greatest asset of a developed country in an era of depopulation -- should ensure that neither the American nor Canadian population ever goes into decline.

Does that mean that we are immune to the demographic scourge being inflicted on Japan, Russia and Europe? Hardly. Our populations may be stable, but their makeup is undergoing a revolution of its own: aging.

Over the next 10 years, the number of workers under 30 will decline by 25 per cent. By 2030, people over 65 will have gone from one in seven to one in four. Immigration can mitigate, but can never reverse, the twin effects of lower fertility rates and increased longevity -- what some now call "the perfect demographic storm."

"Starting from now, right now, the working population will never again be as large," says Paul Hewitt, director of global aging at Washington's Center for Strategic and International Studies. "This means that sometime during this decade, all of the major industrial countries are going to make a historic shift, an epochal transformation, from an era when the primary source of social crisis was unemployment to one in which the primary source of social crisis is labour shortage."

No Western country is ready to deal with the issues that depopulation and aging raise. None has a pension system that's fully prepared to go from a large work force and a small retired population to the exact opposite. No country really has contemplated the economic impact of a steady decline in the number of people who buy homes, and a steady increase in the number of people living in nursing homes.

A shrinking consumer base will certainly shake the Canadian and American economies. Hewitt argues that it will send Europe and Japan into a permanent economic decline -- in fact, he thinks it's already contributing to the weakness of the euro.

Ironically, this could be good news for the world. Capital flows to where markets expand. As markets shrink in developed countries, as workers become scarcer and scarcer and consumers fewer and fewer, corporations will seek new markets, new places to invest.

Provided that Third World nations take steps to lessen the risk to investors, by introducing reliable and impartial legal systems and educating their citizens, the 21st century could witness an unprecedented shift of capital to the developing world. It would raise living standards and finally attack the roots of poverty.

But even the developing world is not immune to depopulation's down side. As Third World countries tame their birth rates and improved health care increases people's life spans, *their* populations are starting to go grey. Ten years ago, India had 56 million people who were over 60; by 2021, the number is expected to almost triple to 137 million. Who will look after them?

Finally, there are the more ephemeral questions. What will a world with fewer children be like? Will they be cosseted and protected, or will they find themselves pushed relentlessly to produce, produce, produce, to pay the doctors' bill for their parents, their grandparents and their great-grandparents?

Will creativity and invention wither, with fewer young minds available to create and invent? And will the young rebel by having lots and lots of children? Will they say: "I'll never forgive my parents for making me an only child -- it was so lonely. My children are going to have brothers and sisters. We're going to be a real family."

Global trend lines do not change easily or swiftly, but they do change. A generation or two down the road, parents may start having babies again, perhaps for reasons we cannot yet fathom.

It won't be easy. From his vantage point at Harvard, Nicholas Eberstadt speculates that reversing the tide "will require something on the order of a religious revival, a change in ideology -- a maybe not-terribly-pretty nationalism or ethnocentrism.

"It would have to be in the order of a mass movement. Nothing less would do it."

But that is a destination far distant. For this century, the story is the baby bust. It is a story full of unanswerable questions and uncertain hopes. Many of us won't live to watch its fruition. But some will, and for them, every year the world will have more empty space.

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