

Time to Panic: UN Says Africa's Population to Quadruple

By Michael E. Arth, June 18, 2015



Kibera slum, Nairobi, Kenya, in 1998. It looks much the same today.

In 1998, when I visited the Kibera slum in Nairobi, I saw a vast inland sea of rusting, corrugated metal huts, inhabited by uncounted numbers of destitute people. There were no basic services, clinics, or public schools. Garbage and sewage clogged muddy gullies that passed for streets. Whatever services could be found were sold by opportunists and gangs who made it too dangerous for visitors to enter the slum.

Because of the lack of fresh running water and lavatories, residents urinated and defecated in plastic bags, tied them up, and slung them as far as they could. The shit-bombs, locally referred to as “flying toilets,” sounded like gunshots when they landed on a neighbor’s metal roof. I took a

picture of a boy in a ruffly pink dress, digging for usable bags next to an abandoned latrine. He probably figured it was better to be dressed like a girl in a filthy dress than to be naked like some of the other children. Life has not improved much in the 17 years since my visit, despite local and global efforts. In January 2008, 300 people died and 70,000 were displaced in fires and riots that broke out in the Nairobi slums over claims of vote-rigging in the presidential election.



Boy in a dress, collecting shopping bags that will presumably be used for flying toilets, like the ones that have landed all around the broken latrines.

In 2009, Swedish architect Anders Wilhelmson introduced the cheap and disposable, single-use “Peepoo bag” to some residents of Kibera. The inside of the Peepoo has urea, which within a month at room temperature breaks down the waste into an ammonia fertilizer, along with the biodegradable bag, which can then be safely used on crops. It seemed like a great idea at the time, humorously promoted by the people at a Swedish company called Peepoople. Unfortunately, Peepoople struggled to sell Peepoo. Even three cents a bag was too much for most people. Feeling public scrutiny, by 2015, the Kenyan government had completed half of a planned 182 communal toilets in Kibera. Not as many toilets are taking flight in Kibera (the largest of Nairobi’s 200 some-odd slums), but we, along with Africa, are still heading for a shit-storm of epic proportions. According to Peepoople, more than 2.6 billion people in the world lack access to basic sanitation.

In 1998, the African population was 779 million. By 2015 Africa had added another 415 million people, a number that far surpasses the total combined population of Canada and the United States. During this period, extreme poverty has increased both in sheer numbers and as a percentage of the population. As I am writing this, the UN reports that 60 million people have become refugees and are seeking protection elsewhere because chaotic forces have driven them from their homes. The U.S. now takes in about 1 million legal immigrants per year, 70,000 of whom are refugees, and an unknown number of illegals. The illegal immigrant population currently in the U.S. is estimated to be between 7 and 20 million.

Recently, 900 refugees from Africa drowned in the Mediterranean after human traffickers in Libya tried to smuggle them into Europe by boat. There are powerful incentives to leave Africa. Life expectancy at birth for sub-Saharan Africans is 46 and about 70% live a marginal existence on less than \$2 a day. Under current United Nations projections, Africa’s population will quadruple in this century. It would seem that any rational person, looking at the state of the African continent today, would think adding another three billion people to Africa’s existing 1.1 billion population is ill advised, to say the least. Africa is a cauldron of problems, including civil strife, wars, autocratic rulers, high infant mortality, high HIV/AIDS infection rates, water shortages, religious extremism, illiteracy, extreme poverty, high migration levels and

lack of sanitation. Yet, incredibly, in the 2013 BBC documentary, *Don't Panic: The Truth About Population*, statistician Hans Rosling tells us not worry. Furthermore, he says Asia will add another billion people, and that's okay too, because we will level off at eleven billion.

Rosling uses beautifully animated graphs to illustrate some good news. Birth rates are falling in most countries, even in places like Bangladesh, where fertility rates have fallen from seven children per woman in 1972 to 2.5 today. The rates have also dropped in religious countries like Mexico and Iran. Sweden's Gapminder Foundation was co-founded in Sweden by Rosling, who is well-known for making statistics come to life in his humorous and informative presentations. His talks often use polls to compare what people in various countries think compared to reality. He also uses instant polls of his audience to show the gaps between the facts and reality. Chimps, he points out, making wildly uniformed guesses, and motivated by nothing more than bananas with no real knowledge of the questions, often do better than Swedes, Brits, and Americans in answering multiple choice questions about anthropological questions. For example, most people underestimate the average life expectancy of everyone on Earth by 10 to 20 years. In fact, it is 70. Most people in his polls also vastly underestimated the number of literate people in the world. Rosling said the right answer is 80%. Tellingly, he did not point out that if we applied the answers to Africa, where literacy rates below 50% are common, most people would have been right. Burkino Faso has only 29% literacy. Female literacy is 15% in Niger, which is apparently strongly influenced by a fertility rate of seven children per women.

Falling birth rates are cause for some guarded optimism. Important reasons for this drop in fertility include women giving birth at a later age, and women having access to education and employment. Because it appears that the Earth's carrying capacity has been exceeded, and that many harmful effects are associated with overpopulation, it is foolish to not do what we can to prevent our numbers from growing from seven to eleven billion. We should not take unnecessary chances by adding the equivalent of adding another China, India, USA, and all the countries of Africa combined, to a world that is already overpopulated.

Rosling states we do not know for sure if we have reached “peak oil,” but we have almost certainly reached “peak child.” The number of children in the world has leveled out at two billion, even as the population grows. Unfortunately, as the population ages, the bulge in growth created by previous high birth levels means that the population will explode in places where the median age is low. Places with mature populations—like Japan and Germany where the median age is 46—are prosperous and stable, but countries like Uganda and Niger, where the median age is 15, are in terrible shape and are getting worse.

Let’s not whitewash the facts: Parts of Asia and all of Africa are having a population explosion, where most people are poor and resources are scarce. Even *Don’t Panic* showed graphic scenes of desperately poor Africans having to walk several hours a day to collect dwindling water resources. Billions of people have clawed their way out of poverty, but it comes at a cost. As incomes rise, consumers produce more CO2 emissions and use up more resources. As Rosling points out, 85% of the world’s greenhouse gases are produced by the richest three billion people, who earn between \$10 and \$100 per day. But if the goal is to raise everyone’s standard of living, adding population anywhere negatively affects all of us everywhere.

Many politicians and demographers still believe we need more young people to take care of the old, but with robotics and artificial intelligence, that paradigm is changing fast. Japan is already making great strides in using robots, even pet robots, to take care of the elderly. Automation and artificial intelligence will also lead to fewer jobs—across the board. Just the introduction of self-driving cars alone will eliminate tens of millions of jobs over the next decade. Shared, electric, self-driving vehicles could also eliminate 1.5 billion cars between 2025 and 2030 with a corresponding drop in greenhouse emission and expenses related to polluting vehicles, accidents, insurance and parking (along with the associated jobs).

While Rosling admits that one billion of the overall increase in population will be due to increased longevity, he is only talking about raising average longevity from 70 to about 80 years old. This calculation ignores the growing likelihood of radical life extension. A recent Time Magazine cover featured a picture of a baby with the title,

“This baby could live to be 142.” Even more shocking is the possibility this baby could live indefinitely. Imagine where medical technology will be in 142 years and the idea of living indefinitely long seems plausible. We should prepare for this by having zero or negative population growth now.

In casual conversations, I often hear people speak about the need for natural disasters or a “culling” of the population to bring humans in line with the Earth’s carrying capacity. The number of natural disasters has been falling since 1900, and any talk of deliberately culling the population is reprehensible and genocidal, even if it is allowed indirectly through neglect. Such radical measures are also cruel and unnecessary, especially compared to how effective public policy initiatives regarding family planning could stop population growth very quickly.

A “youth bulge” occurs when there are too many young people coming of age at any given time. The median age of sub-Saharan Africa’s population is 18.6, with Nigeria and Uganda at 15. This is a population time bomb, because it means that about half of African women are only now entering their child-bearing years. A youth bulge in the Middle East and Africa has appeared to produce a disproportionate share of young, unemployed, young males inclined toward religious extremism, suicide bombings, civil strife, kidnappings, riots and the like.

In 2025, the city with the largest number of children in the world will be Kinshasa, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where half of all residents are under 18 and 39% of the population is illiterate. Already ranked among Africa’s most dangerous cities, it is easy to predict Kinshasa will fall victim to the mother of all youth bulges. Sub-Saharan Africa grew from 186 million in 1950 to 859 million in 2010. Global rates of extreme poverty rates are falling, but in sheer numbers, they have hardly budged. The World Bank estimates 1.2 billion people are earning less than \$1.25 per day. Why feverishly work to keep up with population growth when family planning could much more easily allow everyone to catch up while also taking pressure off strained resources? According to a 2013 UN report, significant progress was made in reducing extreme poverty in China because of their one-child policy. By contrast, because of high fertility rates, the number of sub-Saharan Africans living in extreme poverty rose

from 290 million to 414 million between 1990 and 2010. These Africans represent one-third of all destitute people in the world. If population growth had stopped in 1990, we could have eliminated extreme poverty in sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere. If we could achieve zero population growth (ZPG) today, I believe we could bring 1.2 billion out of destitution within 20 years.

What would it take? Unfortunately, because of population momentum based on large numbers of women who have not passed child-bearing years, it would take a fertility level of about 0.5 children per woman in the developing world to quickly achieve growth rates like Europe or Japan. This may seem extreme, but the benefits would be enormous for people everywhere, especially for those now suffering the most. It could be done through a combination of birth credits (a marketable birth license plan) coupled with direct payments, loans and educational incentives from the affluent countries to those people opting out of parenthood. This would have immediate benefits: The opportunities for women would be vastly increased, the standard of living would rise precipitously, and it would give us all breathing room to begin solving other problems.

The facts of overpopulation are cause for panic and action, not complacency. The right to bear a child is both an individual right and a responsibility held in common. So far, the focus has been primarily on the individual right to bear a child with little regard for the goal of having a stable and sustainable planet where everyone can have a decent life. It is irresponsible to not do what we can to achieve global ZPG.

Visit [The Eco-Initiative](#) for an update to this article, and learn about an Africa-centered, zero-cost plan that would be based on a newly-created currency backed by the rich countries (the eco). The initiative could solve overpopulation, global warming, and extreme poverty.

