

The global fireworks of population explosion

By Wayne Visser

Whether you're engaging in idle chatter in the pub or attending a high-powered global conference, if you want to spice up the conversation, throw in something on population growth. It's bound to be relevant - after all, it is an economic, cultural, political, social, religious and personal issue - and it's guaranteed to get the emotions flowing on tap. But what are the basics we can agree on?

Well, firstly, this is not a new debate, nor does it have "a solution". Commentary on population growth goes back to Plato's Republic, where the optimum city size was proclaimed to be around 5,000. More recently, Thomas Malthus and Bertrand Russell brought the debate back into the mainstream. In the 20th century, the Limits to Growth report, and a series of UN conferences and reports have forced an international focus on the implications of population change.

Among the widely accepted references are the Cassen Report, the 1994 World Bank Report, the Academy of Sciences report, the output from the UN Habitat conference in 1995, and currently, the annual Human Development Reports of the UNDP. What do these lofty documents conclude:

- The earth had a population of less than 1 billion in 1750; today it is 5.8 billion and will almost certainly be over 10 billion in 2150 (that's 10,000,000,000 !!!);
- The world population growth rate peaked at approximately 2% in the 1960s, while the number of people added in a decade peaked at 825 million in the 1980s;
- Virtually all future population growth is expected to take place in the South: Asia is currently 3 billion, expected to reach 6 billion; Africa is currently 700 million and likely to grow to 2 billion;
- Fertility rates are nevertheless dropping: Between 1950 and 2000, Africa's fertility rate will have dropped from 6.5 to 5.5 and Latin America's and Asia's from 6 to 2.5.

But for all this supposedly scientific research, the population issue remains coloured by ideological lenses and evades consensus on policy solutions. How many times haven't I heard the sweeping statement: Don't feel sorry for Africa - if "they" would stop having so many babies, they wouldn't have so many problems. Or: The major environmental issue today is the unchecked population growth of the "less developed countries". Or the unthinkable: Well, AIDS is a God-send for Africa, as it will take care of the overpopulation in one foul swoop.

These simple diagnostic prescriptions for complex global problems may make their proponents feel comfortable, but they are hopelessly distorted views and they don't help to address the challenges either. Let me deal briefly with the first generalisation here, and the other two in subsequent articles.

Family size is closely related cultural perceptions of wealth, economic necessities for security, levels of modern education, and the empowerment of women. For the traditional rural man, children are a measure of his wealth - they are sources of labour, labola (bride price), old-age security, and strength of his tribe. With high infant mortality, more children must be born if a few are to survive. For the poverty-stricken township family, more children have a similar meaning, but they are also hope for the future - maybe they will be able to get jobs and bring in an income.

That population growth is a function of economics is irrefutable. Fertility rates are highly correlated with the Age Dependency Ratio (number of youth plus number of old age divided by the working population). So, in SA, and other countries where unemployment is high, this is the one of the first issues to tackle. As economic activity is boosted, the dependency ratio will fall and so will fertility and population growth. It's the chicken and egg. You can't have one without the other.

Where does this leave SA? A "basket-case" of Africa? More about this next time.

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