

Depopulation instead of overpopulation

DEMOGRAPHICS

DEPOPULATION

EMANCIPATION

Like overpopulation, depopulation would have widespread consequences for the environment, the labor market and social and cultural practices. In the recent book *Empty Planet*, the thought that we might have to deal with depopulation in the future popped up again: the global population, now 7.5 billion, will decline rapidly later this century after peaking below 9 billion – rather than the 11 billion that is predicted by the United Nations. Why does this scenario of depopulation keep coming back, and is it becoming more realistic?

Our observations

- According to the United Nations (UN), the world population will grow from 7.6 billion today to [11.2 billion by 2100](#): It is expected that more than half of global population growth until 2050 will occur in Africa, with Niger topping [the list](#) at 7.153 children per woman, followed by Somalia at 6.123 children per woman. The lowest-fertility countries now include all countries in Europe and Northern America, and many countries in Asia (e.g. Japan, Taiwan and Singapore) and Latin America (e.g. Mexico and Brazil).
- The new book *Empty Planet: The Shock of Global Population Decline* foresees global population peaking at 9 billion by 2060 and predicts that by 2100, it will have shrunk to 7 billion, after which the decline will continue. The main reasons for this decline are urbanization and the empowerment (mostly by education) of women. The authors, Canadian journalist John Ibbitson and political scientist Darrell Bricker, claim that “the great defining event of the twenty-first century will occur in three decades, give or take, when the global population starts to decline. Once that decline begins, it will never end.”
- In the past two decades, several theories on population decline have appeared. For example, Nicholas Eberstadt published the article [Too few people?](#), arguing that “global population will peak in 2040 and then start a headlong dive”; Fred Pearce argued in his book [The Coming Population Crash: and Our Planet's Surprising Future](#) that the global trend to empower women through education and equal rights causes lower birth rates and by 2040, the world's population will be declining for the first time since the Black Death reduced the world's population from an estimated 450 million down to 350–375 million in the 14th century.
- Whether we're facing a decline or growth of the global population has great impact on our forecast of and, therefore, policy on food production, climate change, the [future of work](#), healthcare, [pensions](#), [\(im\)migration](#), economic growth and so on. Both prospects come with their own set of positive and negative consequences. Population decline, for example, is thought to be a good thing for the planet, because human activities will be less of a burden, whereas slower economic growth or [ageing populations](#) are negative consequences that population growth doesn't have.



Connecting the dots

In *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, published in 1798, Thomas Malthus painted a dystopic picture of a future in which population would increase geometrically, doubling every 25 years, without food production being able to keep up. This would result in worldwide famine and starvation, called “the Malthusian trap”. He concluded that birthrates had to be controlled in order to prevent a humanitarian disaster. This was a major stimulus for countries to install population controllers, as shown by mass [U.S.-funded family planning programs](#), Iran’s birth control [policy](#), India pressuring its citizens [to get sterilized](#), and [China introducing its one-child policy](#), which led to forced abortions. Later on, many others expressed the same concern for overpopulation and its disastrous consequences, such as [Al Gore](#) and [the Club of Rome](#). However, counter-predictions on demographic trends were also introduced. In 1921, for example, philosopher Oswald Spengler [argued](#) in *The Decline of the West* that every civilization will eventually decline at its peak of intelligence, referring to a point in its history at which a culture has flourished and reached great welfare. At this time, cultural phenomena such as urbanization and feminism take flight and depopulation will start. The decline of population based on these two factors is [reintroduced](#) by, for example, Eberstadt and Pearce. Rural societies, for example, [consider children an asset](#): they are very cheap land workers and later on, they can take care of their parents when they get old. In the city, however, children cannot fulfill such a role. Instead they put a heavy burden on households and hinder (especially) women in pursuing a career. What is more, the empowerment of women includes education in the first years of fertility, which causes a delay in having children, which often leads to not having them at all. Furthermore, after education, women choose to have fewer children in order to pursue a career or other ambitions, and if having children is in the way of their life ambitions, they will choose [not to become a mom at all](#). In their calculations on global population growth rates, the UN considers fertility¹, migration², and death rates. The [main argument](#) in *Empty Planet* that aims to make the scenario of a global depopulation more plausible at this point

in time, is that urbanization and the empowerment of women have a huge impact on population rates. Furthermore, they claim the expansion of education for women and urbanization are currently happening fastest in developing countries. The UN therefore erroneously assumes that Africa will stagnate in rural poverty for the rest of the century. Moreover, the immense speed of dropping fertility rates due to these factors has already been demonstrated in other areas. In the Philippines (a country in which urbanization has been happening relatively [fast](#)), for example, fertility rates dropped from 3.7 in 2003 to 2.7 in 2018. Ibbotson points out that historically, such a change in fertility rates took shape much more slowly in countries such as the U.S., namely from about 1800 to the end of the Baby Boom. The process of [urbanization](#) originated more than two centuries ago, but the next urbanization wave might indeed be of unprecedented scale and pace, making a scenario of depopulation more plausible in current times. Furthermore, Africa, which is thought of as the biggest contributor to population growth by the UN, has successfully benefited from a number of cases of “leapfrogging” technology, such as mobile phones over landline connections, access to mobile banking through services such as M-Pesa in Kenya and Tanzania. According to GSMA Intelligence, [smartphone adoption](#) in Africa will rise from 37% in 2017 to 67% by 2025. Smartphone adoption could be a huge [impulse for E-learning](#) and thereby raise the level of education in many African countries by solving pressing problems such as teacher shortage, lack of curriculum, etc. The empowerment of women in Africa could therefore take flight as well, since many more girls will be educated partly during their first years of fertility and might then develop other ambitions than motherhood alone. The two factors, urbanization and the empowerment of women, already pointed out by Spengler at the beginning of the former century, have indeed proven to cause depopulation over time in certain regions. The fact that they are currently gaining momentum on a global scale makes the scenario of depopulation more plausible than before.

Implications

- According to the authors of *Empty Planet*, depopulation will have positive effects on the environment, since it means there will be less people to burden our planet. However, as logical as this argumentation might seem, the opposite could be the case as well. For, if depopulation also means that more people will be wealthier, the environment might suffer from depopulation when current [dynamics](#) remain unchanged: the richest 10% of people now produce half of Earth’s climate-harming fossil-fuel emissions, while the poorest half contribute a mere 10%.
- Forecasts of population rates will remain rather uncertain due to the many factors that can influence their course. As we wrote before, other factors such as life expectancy or [religious or political](#) views on reproduction can influence the fertility rates of a country as well. The effects of population growth or decline are uncertain too. Some even argue that [both scenarios](#) could equally be used as a positive or negative argument for wealth, environment or innovation.