What Is Worse, An Older Population Or Running Out Of Resources?

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Having a small family is the most important individual contribution we can make to a sustainable future

Human population growth is a major driver of unsustainable consumption levels. Like any issue, it has its pessimists and optimists. Pessimists point to the doubling of human numbers over the last half century and the projected addition of a further 50% or some 3.5 billion by the end of the century. Optimists point to the fall in the birth rate by one third over the last fifty years and that over half of the world's citizens now live in countries at or below fertility replacement rate.

Two things need to be said about these scenarios. The first is that they are not incompatible: both come from UN figures. We are generally living longer and previous above-replacement birth rates mean that there is over a billion young people entering their childbearing years. Even if they have fewer children than their mothers, that is still a lot of babies.

The second is that they are not fixed. A combination of culture, circumstances, chance and personal preferences determine how many children we each have. That number varies enormously, both between and within communities. Some people have none; some have lots.

Poorer communities benefit from smaller families

A few countries impose penalties on people with large families in order to limit population growth. However, for most of the world, people end up with more children than they want. Improving their rights would result in smaller families, helping them and society. In some poorer countries, family planning, education and employment and personal rights go hand in hand. Women need all three if they are to secure an independent and respected social role and some aspect of control over their futures. This is particularly the case for adolescents where hopes for education, opportunities and fertility control can be replaced by a reality of withdrawal from education, child marriage and frequent, multiple unsafe pregnancies.

In wealthier countries, too, education and employment opportunities, high quality sex- and relationship-education and affordable family planning services go hand in hand in reducing unplanned pregnancies.

Women's control over their lives has multiple benefits

Promoting women's control over their lives and people's right to determine their family size is still controversial in some cultures. However, it has a lot going for it in comparison with other environmental and development initiatives. It is relatively cheap: contraception pays for itself through the amount it saves in avoided health complications and other social care. It has no problematic side-effects: rather, smaller families reduce pressure on resources and services of all kinds and increase the funds at household, community and state level available for investment.

Reducing the birth rate also addresses two other major population related issues: urbanization and migration. Both are becoming increasingly serious issues.

It does worsen one issue: our ageing profile. With increasing longevity and a falling birth rate, populations are ageing all over the world. However, what is worse, an older population or running out of resources? Ensuring a sufficient workforce

to provide for the elderly can be addressed through reducing unemployment, providing support to enable those with family commitments to work more and designing work to help the healthy old to continue in employment. We might even think about improving productivity, looking at society's spending priorities and spreading the wealth more evenly.

Some people look further ahead and worry about the effects of a declining population, as if 7-11 billion is the right range to be in. This is understandable: modern society is built on ever greater consumption, unachievable though this ultimately is. In fact, fewer people would mean greater space and resources for all. As our non-renewable resources become inevitably exhausted and climate change increasingly affects agriculture, we will welcome any reduction in our numbers.

For the children in a family or society, too many of them for the available food and water -- for the ecological carrying capacity -- is unkind and breeds violence. Children matter so much that words cannot express it. So let us put action behind our words, and make a better world for the children we actually can take care of!

Simon Ross, is the chief executive of Population Matters, a UK based charity and membership organization that has existed for (see About) more than 20 years. It promotes smaller families and mindful consumption in order to make the world a better place. Homepage: www.PopulationMatters.org

Top graphic courtesy International Planned Parenthood Federation.

Further Reading:

Hempel, Marilyn (ed.). Facing the Population Challenge: Wisdom from the Elders. Blue Planet, 2014

May, John. Population Policies: Their Origin, Evolution, and Impact. (Springer, 2012.

Robbert Engelman's book More: Population, Nature, and What Women Want (Island Press, 2008) was reviewed by John Wertime, September 11, 2008 on Culture Change website.