

# Global warning: there's too many of us



**JOHN GIBBONS**

Population control is an issue we must address with the same urgency as climate change

**B**Y NOW, most people are aware of the urgent need to sharply cut emissions in order to stabilise climate by mid-century. What is less well known is that by 2050 we will also be in need of something rather more difficult to secure: a second planet roughly the same size and with the same resources as our current one.

Today, there are over 6.7 billion people on earth. In the 20th century alone, world population quadrupled. Every week, global population increases by about 1.5 million. According to the United Nations, if fertility remains at its current levels, we will number nearly 12 billion by 2050.

Even with sharp reductions in fertility, it is now almost inevitable that world population will exceed nine billion by mid-century, barring calamities. This is because right now, almost half the entire world population is under the age of 25.

"These figures demonstrate the folly of concentrating exclusively on lifestyles and technology and ignoring human numbers in our attempts to combat climate change," said reproductive health expert, Prof John Guillebaud.

This year has seen the conflation of a series of closely related crises, including sharp rises in food and fuel prices.

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These are beginning to bring home to the Irish public the realities of a world of deepening shortages of key commodities.

The UK government's chief scientific adviser, Prof John Beddington recently revealed that global grain stores are at their lowest levels ever. Climate change is, he added, already putting severe pressure on food production. As populations continue to rise, "the agriculture industry needs to double its food production, using less water than today".

Given that intensive agriculture is already at or beyond the limits of output, Beddington declined to specify quite how this latterday miracle of loaves and fishes might be achieved.

While the food, energy, water and climate crises intensify, the issue which is quite literally the mother and father of all of these gets remarkably little attention: runaway population growth. In a 1992 report, Unicef stated that a massive investment in family planning would "bring more benefits to more people, at less

cost than any other single technology". It hasn't happened.

Worldwide, an estimated 350 million couples of reproductive age don't have access to contraceptive services. Every day, over half a million women become pregnant, but only one in two of these is planned. The World Bank estimates that there are some 51 million unplanned pregnancies worldwide every year, with a further 25 million arising from faulty or incorrectly used contraception. Simply facilitating people to prevent unplanned pregnancies would, without any coercion whatever, reduce population growth to almost zero.

"Giving women access to modern contraception and family planning also helps to boost economic growth while reducing high birth rates so strongly linked with endemic poverty, poor education and high numbers of maternal deaths," said former Botswana health minister, Joy Phumaphi.

It is a vicious cycle: poverty is increased by population growth, but population growth is itself increased by poverty. The pressure that desperately poor people are forced to exert on already stressed environments in order to try to eke out a living adds to the environmental catastrophes now being witnessed in sub-Saharan Africa. Rising prosperity, on the other hand, takes an even greater overall ecological toll.

There is a widespread and entirely unsafe perception that the "population crisis" is somehow largely solved, and that growth rates are decreasing as people become more prosperous. According to the World Wildlife Fund, humanity is consuming between 20-25 per cent more natural resources each year than the world can produce.

Think of it in simple financial terms: instead of living off the "interest" of the world's once-abundant renewable resources, we are instead eating heavily into the capital. This is visible both in our voracious consumption of non-renewables such as fossil fuels and our over-exploitation of what should be renewable resources.

With both agriculture and fisheries under severe pressure, how exactly are we going to manage to feed an additional 2.5 to five billion mouths by mid-century?

"Whatever your cause, it is a lost cause unless you limit population growth," wrote Paul Ehrlich. His 1968 book *The Population Bomb* envisioned a Malthusian catastrophe that would see hundreds of millions starving to death by the 1980s.

When this scenario failed to materialise, many sceptics scoffed. Others feel he was simply premature. In the 40 years since his book was published, the world's population has ballooned by another three billion. The noose has tightened.

As an entomologist, Prof Ehrlich looks to the lesson of fruit flies. When a female finds a bunch of rotting bananas, she lays her eggs and the population explodes. Once the bananas are all eaten, the population crashes and the female leaves in search of a new pile of fruit. Humanity's problem, Ehrlich says drolly is: "we only have one pile of bananas". Moreover, when sex, politics and religion intersect, the result is usually an incendiary cocktail, and so it has proven in population control. This will be examined in depth next week.