

Claims about the decline of the West are 'exaggerated'

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A new paper by Oxford researchers argues that some countries in Western Europe, and the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand now have birth rates that are now relatively close to replacement, that the underlying trend in Europe is upwards, and that population ageing, although inevitable, is likely to be 'manageable'.

The publication in the journal, *Population Studies*, by Professor David Coleman and Associate Professor Stuart Basten, provides a more optimistic demographic picture of the future in the West, in contrast to the commonly accepted narrative. Much has been written about the Death of the West: how declining [birth rates](#), falling populations, and [population](#) ageing will reduce Europe and end the supremacy of the US while Asian superpowers, such as China and India, see their economies grow to match their huge populations.

The authors say while the West and the English speaking world will have to accept some 'painful adjustments', the population time-bomb scenario is simply wrong. It points out that although the Western economies have difficulties with the rising costs of pension entitlement for its ageing populations, societies are adapting through increases in retirement age and other measures. Countries in the developing world, however, are facing a variety of different challenges. It argues that these have been understated; in some cases persistent substantial population growth, in others rapid fertility decline leading to severe levels of population ageing. In many of these societies, political and social instability makes adjustment difficult.

On the other hand, many [countries](#) in Western Europe have reasonably favourable demographic trends that are 'more stable and sustainable than supposed' (with total fertility rates between 1.8-2.1). In countries such as the UK, robust birth rates combined with record immigration ensure that population decline is not on the agenda and indeed that [population growth](#) has become a problem, argues the paper. Western countries, for all their difficulties, benefit from established civil society, functioning democracy, the rule of law, relatively high levels of trust in political institutions, and some degree of equality between the sexes, it suggests.

By contrast, half the world's populations now live in countries where the birth rate is below replacement, including Brazil, Iran, Turkey and the southern half of India, says the paper. It suggests Brazil, Iran, Thailand and Indonesia may face decades of below replacement fertility, an experience already familiar to China. It says the birth rates may fall in many of these populations to a level lower than that in much of Europe and the USA, because of the slow pace of change of traditional patriarchal society and the sexual inequality that goes with it. That may lead to substantial population ageing before the economy becomes mature enough to support its [ageing population](#).

The paper adds that other countries with large populations or rapid demographic change will experience particular problems as they are likely to have to deal with a deteriorating environment brought on by climate change. India's growing population, soon to become the biggest in the world, faces challenges of resource sustainability made worse by its vulnerability to climate change, the paper argues. Fast developing countries with rapidly falling fertility rates also face the prospect of having to support a faster ageing population, becoming old before they are rich. Other problems are more cultural and institutional, it says, as few of these countries are developed democracies with high quality justice systems and civil society, and pervasive corruption threatens their political stability. The paper argues that these factors hamper the ability

of countries to react to demographic change.

Co-author Professor David Coleman from the University of Oxford said: 'Much has been written about the 'Death of the West', with its threatened demise reportedly due to the low level of reproduction in Western countries. We show that this so-called decline has been exaggerated and trends in European fertility have been misunderstood. With immigration, [fertility rates](#) have gone up in many European and English-speaking countries. India and China and other fast growing economies have their problems too. Fast rising populations in developing economies do not equate with future success as demographic changes are difficult to absorb if they happen too rapidly. Countries with mature social and political systems will find such transitions easier to bear.'

Co-author and Associate Professor Stuart Basten said: 'Many commentators focus on China as the future global superpower - ever growing in economic and political stature. However, China risks falling into a low-fertility trap coupled with severe levels of [population ageing](#). Even when allowed two children, couples prefer one child, with my research showing that this attitude has been reinforced by the urban conditions that families are forced to adjust to and policies that are not family-friendly. Both East and West have their separate different challenges which may mean painful periods of adjustment for everyone concerned.'

The paper is one of a series on demography in a special supplement, 'Population-The Long View', in the journal, *Population Studies*. The supplement has been guest edited by Professor David Coleman, Professor Francesco Billari and Associate Professor Stuart Basten, who are all from the University of Oxford.

Provided by Oxford University

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