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Beyond Eight Billion: Why Population Continues to Matter for Global Development

ALEX EZEH

POPULATION CONCERNS DOMINATED the global development scene throughout the second half of the twentieth century. The United Nations decennial World Population Conferences, starting with Rome in 1954, followed by Belgrade, Bucharest, Mexico City, and Cairo, served as a platform for discussions on global development.^{1,2} Bucharest (1974) underscored the interdependence between demographic variables and development and called for demographic targets as integral part of socio-economic development policies.³ Mexico City (1984) reaffirmed most of the agreements reached in Bucharest but called for attention to human rights, education, health, and well-being as equally important domains of global development.⁴ Throughout this period, concerns around population focused on rapid population growth in low- and middle-income countries and its relationship to socioeconomic development.^{5,6,7} Many bilateral agencies and foundations that supported global development agendas had large population programs and most of the funding, up to 75% of the support for population-related activities, went to family planning programs.^{8,9} Large investments were also made to strengthen population data, including the World Fertility Survey that was conducted in more than forty countries between 1974 and 1980 and the Demographic and Health Surveys which have been implemented in more than ninety countries since the mid-1980s.

The 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo represents a seismic shift in global discourse on population concerns. Perhaps most fundamental was the fact that the ICPD Program of Action, while recognizing the strong connections between population and development, called for a focus on meeting the needs of individuals within the framework of universally recognized human rights standards rather than seeking to achieve specific demographic targets. Post 1994, fertility and fam-

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ily planning almost became synonymous with “population control”, which quickly became a tabooed word in global development.¹⁰ Second, concerns about the impact of HIV and AIDS, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa which was (and still is) the region with the highest rates of population growth and the most affected by the scourge of HIV and AIDS, resulted in significant shifts in development assistance funding away from population issues. By the turn of the century, “population” had virtually disappeared as a factor in global development plans and discourses, both in the MDG of 2000 and the SDG of 2015. Even Africa’s Agenda 2063 makes no reference to population as a factor in achieving the “Africa we Want” even though that Africa’s population will almost triple in the 48 years between 2015 and 2063.¹¹

The 2022 Revision of UN World Population Prospects,¹² which projects a total population of 8 billion people by November 15, 2022, and a continued increase in global population size to 10.43 billion by 2086, provides a unique moment to consider new perspectives on population and why population still matters for global development. First, the continued focus of global attention on population size is grossly misplaced. Rather than size, it is the rate of population change that matters the most; and both high rates of population growth and population decline matter. While the issue of rapid population growth has dominated population concerns to-date, the issue of rapid population decline will likely dominate future population concerns. In 2022, there more than forty countries and territories that are experiencing population decline due to low fertility. By 2050, that number will more than double to over ninety countries and territories, and, by 2100, population decline will pose a much greater challenge to development globally.

Second, contrary to the experiences of high-income countries where population decline and its associated aging has progressed slowly over a long period, allowing countries time to adjust and develop systems to cope with the change, including the adoption of immigration policies that attract much younger and more educated populations from poorer countries, population decline in poorer regions will be more rapid with significant distortions to their population structure. Poorer countries will also have less capacity to attract younger and qualified immigrants.

Third, the divergent demographic experiences currently unfolding creates a confusing and an awkward context for meaningful discussion of population issues at the global level. The countries currently facing the challenges of population decline are largely high-income countries. Some of them are increasingly exploring options for more pronatalist policies at home that would incentivize higher fertility.¹³ These, however, are also the traditional funders of family planning programs in poorer countries where fertility and the rate of population growth remain rather high. The divergent policy responses at home and abroad will increasingly raise moral and ethical questions about why high-income countries continue to support family planning programs in

poorer countries while promoting pro-natalist policies on home soil. Yet, the implications and consequences for a country like Niger to have its population increase from 26 million today to 67 million by 2050 or 167 million by 2100, using the medium variant of the 2022 WPP Revision, is as challenging as having the population of South Korea decline from 52 million currently to 24 million by 2100. And these projected rates of change may underestimate the true rates of change given the very low and very high ages at first birth in Niger and South Korea, respectively.

As we reflect on a world of 8 billion people, it is time to think beyond the numbers and see what the divergent demographic experiences and the significant shifts in the distribution of the global population portend for global development and universal wellbeing.

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