

POPULATION STABILISATION

Human overpopulation is harming the planet

Since 1950, the global population has tripled, growing from 2.5 billion to 7.6 billion people in 2017.¹ Mid-range estimates for future growth indicate a population of 9.8 billion by 2050 and 11.2 billion by 2100. Population growth is not the only problem that humanity faces, but it is an inescapable fact that it acts as a multiplier of sustainability pressures, including climate change.

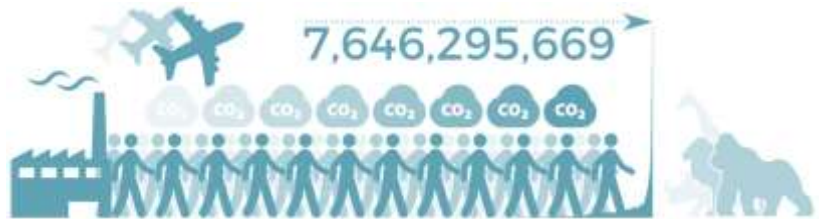
Actions

- Advocate for a UK population policy
- Promote the right of all women to determine how many children they want and when (e.g. reducing teenage pregnancies in the UK)²
- Lobby governments to make family planning education and services available for all
- Discuss population growth and demographic change, mention it in policies and in needs assessments

Controversy

There is understandable scepticism about viewing population growth as a problem. Historic wrongs are well known and contribute towards making the subject a highly emotive topic of debate.

Public health has a key role in discussing the complexities of these issues in a balanced and sensitive way. Acknowledging concerns involved but promoting reproductive choice and education for women, which is known to reduce family size.⁶



"The sooner we stabilise our numbers, the sooner we stop running up the 'down' escalator. Stop population increase – stop the escalator – and we have some chance of reaching the top – that is to say a decent life for all."

Sir David Attenborough³

RSA President's Lecture, 2011

Can reducing consumption balance population growth?

Reducing consumption is a laudable aim, however global trends currently indicate that as countries develop, their resource consumption increases. The Global Footprint Network publishes data which shows the positive relationship between Human Development Index and ecological footprint per capita (see *Resources panel*).⁴ The World Bank publish data which shows how the number of plane passengers is increasing in all country income groups with no sign of slowing (see *Resources panel*).⁵ In 1970, there were 310 million air passengers globally, compared to 4 billion in 2017.

Excessive consumption by developed countries is a major problem but strategies aimed at this and addressing population growth need not be mutually exclusive. Developing countries with growing populations will not remain less-developed forever. All people, regardless of where they live, deserve to live comfortably, to eat well and to own items like computers, smartphones and washing machines. How will a global increase in the middle classes be balanced should the planet's population continue to grow in the future? This is particularly pertinent in light of the increase in global consumer culture. It is important to reduce *overall* consumption, as well as excessive per-person consumption.⁷

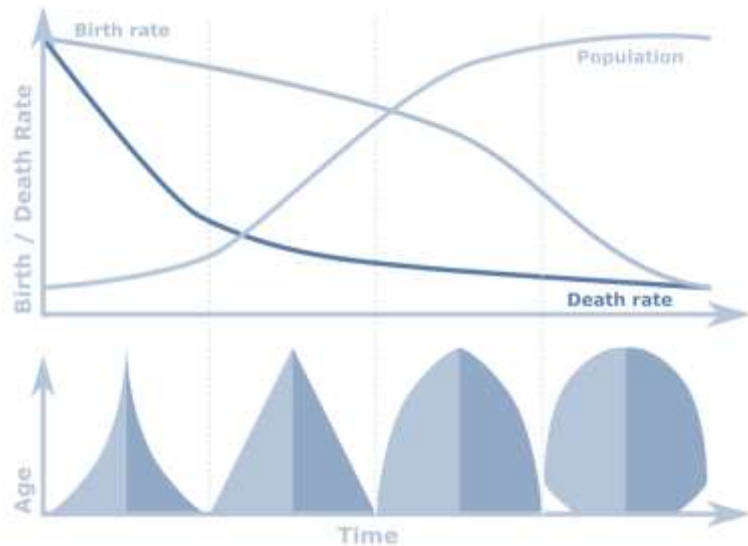


Resources

- United Nations Population Fund Population Dashboard
<https://www.unfpa.org/data/world-population-dashboard>
- United Nations Issues – Population
<http://www.un.org/en/sections/issues-depth/population/>
- Overpopulation – The Human Explosion Explained
<https://youtu.be/QsBT5EQt348>
- Britain’s Demographic Challenge
<http://www.civitas.org.uk/content/files/britainsdemographicchallengeweb-1.pdf>
- David Attenborough’s People & Planet Speech – RSA
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fK0rXRmC4DQ>
- World Bank Data – Old Age Dependency Ratio
<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.DPND.OL?end=2017&start=1960&type=shaded&view=chart>
- World Bank Data – Air Passengers
<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IS.AIR.PSGR>
- Global Footprint Network – Free Public Data Set
<https://www.footprintnetwork.org/licenses/public-data-package-free-2018/>

Demographic transition

As countries become wealthier, there is a trend for mortality rates to reduce and, after a lag period, for fertility levels to reduce.⁸ Population tends to increase in this lag period as birth rates begin to drop. Not only does this process cause a change in the absolute number of people but it also changes the age profile of the population, from being overall younger to older.



However, as the population age profile changes, so does the dependency ratio. Globally the overall dependency ratio has fallen (this being the ratio of dependent people to the working age population), however the old-age specific dependency ratio is rising steadily (see *Resources panel*), raising questions about how nations will care for their aging populations into the future. This is an economic question which highlights the links between population growth, demographic structure and the economy. This is particularly important as the links between health and wealth are well known.⁹

The environmental impact

Since 1992, when 1,700 scientists drafted a ‘warning to humanity’, the planet has continued to approach the limits of what the biosphere can withstand.¹⁰ The Earth is believed to be in the throes of its 6th major extinction event, largely driven by humanity co-opting resources, fragmenting habitats, introducing non-native species, spreading pathogens, directly killing species, and impacting the global climate.^{11,12} It is believed by some that the scale of this extinction event is underestimated.¹³

The sheer size of the human population and the pressures this creates on the natural world is a major driver of environmental damage.

References

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Graphics of factory, people, CO2 Cloud, planes and animals adapted from icons made by Freepik from www.flaticon.com

Professional Development Questions

1. What is the global dependency ratio and how does this change as the demographic transition progresses?
2. What issues might developing countries face in the near future as their standard of living improves? Consider this from environmental and socio-economic perspectives.

FPH General CPD Questions

1. What did I learn from this activity or event?
2. How am I going to apply this learning in my work?
3. What am I going to do in future to further develop this learning and/or meet any gaps in my knowledge, skills or understanding?