
Baby shower: What sort of world awaits the seven billionth person? - The Irish Times

The Irish Times - Saturday, October 29, 2011

Baby shower: What sort of world awaits the seven billionth person?

On Monday, with a birth most likely in Asia or sub-Saharan Africa, the world's population will reach seven billion. What sort of social, geopolitical and physical environment will that child grow up in, and how many more people can fit on Earth

JEFFREY SACHS ON GLOBAL POLITICS

ACCORDING TO THE United Nations population fund, this Halloween brings a special arrival: the seven billionth person on the planet. Earth is getting crowded fast. Just 12 years ago we welcomed the six billionth person. And, if the UN is correct, in 2024 we'll welcome the eight billionth.

Can we make the world hospitable for these new arrivals? The newest arrival will enter a world of complications and crisis. We don't know precisely where the seven-billionth person will arrive, but we can say with about 90 percent probability that the child will be born in low-income Asia or sub-Saharan Africa. In the developed world the fertility rate is already low. Birth rates and population growth remain high only in the poorer countries, where jobs, food, water, electricity and other basic needs remain a daily struggle.

There is some very good news, but also some rather alarming news, about that daily struggle. On the positive side, our seven-billionth arrival, even if he or she is born in a remote village, will be very much part of today's globally connected society. The information and communications revolution has ended isolation. No places are cut off from the rest of humanity. Even Somalia, in the agony of warlords and famine, is well covered by mobile-phone services.

The good news extends to other areas of technology. Lower costs of transport, computing, communication, diagnostics, logistics, mapping, solar power and a host of other technologies make possible the spread of development at a pace unmatched in history. It's no accident that China has achieved 10 per cent growth of the economy (doubling every seven years) for three decades. Technology plus globalisation makes that feasible.

Ah, but if only progress were so assured. Our newest person on the planet will also grow up in two extraordinary transitions, both unprecedented in modern history. By far the most important is the arrival of the Anthropocene: the epoch defined by our impact on the planet. The ecologists and geologists tell us some sobering news. Humans are now so numerous, and such heavy users of Earth's primary commodities – water (for food, industry and household use), carbon (for food and fuel), nitrogen (for fertiliser) and land (for crops, pastures and cities) – that humanity has overtaken nature itself in many basic Earth processes. We are destabilising the climate system, depleting fossil water and fossil energy reserves, and destroying the habitats for millions of species.

It's an unprecedented situation. And we are in denial. Actually, more than in denial, we are in the

Baby shower: What sort of world awaits the seven billionth person? - The Irish Times

hands of corporate propaganda from Big Oil and other interests that tell us not to worry. It's one thing to fall into the fervour of a financial bubble. After the bust, there is a recovery. It's another to fall into the fervour of an ecosystem collapse. There can be no bailout if we wreck the planet.

The second unprecedented change is the loss of global leadership of the north Atlantic societies. For about 250 years Europe and the US, for much good and much ill, have been in the global lead: militarily, politically, economically and technologically. Yet that is ending, most importantly because the rest of the world has unlocked the formulas of advanced technologies and economic growth. Monday's seven-billionth arrival will grow up in a multipolar world, where China, India, Brazil, Nigeria and other regional powers will stake their claims to influence and leadership.

History has shown that transition eras are fraught with dangers. We are already in the midst of global scrambles for food and energy that spill over into dangerous local conflicts and geopolitical rivalries. We are in a period in which the US has dramatically pulled back from global leadership with no other countries or groups of countries rising to solve global problems. And we are in the midst of financial instability as well, in which global finance has escaped the regulation of national governments, putting all regions at risk of financial destabilisation.

Can we get a grip? That is really the question as the seven-billionth child arrives on the scene. Within days of that arrival the G20 will gather at Cannes, in France. The leaders of the most powerful economies will sit around an enormous table (seating about 30 governments, plus the UN and a number of multilateral institutions) to try to assure the world that we can get a grip. A worried world will look on.

If the leaders are serious, they will agree to the following. First, that only global co-operation can

address the burgeoning challenges of finance, environment and population growth. Without a global framework for the world economy and for managing the Anthropocene, we will improvise our way to disaster.

Second, they should take note of the burgeoning population and agree to do something about it. Most important of all, they should agree to help girls around the world, especially in the poorest countries, to stay in school and to complete at least a secondary education. There is no measure of greater significance than universal secondary education (for boys and girls), to empower young women, boost economic development and lower fertility rates.

Third, to be practical, the G20 leaders will find new ways to finance "global public goods" such as universal secondary education and the fight against climate change. At least two new methods of financing should be agreed. The first is a financial-transactions tax, a tiny levy on each international financial transaction. The goal is to slow the global casino of international finance while raising funds for poverty alleviation. The second is a levy on carbon-dioxide emissions from burning oil, gas and coal. Even a small charge would put the world in the direction of long-term climate repair. The world as a whole would finally begin the process of shifting from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources, such as solar and wind power, while raising tens of billions of dollars every year to help the poorest countries to create a modern and sustainable energy system.

Nobody can believe that managing a human family of seven billion will be easy. On the other hand, there is no more uplifting and exciting opportunity than to fashion a world that can be hospitable and decent for all.

Jeffrey D Sachs is the UN's leading adviser on the Millennium Development Goals. Next Saturday he will be in conversation with David

Baby shower: What sort of world awaits the seven billionth person? - The Irish Times

*McWilliams at the Kilkenomics festival, which runs from Wednesday to Sunday in Kilkenny; kilkenomics.com. His latest book is **The Price of Civilization***

MICHAEL VINEY ON CLIMATE

ON THE DAY I was born, in 1933, the planet's human population stood at about two billion. The population of this overcrowded, urbanising, junk-littered, half-starved, water-stressed world has more than trebled in my lifetime.

I write from west Co Mayo, looking out to rare reaches of silence, space and solitude – not everyone's choice, perhaps, but a vantage point for considering their opposites. Bare branches and crumbling bracken bring a seasonal end to birth and growth, a rehearsal of death at its proper time in the sustaining cycles of the world.

As the only species on Earth to have interfered with mortality, we evade the natural controls on population that rule a finite, if intricate, planet. While food shortage, disease and predation curb the numbers of everything else that lives, we continue to dodge the larger consequences of famine and plague (though both now hover with increasing menace). We have escaped a near extinction through war – the human version of predation – by the skin of nuclear disarmament.

Each birth (now running at two every second: another 80 million every year) leaves less room for the rest of nature. Most big mammals have been robbed of their right to roam, and the diversity of all species dwindles at a shocking rate. Yet some nations think boosting their population will provide the young to earn the money to keep the increasing numbers of the old – “the ultimate Ponzi scheme”, as David Attenborough has called it.

At 85, Sir David has spent decades chronicling our runaway assault on the ecosystems of most other species. It has allied him with the UK's Optimum Population Trust (OPT), pressing for contraception and the education and empowerment of women. His new television series, *Frozen Planet*, on the world's last wilderness, speaks not only for penguins and polar bears but also for a human future imperilled by global warming, itself a consequence of population growth.

For the OPT (populationmatters.org) the optimum population of Earth is one compatible with a good quality of life, both for humans and for the rest of nature. Some thinkers have tried to put figures on it. Arne Naess, for example, the Norwegian philosopher who founded the deep-ecology movement of the late 20th century, thought 100 million might be quite enough. Aristotle, who lived in a world of that number, certainly thought a large increase would bring poverty to the citizens, and thus “sedition and evil”.

In 1798, at 900 million, Thomas Malthus sounded the alarm, pointing out that while unchecked human reproduction was exponential, “subsistence increases only in an arithmetical ratio”. He urged family planning, especially among the poor. The subsequent rubbishing of his theories has rested on the human capacity for indefinite technological advance – the “great encouragements to agriculture” that he thought must inevitably be outpaced.

Artificial fertilisers, mechanisation and F1 hybrid plant breeding were among the innovations that seemed to prove him wrong. As world food supply now ultimately drifts out of balance, and drought and salinisation bite at the planet's arable land, the potential of genetically modified crops is offered as the answer.

Earlier this month, however, *The GMO Emperor Has No Clothes*, a global citizens' report on the state

Baby shower: What sort of world awaits the seven billionth person? - The Irish Times

of GMOs, brought a seemingly devastating challenge to the claims for this biotechnology. It was prepared by a network of 20 Indian, southeast Asian, African and Latin American food and conservation groups, is backed by Friends of the Earth International and can be downloaded at navdanyainternational.it.

The world's three largest GM companies now control almost 70 per cent of world seed sales, marketing patented seeds to more than 15 million farmers. The seeds are supposed to make herbicides and insecticides unnecessary, but the report claims that, as weeds and insects develop resistance, chemical use has soared on soya, maize and cotton farms across the world, and the seeds have failed to increase the yield of any food crop. In India, it alleges, indebtedness arising from GM use has prompted many of the suicides among India's cotton farmers in the past decade.

Monsanto, the pre-eminent GM emperor, has, predictably, disputed the report's findings, pointing to far more favourable evaluations by the US National Academy of Sciences. The weight of both sides will be further tested among the 2,000 or so "key opinion formers" expected at the CropWorld global conference that opens in London on Monday.

In Ireland, meanwhile, anti-GM activists watch for any sign of weakening in Europe's reservations on the seeds. In the Government's eagerness to embrace new biotechnology, we may yet be grateful for cautionary obstacles that blunt its "cutting edge".

FINTAN O'TOOLE ON OVERPOPULATION

ACCORDING TO THE UN, the seven billion people living on Earth will become at least 10 billion by 2100. Where will they live, all these inconvenient "surplus" people? About 2.5 billion of them will be born in Africa. On current trends, most of them will end up living in the fastest-growing kind of human environment, the meg-aslum on the edge of a city.

Places like Mathare, a vast conglomeration of tiny shacks outside the Kenyan capital, Nairobi. This ramshackle jumble of mud and brick, of wooden planks and corrugated tin roofs, of open sewers and rubbish, is home to about 600,000 people. Mathare is the kind of home into which the bulk of the world's new people will be welcomed.

I was in Mathare two years ago. It is a good place to go if you want to terrify yourself about the prospect of huge population growth. You see people with almost nothing: with neither the ties to nature and tradition that sustained them in the countryside from which they came nor the basic pleasures of urban life, such as access to water and electricity and public services. In some ways they have less than nothing. Old tribal ties now manifest themselves in political and gang violence that makes life even more precarious. And even the assumption that at least living in an illegal slum means you don't have to pay rent turns out to be untrue. Families that survive on an average of €2 a day have to hand over €10 a month to "businessmen" who charge them for the privilege of living in a hovel. No one, it seems, is too poor to be exploited.

And so there is the question that you don't want to ask but that will not go away: is it worth being born at all if this is to be your life? Are all those extra billions of people to be born between now and 2100 simply a mistake, an unintended and unfortunate consequence of our ability to produce more food and to control lethal diseases? Not to themselves they're not.

Go inside one of those huts in Mathare and what do you see? You see pictures of flowers, cut from magazines, stuck on the walls. You see bits of old furniture, scavenged from dumps or from skips in nicer parts of the city, arranged in some hopeful semblance of domestic order. You see school copy-books neatly arranged on improvised shelves to keep them safe. You see school uniforms, miraculously spotless, hanging from the corrugated ceiling.

Baby shower: What sort of world awaits the seven billionth person? - The Irish Times

And then talk to the people who live in these shacks and you realise that this is what they are: not inconvenient numbers, not some vast sludge pond of excess humanity, but people with imaginations and aspirations.

I often think of Martha Mukami, a wiry little woman, coiled like a spring, who would now be 40. If you wanted an image of human degradation, Martha could provide a good one: she told me she had started to work as a prostitute because her children begged her to do so when they had nothing to eat. She knew she ought to insist customers use condoms, but she needed the money too badly to insist. She wouldn't take a HIV test, she told me, because, "If I found out and it was bad, I could get a shock and die."

So is she a pointless, surplus person who should never have been born? Not to herself: she had managed to escape prostitution and to set up a little stall selling charcoal and porridge, and her eyes blazed with energy and determination. Not to her community: I was told I'd be safe in Mathare as long as I was with Martha, because she is so respected. Not to the five children she cares for; three of her own and two belonging to her sister-in-law, who is dead. I asked her what she wanted her children to be. "One will be a doctor, one an engineer." Just like any proud mother in Cork or Cavan.

Overpopulation is already a very real phenomenon. In 2006 I was in the fastest-growing megalopolis in the world. It is one that barely registers in western consciousness: Chongqing, on the River Yangtze in midwestern China. Back then it was home to 31 million people, more than the populations of Iraq or Peru. By now the number is at least 33 million. The very fact that many people in the West have never heard of the place is a mark of the way rapid population growth is changing the way we have to imagine the world.

Thinking about Ireland as the centre of the universe becomes a lot harder when its entire population is less than a sixth of that of an "obscure" Chinese

city. But the same may gradually become true for London, New York and Paris.

The point about Chongqing is not that it is overcrowded: that's true of every Chinese city. It is that it seems endless, both physically and imaginatively. Human beings like to live in bounded spaces, but, in a place like Chongqing, you don't know where the boundaries are. And, more importantly, you don't know where they will be. With Chinese cities having to absorb 8.5 million migrants from the countryside every year, where does Chongqing reach its limit? Is it 40 million? Or 50 million? Or 100 million? This psychological uncertainty is underpinned by physical reality. The Yangtze, on which the city depends, is a finite resource. The city, in order to sustain its growing population, is encouraging the development of giant chemical factories near the river that keeps much of China alive. It is not hard to see the inherent contradictions or to wonder about the sustainability of such vast cities.

And the population explosion is not just an urban phenomenon. I've visited communities in the most overcrowded country in the world, Bangladesh, who are trying to eke out a living on the most marginal land. There are people trying to survive on strips of territory on the edges of coasts that are horribly vulnerable to typhoons, tsunamis and rising sea levels – and will only become more so over time. There are people living on "chars", temporary islands of sand and mud thrown up by the shifting movement of rivers, that are home to more than five million: their precarious livelihoods can be swept away at any moment by erosion and floods. No one would choose to live in such places if land were not so desperately scarce.

And yet overpopulation, however real and obvious, is not ultimately a matter of numbers. Ireland was "overpopulated" in the 1840s, in the sense that it was unable to sustain its relatively modest population of eight million. Whenever it returns to that level, perhaps towards the end of this century, it will still be, by international standards, underpopulated.

Baby shower: What sort of world awaits the seven billionth person? - The Irish Times

The question is not the raw number of people but the quality of their lives, whether they have the power to demand a fair share of the available resources, whether women can make decisions about reproduction, whether there is enough hope for the future of their children for parents to decide to concentrate their resources on fewer of them. In that sense, the threat to human survival lies not in the shortage of space on our planet but in the shortage of justice in our political and economic systems.