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8 Billion and Then What?

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THE WORLD POPULATION reached 7 billion in 2011 according to the United Nations (UN 2022). It is estimated at 8 billion in 2022 (symbolically fixed on the date of November 15). According to the UN medium scenario, it will attain 9 billion in 2038, and 10 billion in 2059. The number of years between these milestone dates (11, 16, and 21 years) when the global population reaches a round number indicates that population growth is expected to decelerate further, as it has been since the 1960s when the world population was increasing at a rate of 2.3% per year. Furthermore, the number of people on earth will most likely peak in the second half of the 21st century and start declining thereafter, according to all institutions beside the United Nations that are providing long-term global projections to 2100, i.e., the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) and the Wittgenstein Centre for Demography and Global Human Capital (WIC). The peak will be reached in 2064 according to the IHME at the level of 9.7 billion, at the same level but in 2070 according to WIC, and in 2086 according to the United Nations at the higher level of 10.4 billion. In all projections, the main driver behind the decline will be the ongoing fertility transition, with more and more countries achieving below replacement fertility. Indeed, by 2100, only a handful of countries would have a fertility rate above 2.1 live births per woman, and the highest fertility is predicted to be in Niger (West Africa) with 2.22 live births according to the UN medium scenario.

One very striking fact is that the 2 to 3 billion people who will be added to today's world population will be born in countries that are now most stricken by poverty, mostly in sub-Saharan Africa. The sub-continent is likely to triple its present size of 1.2 billion to 3.4 billion by the end of the century. Meanwhile, with the expected increase in life expectancy, most countries will need to deal with shrinking and ageing populations. Sixty-five percent of all 237 countries and territories that are in the UN dataset would experience negative population growth rate in 2100. While sinking population numbers are probably good news for humanity and for the planet, the sheer number of people does not necessarily fully reflect on the sustainability of ecosystems

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on earth. What is important is not only how many people there are or will be but what behaviour they adopt and will adopt in their everyday life. It is equally essential to know to what extent human beings and the systems in which they will live (economic, social, environmental, geopolitical, technical, etc.) will be equipped to face the challenges of the future. It is likely that this future demographic path, without recent precedent, will require significant changes at the individual level but above all at the larger, societal level. Just like the human population will move away from a situation of permanent growth, it is possible that the whole human and economic system will be radically obliged to do the same.

References

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