

Ask the experts: The world's population just hit eight billion. What now?

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On November 15, the world's population surpassed 8 billion people—or at least, it very likely did as global population is an estimate. That's 2 billion more people on Earth than in 1999 when the population hit 6 billion and 4 billion more than in 1974.

While this milestone is a testament to human achievement and progress, it also brings with it increased concern about whether the Earth can sustain so many people.

To help understand how we hit this milestone and what it means for global sustainability, we reached out to some of Dal's experts on population, economic growth and international development, including Dr. Talan Iscan and Dr. Mrityika Shamsuddin with the Department of Economics and Dr. Robert Huish with the Department of International Development Studies.

What does it mean to surpass a population of 8 billion people?

Dr. Shamsuddin: 8 billion is just a number. Ten years ago, it was 7 billion. Humankind has made tremendous progress with more and more people coming out of poverty and hunger in the midst of population growth. We need population growth for labor and human capital, to ensure there is revenue to finance government expenditures. Population growth also means that there is higher demand for the goods, which signals producers to produce more and increase productivity which leads to innovation. However, rapid population growth might lead to congestion, depletion of non-renewable resources, deforestation, pollution and hence global warming. It also means that there are more resources needed to ensure access to health care, education and other essential services.

Dr. Huish: Broadly speaking this is a product of the [global population](#) living longer. That comes from big gains in population health and nutrition, along with deep cuts in infant and maternal health. So, in many ways this stands out as an impressive period of international development and global health, but it does not necessarily account for

the increasingly stark inequalities that also go along with an era where 8 billion people are on the planet. We're living in an era where the Gross Domestic product per capita of Luxemburg is \$118,000, but it is only \$728 in Burundi. Likewise, Japan boasts an impressive 85.1 years of life expectancy. Meanwhile it is only 52.6 years in Lesotho.

Dr. Iscan: The relationship between population growth and the economy is highly complex. However, we know that as long as there are opportunities and jobs, a [growing population](#) increases the economic output of a region (or its gross domestic product). Of course, our current economic system is also built on massive inequalities and historical injustices, such as colonization of cultures and peoples. The question is not whether we should make changes to our ways of living in affluent societies but when. If we hesitate and postpone, the planet will dictate to us when and how this will happen. Economics tells us that it is better to be in the driver's seat and be cautious, rather than be spendthrift and vulnerable.

Will rapid population growth come to an end?

Dr. Iscan: Our societies have come a long way in reducing child mortality and extending life expectancy at birth. These have initially contributed to rising populations worldwide. Our societies have also come a long way in extending social-safety nets for our elderly and reducing the demand for manual labor on farms and beyond, both driven by many [economic factors](#). In a way, as urbanization rates increase and social safety nets that were only available through extended family networks become weaker or replaced, the "demand for children" declines. All these factors have lately contributed to declining population growth rates worldwide, and these population trends appear to be irreversible, at least in the foreseeable future.

Dr. Shamsuddin: It is important to note that the countries we call

developed now had a high population growth when they were growing. Think about the industrial revolution. Low population growth may not be always conducive to [economic growth](#) because that society may find itself with an aging population. An example is the baby boomers in Nova Scotia. Population growth ensures that there are enough children today who will grow up to be tomorrow's workforce.

Dr. Huish: The next pockets of population growth will mostly be in eight countries: Ethiopia, Egypt, Nigeria, Tanzania, the D.R.C., Philippines, Pakistan and India. China, Japan, the United States, and Europe are expected to see sharp declines in birth rates. What this means is that we're not facing an era of population catastrophe that some fear mongers had speculated. Rather, we're living in an era of catastrophic inequalities that continue to exist on scales never before seen in history. It suggests that even though there's more people on the planet than ever before, the human experience on this planet is drastically different, even though on the whole, we're living longer and getting healthier.

How can 8 billion humans (and counting) live within planetary boundaries and what types of changes do we have to make?

Dr. Huish: There is plenty of food, technology, resources and money to sustain the global population onwards to 9 billion. But the patterns that we have put in place of using fossil fuels for 80 percent of our energy production need to change drastically. We also have to realize that global crisis, be it from climate, conflict, or pandemics, will have quick global impacts across the 8 billion. How societies find resilience to these crises will be the big question. Wealthier nations will continue to maneuver these challenges easier than poorer nations, and it may well be that nations will continue to see this era as one of competition for that ability to maneuver, rather than as an era of cooperation to say that we're all in

these challenges together.

Dr. Iscan: While national [population growth](#) rates are declining, the global population is not expected to stop growing until sometime in the middle of this century. So, the challenge ahead is to rethink how we count and value our economic and social output, how we reorient our consumption and production so that we produce and consume what really matters for us in a sustainable fashion, and how we distribute this production to everyone in a just and equitable way. Our current economic system is built on extractive principles and puts a lot of economic value on consumption, no matter how wasteful or mindless it can be—think of mega yachts, like the 126-meter Octopus, which sold for US\$294-million dollars (\$391-million Canadian) just this September. There is however a growing consensus among economists that we are not counting the things we produce and consume the right way, like putting too little cost on pollution and carbon emissions and putting no value on those things that we actually care about, like our relationships with friends, family, nature, and the (bio)diversity around us.

Dr. Shamsuddin: Technological breakthroughs have been instrumental, but it is of paramount importance that production and consumption becomes responsible regarding the environment. The good thing is the changes we need are quite straightforward. We need to walk or bike, reuse and recycle, we as individuals can play a big role.

Dr. Huish: The important take away here is that as more and more people occupy this world, the role of social inequalities are going to continue to be biggest factor going forward with politics, economics, and even the security of democracies altogether. Every nation is going to struggle to provide equitable social supports for its citizenry going forward, and it will continue to be a challenge as enormous volumes of wealth are disproportionately harbored in the hands of a few. Since the pandemic began the 10 richest men on earth effectively doubled their

wealth. And the world's richest 22 men have more wealth than all women in the African continent. It is staggering to think that so much wealth is in the hands of so few. Even though we've passed a population milestone, it does little to change the habits of that stark inequality.

Provided by Dalhousie University

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