

8 Billion Day facts and myths:

A guide to the 8 billion global population milestone on 15 November

Jane O'Sullivan, November 2022

The United Nations estimates that the world population will reach 8 billion on 15 November. Sustainable Population Australia anticipates many journalists will be looking for information to include in articles acknowledging this milestone. Misinformation abounds in this space, so the following points, drawing upon reliable sources, are offered to help journalists and others interested to avoid some of the pitfalls.

1. It is misleading to say world population growth is 'slowing down'. This is based on a confusion between absolute numbers and percentages. The actual number of people added each year is as high as it has ever been – and absolute numbers matter when it comes to assessing impacts on an already crowded planet. While the percentage growth rate has steadily fallen since 1968, it's because the number added each year (as big as ever) is a smaller percentage of a much bigger total population. The latest billion was added in the shortest time ever – just over 11 years. The 7th billion person was estimated to be born on 31 October 2011. We've averaged an [extra 90 million per year](#) since then. The previous three billion took about 12 years each. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) recently wrongly stated that "[the pace of worldwide population growth, which reached a recorded peak at just over 2% a year in the late 1960s, has now fallen below 1%.](#)" The *pace* is 90 million per year and we don't yet have hard evidence that it has slackened at all.
2. There is no guarantee the world population will peak in 2086 at 10.4 billion, as the [United Nations' latest projection](#) anticipates. There is a great deal of uncertainty around this figure, and it depends a lot on what policies and programs are implemented in the meantime. The UN has been [consistently underestimating](#) global population growth in the past decade, so future growth is more likely to be greater than they predict, rather than less, unless the world community provides more support for family planning programs in high fertility countries.
3. Population growth remains a problem despite [more than half of the global population now living in regions with below-replacement fertility](#) (less than 2.1 children per woman). The remaining high-fertility countries more than make up for them. While those countries below replacement tend to be below by only a fraction of one child, those above tend to be two, three, four or more children above replacement. Getting those countries closer to replacement level remains an enormous challenge.

4. The challenge for this century will continue to be high birth rates rather than low. The governments and media trying to encourage higher population growth in rich countries are acting on a very narrow set of interests (keeping wages low and speculative investment profits high) while misrepresenting the balance of interests for the wider community. The economic problems predicted to happen as a result of ageing and declining populations are [entirely unproven](#). Instead, a wide range of [benefits](#) of older and [smaller](#) populations are ignored in the 'birth dearth' catastrophising.
5. Concerns about population growth are often decried as invoking racism, eugenics, neo-colonialism, blaming the poor, seeking to control women's bodies and distracting from the impacts of personal consumption choices on greenhouse gas emissions. None of these accusations are true. Far from being in opposition to progressive agendas, population stabilisation is a vital lever for achieving equity, security, environmental restoration and sustainable development. There is no trade-off between addressing population growth and maximising human rights, reducing poverty or mitigating climate change: in every case, those goals are more readily achieved when population growth is minimised.
6. Minimising population growth is an important component of the climate change response. It is not a distraction from reducing consumption-related greenhouse gases, nor is it 'blaming the poor for the excesses of the rich' since poor countries have the most to gain from greater family planning delivery. It is certainly not a cure for climate change on its own, but is an indispensable tool in our toolbox. Climate mitigation models have found it [infeasible](#) to keep global temperature rise below 2°C unless scenarios assume [rapid deceleration of global population growth](#), far below the UN's medium projection. Whether we can decarbonise the Australian or global economy fast enough to achieve net zero emissions by 2050 [depends greatly](#) on how many more people require energy and resources to meet their needs.

What are important issues to raise around 8 Billion Day?

1. Population growth is causing much suffering in some of the poorest countries. The emerging famine in Somalia is an inevitable consequence of its population growth. Somalia had 2.2 million people in 1950, but now has almost 18 million. That's eight Somalis for every one present in 1950. Madagascar was on the brink of famine last year and the [World Food Programme claimed](#) it was the world's first climate change famine although the drought wasn't unusually deep. They didn't mention that there are seven Madagascans for each one that was present in 1950. The number of undernourished people in the world was receding up to 2014 but has been increasing since then. The rapid increase in poor countries' dependence on imported food to feed their growing populations heightens their [vulnerability](#) to price shocks such as that [caused by](#) the Ukraine war. This is leading to [protests](#) and violent unrest in many countries, as has been an increasingly [prevalent pattern](#) as import-dependence increases.
2. Conflict, and displacement of people due to conflict, are both increasing. According to the [World Health Organization](#), the six countries with the highest numbers of internally displaced persons – Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic

and Yemen – are also among the top 10 food insecure countries. All have been compromised by rapid population growth overtaking agricultural capacity, infrastructure and job creation. [Land scarcity and high proportions of unemployed youth](#), both products of population growth, have been shown to increase the likelihood of civil conflict.

3. The limits to growth are becoming increasingly apparent in the real world. The 1972 [Limits to Growth](#) study demonstrated that limits to natural resources and pollutants would ultimately lead to economic decline and population collapse if human societies did not choose to limit population and industrial output at a sustainable level. Several commentators (including then-CSIRO systems analyst [Graham Turner](#) and KPMG analyst [Gaya Herrington](#)) have recently noted that reality has closely tracked the *Limits to Growth* standard projection, which suggests that the tipping point is now worryingly close. Some [argue](#) that the great unravelling of our civilisation is already apparent, for those willing to join the dots.
4. Proper funding and greater political support for voluntary family planning programs is urgently required. UNFPA head Dr [Natalia Kanem](#) misspoke when she said, “population controls had been shown by history to be ineffective and even dangerous.” [Melinda Gates](#) was much more accurate when she said, “contraceptives are actually one of the greatest anti-poverty innovations the world has ever seen.” With the exception of middle-east oil states, all the developing countries that have made the most progress in the past 50 years had successful birth control programs. In almost all cases, these were voluntary, focused on delivering high-quality and culturally sensitive reproductive health services, but they also advertised the benefits to families of having few children. Some examples are South Korea, Thailand, Vietnam, Costa Rica, Iran and Mauritius. They achieved lower birth rates while still poor, mostly rural and largely illiterate. Wealth and education rapidly improved after fertility fell, but were not major drivers of the fall in birth rates. In contrast, high-fertility countries have failed to reduce poverty due to the burdens of population growth and are increasingly facing instability as resource constraints tighten.

About the author:

Jane O’Sullivan, BAgSc, PhD, is a cross-disciplinary researcher spanning the nexus between agriculture, food security, ecological sustainability and economic development. She has participated in numerous collaborations with international colleagues in ecological economics, environmental philosophy, climate change responses and family planning promotion and implementation. Publications include: *The burden of durable asset acquisition in growing populations* (Economic Affairs 32:31-37, 2012); *Population projections: recipes for action, or inaction?* (Population and Sustainability 1:45-57, 2016); *Synergy between population policy, climate adaptation and mitigation* (in Hossain et al. (eds.) “Pathways to a Sustainable Economy: Bridging the Gap between Paris Climate Change Commitments and Net Zero Emissions.” Springer, 2018); *Aging human populations: good for us, good for the earth* (Trends in Ecology & Evolution 33:851-862, 2018); *Climate change and world population* (in Letcher (ed.) “The Impacts of Climate Change.” pp. 313-350, Elsevier 2021).

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