

Earth's population reaching 7 billion and counting

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Scott Woods illustration

The world's population may soar to 7 billion by the end of this month. And, with each new baby, the global footprint expands as does the social, economic and environmental challenges worldwide.

The United Nations (UN) is tracking the estimated population growth on its 7 Billion People/7 Billion Actions website, 7billionactions.org, offering a real-time count of the world's population. While the UN projects the milestone for late October, other demographic data suggests it may be early 2012.

"The seven billionth citizen will be born into a world of contradictions. We have plenty of food yet millions are still starving. We see luxurious lifestyles yet millions are impoverished. We have great opportunities for progress but also great obstacles," UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said at the launch of the 7 Billion Actions initiative in September.

On average, four births and two deaths occur every second. This represents a daily growth of the equivalent of a small city like Regina or Saskatoon, says Don Kerr, sociology professor and social demographer at the King's University College.

"In a sense, this is obviously one of the greatest challenges we now face as we move further into the 21st century," Kerr says.

In 1960, the world's population was 3 billion and has since more than doubled. The UN's middle-of-the-road projections forecast 9 billion by 2041 and 10 billion sometime after 2081.

"In my own lifetime, if I make it to my 90th birthday, I will have likely witnessed more than a tripling of the world's population, from about 3 to over 9 billion," Kerr notes.

But this growth rate has a silver lining.

The population boom can be attributed to great strides made in reducing mortality rates. We're simply sticking round longer and infant mortality rates have dropped. This is mainly through the promotion of public and population health.

While the population continues to grow, this doesn't mean everyone is having more babies.

The global rate of population growth peaked in the late 1960s and has since steadily declined, Kerr says. The most rapid rates of growth are occurring in Africa and South Asia.

While we are not multiplying as fast as we once were, there have been some recent increases. In 2000, 39 countries had 1.3 births per woman, now there are only four countries with a birth rate this low, says Rod Beaujot, sociology professor emeritus and a member of Western's Population Studies Centre.

In addition to population health and life expectancy improvements, fertility rates for more developed countries have increased to 1.85 (Canada is 1.7), which is still below replacement level (2) but this is a move in the positive direction.

These numbers mean major social, economic and environmental challenges will need to be addressed. But Beaujot isn't as quick to sound the alarm on reaching the 7 billion mark.

Rather, he sees it as an opportunity to examine what has been done to stabilize population and examine how growth may impact the environment, particularly in the area of climate change.

"The number is impressive, 7 billion, but we shouldn't think it is a crisis. Things are in-hand with these activities that are being done at the world level," Beaujot says.

"We still have to worry about this as a world, that our population is sustainable within this planet," he continues. "With the interest in bringing up the level of consumption in many parts of the world ... that will bring more pressure to the environment.

"The quicker we can arrive at stability of population the better."

Imposing limits to fertility is not the answer to population stability, Beaujot says.

An example of government-imposed limits on fertility is China's "one child policy," which is currently under debate by the Chinese government on whether to abandon this policy.

"They just don't work that well and they bring much opposition. They just don't correspond to basic human rights," Beaujot says. "Leaders of all kinds should help us to think of what is making a responsible decision on numbers of children to have."

The UN says people should have the right to make free and responsible choices on their family size and have access to the highest standard of sexual and reproductive health, he notes.

The most cost-effective means to reduce fertility and improve living standards, according to the UN, is through education, particularly of girls.

"The status of women (and girls) is fundamental if we are concerned with reducing fertility and slowing population growth," Kerr says. "To the extent to which women have control over their own fertility, with greater equality for partners, we can anticipate a lower birth rate."

If the population continues to grow by roughly a third over the next century with little changes in consumption patterns and technology use, then greenhouse gases theoretically will increase at the same rate. But more people on Earth does not necessarily equal the same amount of growth in consumption, Kerr points out, and there are many variables that interact with population and economic development.

As well, it is expected the greater the population size, the greater the demand for food if consumption patterns don't change. However, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN reports on a global level people are eating more calories daily, with an exception in Sub-Saharan Africa – highlighting access to food is improving.

One thing that threatens food accessibility is the use of agricultural land to cultivate crops for energy use. As well, the consumption of meat has increased in recent years, which will have an impact on scarcity and the cost of basic food stocks on the world market, Kerr says.

Reaching the 7 billion mark is significant, but it doesn't represent a breaking point in the world's population exceeding its capacity.

“What happens in terms of future fertility is very important,” Kerr says. “Obviously with further reductions in mortality desirable, fertility reduction is crucial in returning to greater population stability into the future.”

The paradox is Canada’s population growth is increasing faster than most developed countries, yet it remains lower than the world level.

Canada’s population of roughly 35 million represents about one half of one percent of the global population. Canada continues to grow through high rates of immigration.

“It’s easy to arrive at a consensus at the world level, but once you come down to a country or city or community, everybody wants to grow,” Beaujot says. “Nobody wants to decline or to be growing more slowly than their neighbours.”