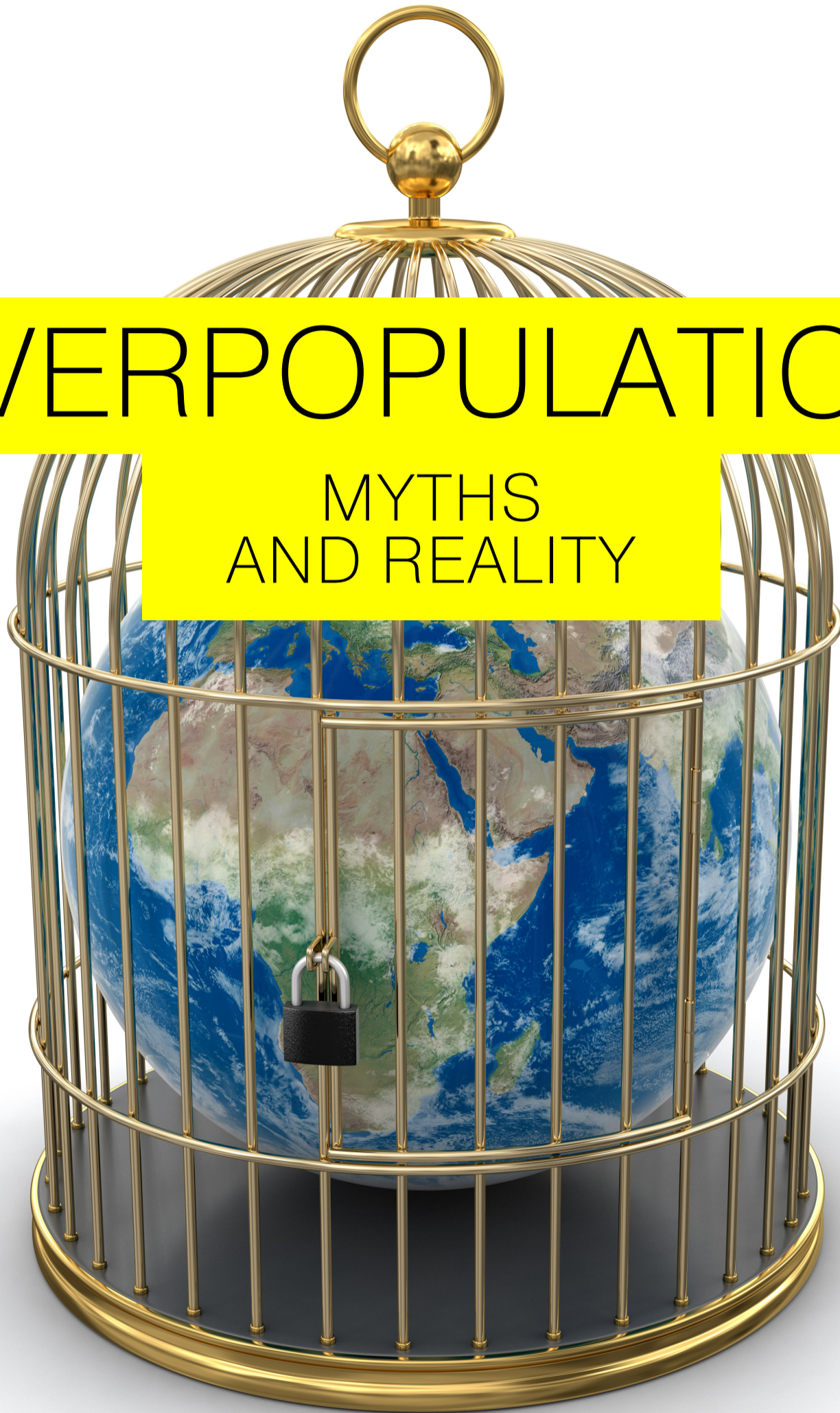


OVERPOPULATION:

MYTHS
AND REALITY



Text: Olga Irisova

OVER THE PAST 54 YEARS, THE EARTH'S POPULATION HAS MORE THAN DOUBLED, AND ACCORDING TO A RECENT UN REPORT, THE NEXT 12 YEARS PROMISE A NEW WAVE OF GROWTH. BY 2050, THE UN FORECASTS THAT THERE WILL BE 9.6 BILLION PEOPLE ON THE PLANET, LEADING TO A RAPID DEPLETION OF EARTH'S CAPACITIES, FROM ENERGY SOURCES TO FRESHWATER RESERVES. YET THE BIRTHRATE HAS BEGUN FALLING OVER THE PAST DECADE, NOT JUST IN DEVELOPED WESTERN COUNTRIES, BUT IN DEVELOPING ASIAN COUNTRIES AS WELL. THIS HAS LED NOT A FEW SKEPTICS TO BELIEVE THAT THE POPULATION COULD EVEN SHRINK IN THE FUTURE. SO WHAT IS OVERPOPULATION: A MYTH OR A REALITY THAT THREATENS US?



In 1804, just under a billion people inhabited the Earth, and it took 123 years for this figure to double, reaching 2 billion in 1927. From there, the growth skyrocketed: By 1959, the population had risen to 3 billion, and by 1974 to 4 billion. In 1987, the planet was home to 5 billion people, and in 1998, 6 billion. In just 15 years to the present day, the population has reached 7.2 billion. Many experts are forecasting continued exponential population growth, eventually leading to a shortage of resources and food to maintain normal sustenance for the entire human population.

95%

EXPERTS ARE 95% CONFIDENT THAT TODAY'S POPULATION LEVELS ARE ALREADY LEADING TO EARTH'S DEPLETION

On September 30,

the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change published a report stating that experts are 95% confident that today's population levels are already leading to Earth's depletion. Given the 2050 forecasts of the population reaching 9.6 billion, it seems that by the end of the century, about 20% of the Earth will experience a shortage of food and freshwater. But the International Water Management Institute has estimated that by 2025, approximately 1.8 billion people will live in places where there is a deficit of freshwater.

In reality, however, the population growth figures could turn out to be much higher or lower, depending on a number of factors such as access to birth control, infant mortality, and life expectancy, which has risen from 48 in 1950 to 69 today.

The global average fertility rate (number of children per woman) is currently 2.5. Demographers say that the replacement fertility rate is 2.2, but in poor countries it is a bit higher, given the high mortality among children and teenagers and the large number of deaths in childbirth. So as it turns out, the actual global average is only slightly higher than the replacement fertility rate, which suggests rather moderate growth on a global scale. However, in poor countries, the birthrate is significantly higher at 4.4, while in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) it is 5.2. Exponential growth is thus only being observed in the poorest parts of the world. The scatter of the fertility figures is truly staggering and ranges from a minimum of 1.2 in Bosnia and Herzegovina to a maximum of 7.6 in Niger.



TOP 50

of the most populated countries



| | | | | |
|---|---|---|--|---|
| CHINA 1.360.680.000 10.25.2013 | MEXICO 118.395.054 08.01.2013 | FRANCE 65.776.000 09.01.2013 | KENYA 44.354.000 08.01.2013 | UZBEKISTAN 30.183.400 08.01.2013 |
| INDIA 1.235.570.000 10.25.2013 | PHILIPPINES 98.551.000 10.25.2013 | UNITED KINGDOM 63.705.000 08.01.2012 | ARGENTINA 40.117.096 10.27.2010 | MALAYSIA 29.791.300 10.25.2013 |
| UNITED STATES 316.929.000 10.25.2013 | VIETNAM 88.780.000 08.01.2012 | ITALY 59.772.978 04.30.2013 | POLAND 38.533.299 12.31.2012 | SAUDI ARABIA 29.195.895 08.01.2012 |
| INDONESIA 237.641.326 05.01.2010 | ETHIOPIA 86.613.986 08.01.2013 | BURMA 53.259.000 08.01.2013 | SUDAN 37.964.000 08.01.2013 | VENEZUELA 28.946.101 10.30.2011 |
| BRAZIL 201.032.714 07.01.2013 | EGYPT 83.661.000 01.01.2013 | SOUTH AFRICA 52.981.991 JULY 1. 2013 | ALGERIA 37.900.000 01.01.2013 | NEPAL 26.494.504 08.22.2011 |
| PAKISTAN 184.607.000 10.25.2013 | GERMANY 80.523.700 12.31.2012 | SOUTH KOREA 50.219.669 08.01.2013 | UGANDA 35.357.000 08.01.2013 | AFGHANISTAN 25.500.100 JANUARY 1. 2013 |
| NIGERIA 173.615.000 07.01.2013 | IRAN 77.002.000 10.25.2013 | COLOMBIA 47.292.000 10.25.2013 | CANADA 35.158.304 08.01.2013 | NORTH KOREA 24.895.000 08.01.2013 |
| BANGLADESH 152.518.015 07.16.2013 | TURKEY 75.627.384 12.31.2012 | SPAIN 46.704.314 01.01.2013 | IRAQ 34.035.000 08.01.2012 | GHANA 24.658.823 09.26.2010 |
| RUSSIA 143.500.000 08.01.2013 | DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO 67.514.000 08.01.2013 | UKRAINE 45.469.812 08.01.2013 | MOROCCO 33.062.500 10.25.2013 | YEMEN 24.527.000 08.01.2012 |
| JAPAN 127.300.000 10.01.2013 | THAILAND 65.926.261 09.01.2010 | TANZANIA 44.928.923 08.26.2012 | PERU 30.475.144 08.30.2013 | MOZAMBIQUE 23.700.715 08.01.2012 |

According to the ^{U.S. Popu-} ^{lation Ref-}
 erence Bureau, 1.2 billion people live in developed countries today, and 5.9 billion in less-developed countries. By 2050, this ratio will change to 1.3 billion versus 8.4 billion. That means that by 2050, about 86% of the Earth's population will be living in developing and third world countries.

But the highest fertility rates today are in countries with the lowest GDP per capita. The highest birthrates remain in Burundi, Uganda, and the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa, which remain in extreme poverty. The population of the region today is approximately 900 million, and at the current rate, that number could grow to 2 billion in the next 40 years. As the African governments aren't able to provide employment and adequate social support to the majority of their citizens, poverty in SSA will only worsen as the population grows.

It is also important to account for the high rates of urbanization across the board, which experts expect will contribute to urban areas doubling in size by 2050. In other words, 10-15% of the planet used today for agrarian purposes will be given over to cities, which will naturally reduce the area of agricultural lands globally.

86%

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Robert Walker, President of the Washington, D.C.-based Population Institute, told WEJ:

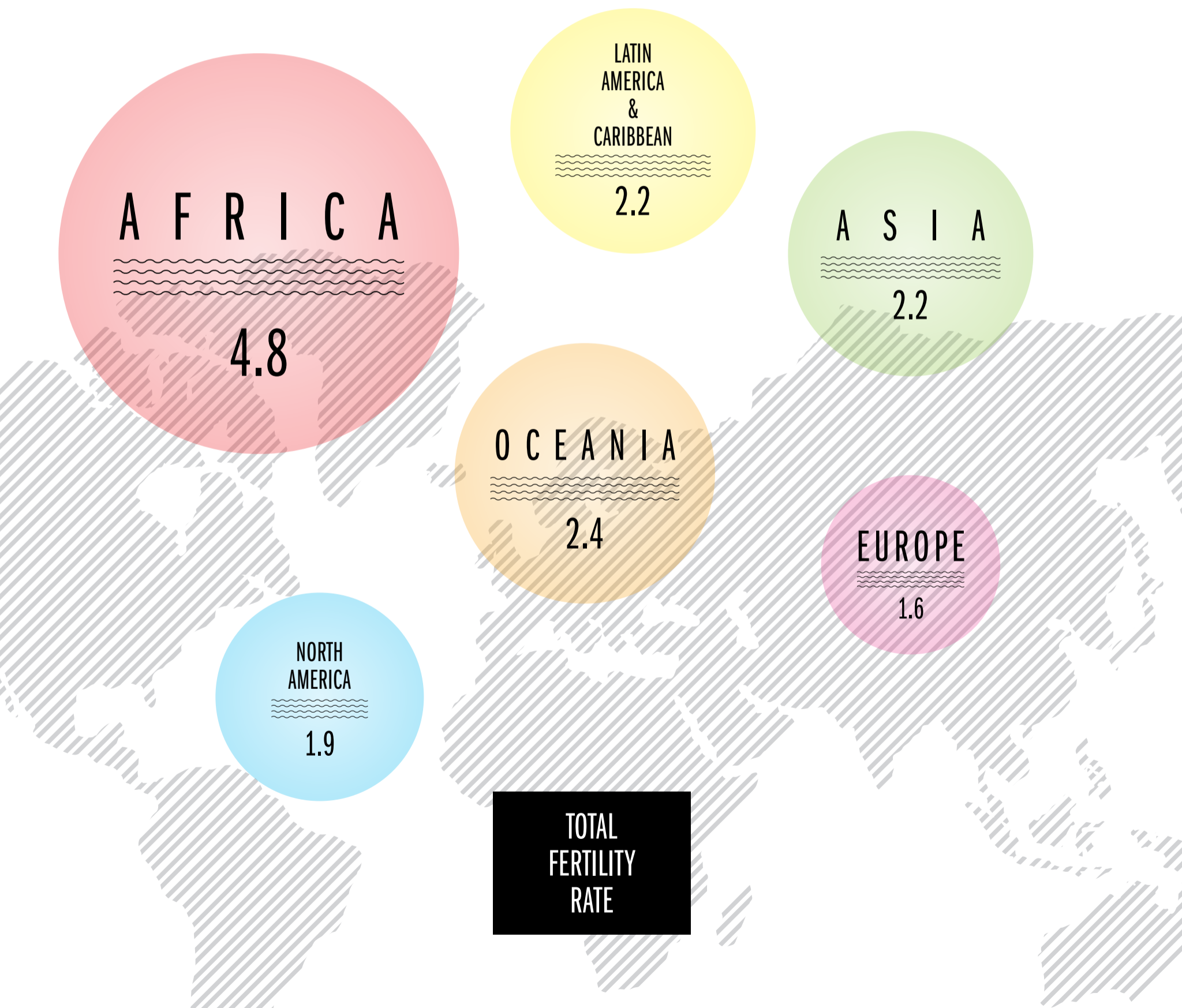


“No one knows whether the farms will be able to feed an additional 2.4 billion people by the middle of the century, or almost 4 billion by the end of the century. Already, farmers are faced with numerous difficulties in expanding food production, and in the future, growing crops will be further complicated by a shortage of arable land, reduced topsoil, growing water scarcity, rising costs of fertilizer and fuel, and the effects of climate change.”

Many countries are very concerned about the rapid pace of population growth and the fact that in the future, they will be unable to maintain normal levels of functioning to the proliferating community, or provide people with jobs, places of study, food, and housing. That is why some developing countries at the end of the 20th century already launched state programs to keep the birthrate in check. Most of them were crowned with such success that instead of concerns about overpopulation, the governments of these countries are now more worried with the drastic drop in the birthrate and the gradual aging of the population.

For example, in the 1970s, the average birthrate in China stood at five or six children per woman. Today, that figure has fallen to 1.5, which is significantly lower than the replacement fertility rate of 2.1. The Chinese government has three decades of policies that controlled the birthrate to thank for such a rapid decline in the birthrate. In the media, it was nicknamed the “one-child policy,” and it can be summarized as follows: Strict family planning norms were put in place at the government level, which limited city families to no more than one child, while in rural ar-

as a maximum of two were allowed. Over the course of its history, beginning in 1979, the Chinese policy of population control has claimed the lives of nearly 400 million children, as forced abortions and sterilization were often implemented.

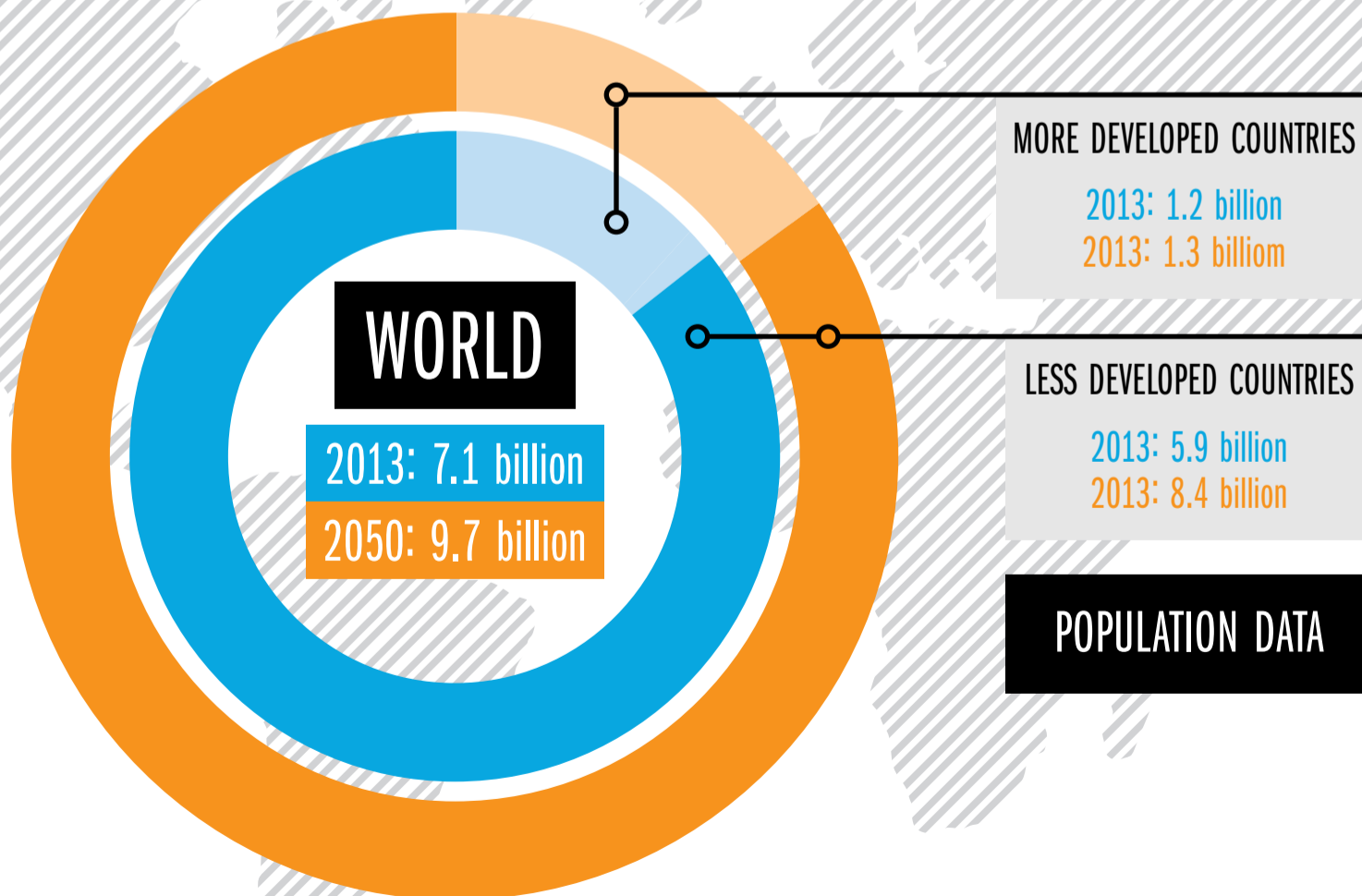


Steven Mosher,

President of the Population Research Institute, talked to WEJ about other state programs that place controls on the birthrate:



“In Uzbekistan, there are currently monthly sterilization quotas that health officials have to implement. This is, of course, done in an effort to limit births. In practice, implementing the quota leads to forced sterilizations. A program to curb the birthrate in Iran was so “successful” that former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad even tried to reverse it. Iran’s birthrate fell from 7 children per woman in 1980 to 1.86 children today. This is the fastest decrease in birthrate ever recorded. And it all happened as a result of a sterilization campaign that was promoted by the religious mullahs. And so today in Iran the birthrate is lower than the population reproduction figure. If you have undergone a vasectomy or tubal ligation, the effects are irreversible and you will never be able to have children. Besides Iran, Peru also has a long history of birth control programs.”



As a result, thanks to a stabilization of the population growth rate in the Asia-Pacific region, the percentage of undernourished people has fallen from 23.7% to 13.9%, alongside a general increase in welfare and improved education, housing, and health care.

Contrived Problems and an “Aging” Europe

While the population is increasing, the rate of growth has slowed. Demographers say that the current birthrate in India of 2.6 children should fall to 2.1 by 2025 and to 1.8 by 2035. Similar dynamics will be typical for other developing countries beyond Sub-Saharan Africa. Meanwhile, the populations of Europe, Russia, and most of the Latin American countries are gradually aging.

For example, in 1980, the average age in Western Europe was 34, but by 2030 that will have increased to 47 according to the UN’s Population Division, indicating a gradual decline in the number of working-age people. Europe’s population by 2050 will decline by 14 million. Fertility in France, Scandinavia, and the UK currently stands at 1.9, which is much less than in the U.S., with 2.1. In Italy and other Mediterranean countries, the rate is even lower. Whereas the situation could

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be considered complex in Northern Europe, the rest of Europe doesn’t have any positive prospects whatsoever. The relatively high birthrate in Northern Europe will at least maintain zero growth in the workforce until 2050, but the working-age population in Mediterranean countries will decline by 22% and in Germany and Cen-

tral Europe by 29%. This trend will certainly increase the tax burden on the working population to support social protections for retired people at the current level. We are of course talking about the natural increase in the population, without considering migration.



“Population growth is slowing almost everywhere, not just in Europe, in some places, the changes are already negative. In most of Europe and several Asian countries, the population is aging. In Japan, for example, the demographic decline has been going on for two decades, as a direct result of the decrease in births. Since Japan’s population is aging rapidly, the problems will only get worse. This trend of declining births could partially worsen the economic crisis, but the economy actually isn’t the main reason for the fall in births. In fact, as a country develops and the well-being of a population grows, fertility falls. The standard of living improves, life expectancy increases, and there are fewer deaths. Soon after, the birthrate starts falling. The major reason for the continuing high rates in Africa is that the mortality rate across the continent is still high.”

– comments Moshier.

It is also entirely possible that the latest UN forecasts are greatly exaggerated. An analysis of demographic trends done by Deutsche Bank showed that population growth is likely to be much slower than what the UN is predicting. According to this forecast, global births will fall to the level of replacement in fewer than 15 years. The population could continue to grow for the next several decades, but this is due to longer life expectancy rather than

an increased birthrate. In general, Deutsche Bank experts believe that the world population will reach its peak of 8.7 billion people around 2055 and fall to 8 billion by the end of the century.



“Overpopulation is a myth. Most people who believe in overpopulation live in cities, which by definition are large crowds of people. Much of what has been mistakenly called ‘overpopulation’ is actually urban poverty. Photos of overcrowded streets only illustrate the overcrowding of a particular space. The world is still mostly covered with large swaths of empty places. Look at Russia, for example, with its millions of acres of wild, untouched nature.”

– Mosher believes that. **WEJ**



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