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6 Billion

A Time for Choices

Global Population Hits 6 Billion

In October 1999, world population will reach 6 billion, an increase of a billion people in just 12 years. How fast the next billion people are added, the effect on natural resources and the environment, and the quality of life will depend on policy and funding decisions taken in the next 5 to 10 years, according to *The State of World Population 1999* report, published by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).

Global population has quadrupled this century, growing faster than at any time in previous history. At the beginning of the 20th century, the world's population was approximately 1.5 billion. In 1927 it reached 2 billion; in 1960, 3 billion; in 1974, 4 billion; in 1987, 5 billion; and on 12 October 1999 it will hit 6 billion. Nearly half of all people on earth will be under 25.

Today people live longer and healthier lives than ever before. Modern medicine and better living conditions have dramatically lowered the global death rate, especially for infants and children. Since 1950, average life expectancy has risen from 46 to 66 years. A growing majority of women and men have the information and means to make choices about the number and spacing of their children. However, there are still a billion people—one person in six—living in poverty.

Although the rate of population growth is slowing, due to falling birth rates, the absolute annual increase is still near its historic high of 86 million a decade ago because there are so many women and men of childbearing age. Over 95 per cent of growth is in developing countries. The fastest growing regions are sub-Saharan Africa—where the average woman has 5.5 children—and parts of South Asia and Western Asia. Meanwhile, population growth has slowed or stopped in Europe, North America and Japan. The United States is the only industrial country where large population increases are still projected, largely due to immigration.

The United Nations projects that world population will grow from the current 6 billion to between 7.3 and 10.7 billion by 2050, with 8.9 billion considered the most likely—meaning world population may grow almost as much in the next 50 years as in the past 50. In this scenario, the current yearly increase of 78 million people would gradually drop to 64 million annually in 2020-2025, and then fall sharply to 33 million people a year in 2045-2050.

Due to improved education and health care and increased access to family planning in Asia, Africa and Latin America, women are having fewer children, and families are smaller than ever before. In developing countries overall, birth rates have dropped by half since 1969, when the United Nations began its Population Fund, from almost six children per woman to under three today. As a result, population growth has begun to slow.

However, the highest rates of growth are taking place in the poorest countries, those least prepared to provide basic services and jobs for growing numbers of young people. The people and countries most affected are concentrated in Africa and South Asia, but there are some in every developing region. In 62 countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America, over 40 per cent of the population is under age 15. Africa, the world's most rapidly growing region, is also the youngest, with a median age of only 18. Worldwide, over a billion people are between ages 15 and 24, the parents of the next generation.

At the same time, 61 countries are seeing fertility rates at or below the "replacement level" of about 2.1 births per woman, and their populations could decline over the long term. However, the report says there is no sign of a global "birth dearth" since births will continue at over 100 million a year for the next 50 years. Deaths will also rise over this period as populations become older, which is already happening in industrial countries and is just beginning in less-developed regions. Globally, there are more older people than ever before.

The report warns that "this slow demographic change calls for policy choices." Around the world, but particularly in the more-developed regions, countries with ageing populations will face challenges providing support and medical care for the elderly. With fewer young people, they will look to active older people and

immigrants to supply some needed services and contribute to the economy. Countries with higher birth rates will have an opportunity to increase productivity and economic development if enough jobs are created for working-age people who are having fewer children.

At the same time, HIV/AIDS is taking a heavier toll than had been anticipated by demographic experts, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, where it is the leading cause of death. In many countries, it has erased decades of progress in reducing child mortality and increasing life expectancy. In 29 African countries, the average life expectancy is now seven years less than it would have been without AIDS. However, the population is not expected to decline in any of these countries because of continuing high birth rates.

Unbalanced consumption patterns and growing population increase pressure on land and water resources, especially in urban areas. At the end of this century, the wealthiest fifth of the world's people consume more than 66 times the materials and resources of the poorest fifth. Already, rising population has reduced world grain area per person by 50 per cent since 1950, and world per capita grain output has been stagnant for more than a decade. Water stress and scarcity is another big concern. According to a recent study, one fourth of the world's people are likely to live in countries facing chronic or recurring shortages of fresh water by the year 2050.

Continued population growth and unbalanced consumption will also affect other environmental trends such as collapsing fisheries, shrinking forests, rising temperatures and the extinction of plants and animals. "One of the real choices we will face in the 21st century is how many species and ecosystems we are willing to eliminate in order to make more space for more human activities," the report warns.

Continuing urbanization and international migration also pose policy challenges. Today almost half of all people live in cities, compared to one third in 1960. Worldwide, cities are growing by 60 million persons each year. And by 2030, it is predicted that over 60 per cent of people, 5 billion, will live in urban areas, many of them megacities with 10 million people or more. Today there are 17 megacities—compared to just two in 1960—and it is projected that by 2015 there will be 26, 22 of them in less-developed regions, 18 in Asia alone.

A 20-year Programme of Action endorsed by the world's governments in 1994 at the International Conference on Population and Development is under-funded, according to the report, and more resources are needed to provide reproductive health services. Unless governments commit further action and funding, the report warns, the cumulative effects of continuing poverty, gender discrimination, new threats such as HIV/AIDS, environmental change and shrinking international resources for development could "wipe out the benefits of lower fertility over the past generation, with global consequences."

—*Word count: 1,188*