

Editorial

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Phil. Trans. R. Soc. B 2009 **364**, 2975-2976

doi: 10.1098/rstb.2009.0180

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Editorial

THE WORLD IN 2050 PARTICIPANTS

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THE WORLD IN 2050: A SCIENTIFIC INVESTIGATION OF THE IMPACT OF GLOBAL POPULATION GROWTH ON A DIVIDED PLANET

An international group of 42 scientists met at the University of California, Berkeley on 23–24 January 2009 to discuss The World in 2050, and how global changes in the human population might change our future. The meeting was organized by the Bixby Centers at the University of California at Berkeley, San Francisco and Los Angeles. The participants all spoke as individuals and not as representatives of governments or organizations. The proceedings are web-cast (<http://www.prb.org/Journalists/Webcasts/worldin2050/worldin2050-overview.aspx>), and the papers prepared for the Forum is published as a theme issue of the Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B. This statement, prepared by the organizers, summarizes some conclusions of the meeting without committing every participant to support of every detail.

Rapid population growth in some regions, combined with increasing affluence and explosive growth in fossil fuel and natural resources consumption throughout the world, is seriously endangering a broad range of natural systems that support life. For the first time in history, much of the natural world is adversely affected by human activity. Global warming is just one among many threats to sustaining human life, wildlife and the natural environment.

The United Nations projects that the human population will increase from the current

6.8 billion to between 8 billion and 10.5 billion in 2050. Although more than half the world's women now have an average of two children or fewer, the global population is still growing rapidly and this year there will be 78 million more births than deaths (a number slightly less than the population of Germany). Over 95 per cent of this growth is in low-income countries least able to provide for these numbers. Despite deaths from AIDS, much of the fastest population growth is in Sub-Saharan Africa.

In 2007, Western donor contributions to family planning were less than a quarter of the inflation-adjusted target set at the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development. Shrinking family planning budgets have been associated with stalled fertility decline in a number of countries, leading to serious adverse effects on the health of women and their families and the stability and progress of civil society. In Kenya, as a result of diminished focus on family planning, the projected population in 2050 has been increased from 54 million to 83 million. Some observers predict that an increase of this magnitude may lead to food scarcity and crumbling infrastructure and, potentially, to violent conflicts over scarce resources.

With over 80 million unintended pregnancies each year, there is already a large unmet need for family planning. Surveys show that 200 million women wish to delay or stop the next pregnancy and over 100 million are not using any contraception because they lack access to it or face other barriers to its use. Even in the USA, one of the most affluent nations in the world, half of all pregnancies are unintended.

Meeting the unmet need for family planning has been highly successful in slowing rapid population growth. Ready access to contraception and safe abortion has decreased family size, even in illiterate communities living on less than a dollar a day. Increased access to family planning will make it easier for countries with rapidly growing populations to expand education. Education, in turn, particularly of women, makes an important contribution to fertility decline and a crucial contribution to development. However, rapidly growing countries cannot always expand education fast enough to keep pace with the growing number of children each year.

The coming decade should be dedicated to the needs of the one billion young people aged 15–24 in the world, the majority living in low-income settings with limited educational and employment opportunities. Every young person should have full access to contraception and the knowledge of how to use it. The burden of ill health associated with unsafe abortion must be confronted, especially among young

One contribution of 14 to a Theme Issue 'The impact of population growth on tomorrow's world'.

people who are often most vulnerable to unintended pregnancy.

The unmet need for contraception in low-income countries is calculated to increase from 525 million couples in 2000 to 742 million by 2015. It is essential that national leaders and international donors, especially the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, understand the imperative to invest in education and improved access to family planning.

All women should be protected from unintended childbirth. Making every birth a wanted birth is a goal that can be approached through improved access to family planning.

Reaching this goal is vital to creating a healthier and more equitable world.

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