

Looking Beyond A Seven Billion Population – Excitement or Trepidations?

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Prior to the industrial revolution, the world's population increase was hardly noticeable, and growth was slow owing to outbreaks of plague and other infectious diseases. It reached approximately 375 million only around 1400 A.D¹. After that the population grew steadily at an average rate of only around 0.5% to its first billion in the 1800s. With the subsequent steady increases in the growth rate to 2.6%, it is generally believed that the world population reached 2 billion in 1927, 3 billion 33 years later in 1960, 4 billion just 14 years later in 1974, 5 billion 13 years later (1987), 6 billion 12 years later in 1999 and 7 billion this year also 12 years later¹.

As the world's population crosses the seven billion mark, some will welcome this event as yet another significant historical landmark for mankind. Some countries have chosen to mark the event by symbolically highlighting an infant coincidentally born on the day the world population was presumed to have crossed the seven billion mark. Yet others view the event with trepidations as to the serious implications this poses for the future of planet earth in general and many countries in particular.

The time taken to double the world population has been shrinking and has been attributed to the effects of demographic transition, with mortality rates declining, changes in fertility patterns, control of infectious diseases, socioeconomic development, environmental and quality of life improvements, consequent expansion in life expectancies and numerous other changes that countries around the world were experiencing. However these changes were not uniformly experienced. Some countries in Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Latin America, that have seen their population numbers expanding by between 32 to 58% during the period 1990 to 2009². Countries such as Chad, Ethiopia, Cambodia, Vietnam to name a few, have found these increasing numbers straining their available resources.

On the other hand some have viewed the growing world population numbers as exciting and creating a growing base of consumers - a form of wealth creation. It is true socioeconomic development is apparent in China. However, one cannot deny the negative impact of this exponential world population growth and view it with concern. The concerns here have primarily been with the impact of overpopulation on the limited often finite resources that a country may have. These include among others water supply, food, fuel, employment and housing etc.

Apart from this there are concerns as to the effects of a rapid population expansion on educational opportunities and health. For the health sector, more hospitals, clinics and health facilities equipped with appropriate equipment and services, together with additional trained medical personnel of doctors, dentists, and allied health personnel would be needed. Support services and additional laboratories with relevant and current equipment would also have to be provided placing additional cost demands on governments.

One other outcome that cannot be ignored will be the phenomenon of ageing that many countries, including Malaysia will have to face consequent to population growth with enhanced life expectancy. This is already having impacts on Asian countries like China, Japan and Korea that is impacting the health care services, housing, recreational sectors etc.

It is widely recognised that the elderly face multiple health problems that are non-communicable, degenerative and debilitating in nature. These problems require long term care, expensive resources, and adequate supportive equipment and services. Consequently the concept of compression of morbidity is more vital now than ever before as are also health promotion and wellness initiatives that target individuals from 'womb to tomb'. The concerns would be about how to keep our ageing population healthy as long as possible so that the period of morbidity that they experience is limited to the least possible period. Disability free years including disability adjusted life years need to be paid attention to. Malaysia in recognising the challenges of an aging population has a national policy on caring for the elderly in place since the mid-90s and efforts have been underway to meet these challenges in the future. The concern here would be as to whether these are adequate and accessible to those who need them most and how much of the future needs are being recognised and being planned for. The problem of ageing and its impact on society and Malaysia's resources cannot be ignored nor given a lesser priority on the assumption that there is time to handle this problem. It cannot be denied that the elderly themselves need to be empowered to keep healthy and contribute economically in tangible and non-tangible ways for the benefit of society and the nation. The national association of senior citizens of Malaysia (NASCOM) need to continue to play an important advocacy role so that the various Government agencies and Ministries play a more proactive role to ensure that the nation pays attention to the well-being and health of the elderly

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from an early age. The Ministry of Health needs to continue to play a leadership role in mobilising and strengthening intersectoral collaboration for the benefit of the health of Malaysia's ageing population. We need to pay close attention to the experiences of countries such as Japan, China and even our neighbours Singapore as to how they are handling similar issues to review our current approaches and develop a model that suits us best.

Malaysia's growing population is unlikely to slow down and the projected increases will take place. The current estimated population of 28.7 million in 2011 is projected to increase to 32.6 million in 2020 and 42.9 million by 2050³. Certain problems that may not appear to be of significance because of low percentage of occurrence may yet be economically of concern by virtue of the large absolute numbers that occur due to the rapidly growing population. Thus we need not wait for the proportions to become large enough before reacting with preventive and promotive efforts but rather address these earlier when the absolute numbers are rapidly increasing.

There is a growing recognition also that some countries are experiencing population growth as a result of increasing immigration. Though available statistics do not indicate that immigration presently contributes to Malaysia's population growth, the immigrants coming to this country as those to

other countries could bring in health related problems that need attention so that new diseases are not introduced nor social and cultural issues cause problems. Behavioural and psychosocial issues are likely to be of concern and these too will have to be addressed.

Yet there are other concerns that need to be addressed. These would include coping with mental health problems, dementia, Alzheimer's disease, stress, increasing numbers of lessor abled individuals and those with learning disabilities, and environmental concerns. Are appropriate programmes being put in place to address these? Are adequate resources being planned for to meet the effects of these concerns. A balanced long term approach to these needs to be taken if the quality of life of a nation's current and future generations is to be enhanced and maintained.

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