



Be prepared

As the world population expands, the concerns of the poor should not be ignored

Turmoil in the world's financial markets understandably worries western investors more than the news that the global population is set to top seven billion. Yet the significance of this milestone cannot be ignored.

The implications of a world with another billion citizens – the six-billion mark was passed only 13 years ago – are both challenging and complex. The parts of the world that account for less than one fifth of global economic output will see 73 per cent of the world's expected population increase by 2050. This includes Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Iraq, Nigeria and Pakistan.

This means that, in the absence of vigorous economic growth in the periphery of the world economy, an even larger number of people will be faced with inadequate nutrition, poor housing and a lack of access to healthcare, education, water and energy. The challenges this presents will not be restricted to the developing world, as rising inequality, aggravated by the likely consequences of climate change, is likely to lead to a rise in forced migration, potentially fanning regional tensions and increasing threats to global security.

Optimists note that population growth in developing coun-

tries, such as Brazil, has slowed significantly as their economies have grown. A “demographic bonus” has also been created in those developing economies with large populations in the economically active 15-64 age group. During the next 20 years, more than 60 per cent of the world's population will live in countries where two-thirds of the inhabitants are in that age group, including India, Indonesia, Mexico and Vietnam. It

is no coincidence that these are the countries where economic growth is forecast.

The demographic bonus is, however, a one-time opportunity. Globally, the percentage of

Worldwide, the percentage of people aged between 15 and 64 will start declining in 2015

people aged between 15 and 64 will start declining in 2015; in more developed countries, that decline has already begun. Worldwide, people over the age of 80 are the fastest-growing group. Supportive policies are needed soon.

This does not mean that we should ignore issues concerning young people. Youth unemployment is unacceptably high in many countries. Indeed, young people's longing for better lives was

the driving force behind the Arab spring. In most developing countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, the number of young people is growing very fast, putting enormous pressure on governments to make urgent investments in health and education.

In particular, increasing the resources to deal with the unmet need for reproductive health care, including voluntary family planning, is essential, together with measures to increase girls' education and women's empowerment. This will help to slow world population growth. There is considerable evidence that the protection of reproductive rights and access to reproductive healthcare are key factors in economic development and poverty reduction.

The scale of the global population challenge is such that the issue is increasingly playing a role in almost all policy sectors. Yet, even as new challenges are added, the old ones remain. Unless rights-based government efforts to deal with population growth in developing countries are enhanced, continued high growth rates are likely, threatening prospects for development.

This must include, of course, the right to freely decide the number and spacing of one's children. This is the best way forward for everyone, in developed and developing countries alike. ■

The writer is the executive director of the United Nations Population Fund

Baby grow: greater access to family planning is needed

