second opinion

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Welcome number six billion — and good luck if you're African

IT IS a milestone we've reached quietly, without the fanfare that heralds the passing of 2 000 years. But it is a milestone that is infinitely more significant; measuring not the artificial construct of the calendar but rather the extent of humanity and its extraordinary self-destructive success. Six billion is a prologue to devastation, a foretaste of more suffering to come. Six billion means 6 000 000 000 inhabitants of our crowded, lonely planet.

The United Nations projects the six billionth human will be born on Tuesday. What kind of world will it grow up in?

One of nearly three human beings born worldwide every second, the six billionth baby joins 230 000 newborns who will greet their first dawn that day.

It will inherit a world of paradoxes where sinking birth rates sit juxtaposed with record population growth and unprecedented harvests contrast with widespread hunger.

Perhaps most remarkable of all is the disparity of circumstances it could face.

Born a child of Africa, the six billionth human would have three or more siblings, might be one of the quarter under five suffering from malnutrition-related illness and, if it survived into adulthood, have a life expectancy of just 51 years. AIDS is the disease most likely to kill it.

If born into the developed world, however, the child would have just one sibling, live to 75 and be most liable to die from heart disease or another mainly First World affliction.

Such discrepancies are vast and disquieting — for, coupled with the population explosion, they pose fundamental questions about the future of humanity.

With around 12 percent of the world's inhabitants, and with growth rates that will double that figure by 2045, Africa's demographic future is most frightening of all. Some long-range projections predict that by 2150, a quarter of all humanity will be in Africa — and the highest growth rates are south of the Sahara. South Africa's population of close to 43 million is increasing by a moderate 1,4 percent annually, but at the present rate of 3,2 children a woman, that figure is set to rise. Nor will the country escape the deprivations of soaring population: by 2025, South Africa will be the only sub-Saharan country suffering from significant water scarcity. The environmental impacts for the continent and the rest of the world will be severe.

A recent UN report, GEO-2000, delivered a devastating assessment of the state of the planet. But what are global warming, chronic water shortages, destruction of tropical forest, degradation of soil and extinction of species if not manifestations of soaring population?

Global thirst and mass starvation have been predicted repeatedly. But each time supposed population saturation points are surpassed, these doomsday figures are revised upwards. It is impossible to calculate how many humans the planet can support, or how marginal a survival future billions will face.

Clearly, population explosion is exponential. At the present worldwide annual growth rate of 78 million, in 12 years we produce another billion. Humankind has multiplied from an estimated 300 million in AD1000 to one billion in 1804. The jump from one to six billion has taken less than 200 years. Four of those billions were born since 1927. So how many are too many, and where will this expansion end?

Agricultural production has a good record of keeping pace with hungry humanity, with global supply increasing more than demand over the past half century. The absurdity is inequality of distribution. Although on a worldwide average food security has improved, Africa again checks in with disaster statistics. The number of undernourished people here has nearly doubled since 1960 to 200 million five years ago. With greater numbers competing for food and water in the future, and with climate change wreaking havoc in some of the most fertile areas — as well as many of the poorest — the outlook is bleak.

Long-range population projections are difficult to make. Estimates of a global total range from 3,2 billion to 24,8 billion for the year 2150 with a medium scenario predicting 9,7 billion. Stabilisation could be reached at 10 billion in 2200. By that time, Africa will have 1,25 billion of its own. But with increasing knowledge and empowerment of women, the trend is towards smaller families worldwide. Few couples want to raise the large numbers that until recently they were resigned to. The keyword is no longer population control in the developing world by the developed. The buzzword, rather, is choice — and choice invariably means fewer offspring. In Bangladesh access to contraceptives has meant smaller families, richer lives — and a birth rate drop from 4,9 to 3,3 children per woman in a decade.

But not all population decline is welcome. AIDS is having a devastating toll, reducing life expectancy in the hardest-hit countries by a dramatic 17 years. With 22 million out of a global 30 million cases, Africa is bearing the brunt of the epidemic. In Botswana, one in four adults is infected. Worst of all, AIDS is killing the young and most economically productive — making Africa the only continent where poverty will rise in the next century.

Human fertility may eventually become limited by exposure to hazardous pollutants: pesticides implicated in birth defects and infertility already account for five million acute poisonings annually. We, as a species, may thus curb our own reproductive potential through the environmental impact of sheer biomass. Perhaps only this will ultimately ensure our survival.

On the cusp of the new millennium, then, we are confronted by stark realities. The urgent challenge is to reduce ignorance, eradicate helplessness and maximise informed reproductive choice. This should be the right of everyone. Population must be the issue of the next century. All is at stake here — our lives, our planet, our everything.

● *Mocatta is a freelance writer who spent 12 years in South Africa. She is based in Hobart, Tasmania — the island off Australia whose major problem is depopulation through economic migration to the mainland*