

Population

Fertility Rates Decline, But Overpopulation Is Still a Problem

by **Mace Olcott** — “Population growth is no longer a problem.” The major media bombards us with this message. But the message is not true. The United Nations’ projects that the world population will grow by nearly 3 billion people (to 8.9 billion) by 2050. This increase alone is equal to the world’s total population in 1960.

The current world total fertility rate (TFR, the average number of children born to a woman) is 2.8. This is a great improvement over the 3.4 TFR of the early 1990s and far lower than in the 1960s. If this trend continues, it is possible that the world TFR could reach 2.1, the first step towards population stabilization. We must not forget though that even while fertility rates are going down, world population is still growing by about 75 million people every year.

Consequently, global environmental trends remain ominous:

- ◆ Tropical rain forests are in rapid decline.
- ◆ Global air and water pollution are getting worse.
- ◆ Plant and animal species are being driven to extinction at a rate not experienced since the age of the dinosaurs. If current trends continue, almost a quarter of the world’s mammals face extinction within 30 years.
- ◆ Deserts are spreading across the world, reducing arable land and the prospects for meeting the growing demand for food.
- ◆ Fresh water shortages are increasing across the globe and water wars loom.
- ◆ Global warming will cause oceans to rise and put populous coastal regions under water, including large portions of Florida and Louisiana.

What Should Be Done?

Policies need to be undertaken to speed the reduction in fertility in the parts of the world where the population is growing most rapidly. About 75 poor-to-very poor nations (total population about two billion) have fertility rates

far above the world average. The populations of these nations are likely to double or even triple by 2050. If this occurs, they will not be able to develop successfully, and mass poverty, environmental disasters, wars and terrorism will increasingly be their fate.

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) does great work in poor nations to help impoverished couples plan their families and prevent unwanted pregnancies. In addition to educating couples and subsidizing contraceptives, the fund works to empower women to improve their own and their families’ lives. Sadly, the U.S. Congress cut off \$34 million a year to the UNFPA program in 2002. This relatively small amount of money (the U.S. spends seven times as much each day in Iraq!) would prevent two million unintended pregnancies, 800,000 abortions, 77,000 infant and child deaths, and 4,700 maternal deaths each year.

The Bush administration continues to oppose U.S. funds for UNFPA, and is forcing other U.S. international family planning money to be used for ineffective “abstinence only” programs. The Bush administration has also imposed the odious Global Gag Rule on private non-governmental health care providers around the world.

William Milliken, former Republican Governor of Michigan, has stated that “The right wing is seeking to impose an entire set of doctrinaire beliefs that will sharply restrict health care for women, and as a result, actually increase the number of abortions worldwide.”

Of course population stabilization alone cannot end our ecological crisis. For example far more emphasis is needed on energy conservation, especially in the U.S. And more investment is needed to develop renewable energy sources. But the single most important step is population stabilization – in the poor nations of the world and in the U.S. ■