

Population growth

Population management: The key issues

Talk of a global population problem can be misleading. The components that make up the world's population growth — fertility and mortality — are subject to fluctuations over time. As there is no fixed limit to the numbers the planet can support, many experts argue that it makes more sense to consider the ability of societies to provide for their people.

Of the seven billion who currently inhabit the planet, around a billion overeat, a billion go hungry and another billion are malnourished. Taking into account the amount of food wasted among more affluent populations, the world already produces enough to sustain at least nine billion people.

The size of population that can be sustained in any region varies according to local circumstances such as geography and climate. Political and economic factors also affect the production and distribution of food; as aid agencies point out, famine is often due to man-made causes such as conflict.

Population issues are also bound up with social and cultural expectations to do with family size, the use of contraception and the role of women.

Nonetheless, there is an emerging consensus that stabilising the global population is desirable. This means maintaining the fertility rate at 'replacement level': an average of 2.1 births per woman. This would be enough to replace each parent, plus a little more to compensate for early mortality and those who remain childless. Many countries use this as a benchmark against which to measure their own fertility.

But there is less agreement as to how to go about achieving this stability, particularly among governments. Some states have employed strongly interventionist measures in an attempt to control their populations. These are often controversial because of their human cost, especially to women and girls.

One notable example is China's one child policy, which is thought to be responsible for abortions of female foetuses and the enforced sterilisation of child-bearing women.

In richer, more industrialised countries, the challenge lies at the other end of the spectrum: how to increase the fertility rate in the face of an ageing population. As people have smaller families and live longer due to improved health and living standards, the number of births is falling below the number of deaths. With the number of people capable of working and taking on caring responsibilities shrinking, governments are worried about how they will provide for an elderly population.

As a result of the greying of Europe, some countries are adopting 'pro-natalist' policies which encourage people to have children.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the pro-natalist policies adopted by Germany, Spain and Italy were associated with politically dubious attempts to manipulate the population. But modern France has put in place a wide range of family-friendly measures that appear to have boosted the country's fertility rate while promoting the position of women.

Sweden, meanwhile, has chosen to avoid explicitly-labelled pro-natalist measures while pursuing gender equality policies likely to help maintain the fertility rate. But at 1.98 in 2010, the fertility rate remains below replacement level¹.

Whichever approach is taken, the complexity of factors affecting fertility rates makes it difficult to be certain of the impact of any policy.



¹ Eurostat, epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/population/data/main_tables