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STORY**



Crowded street in Hong Kong, China

## WORLD POPULATION REACHES SEVEN BILLION

On 31st October, somewhere in the world, a child was born who became the seven billionth human living on the Earth. A department of the United Nations (UN) that records the world population had worked out the day on which this event would happen some time ago.

The number of people in the world has been growing very quickly over the last 200 years. It was only 12 years ago, in October 1999, that the UN announced the population had reached six billion.

It's estimated to have taken about 250,000 years for the number of people living on the Earth to reach one billion, in the early 1800s. By 1927, roughly one hundred years later, the population had risen to two billion. The next billion took only 32 years. The population reached five billion in 1987, six billion 12 years later, and after another 12 years, seven billion.

However, the UN predicts it will be a bit longer – 14 years – before the eight billionth person is born. The next billion is expected to take around 18 years. The UN believes the total population will continue to increase until around 2050, when there will be 9.3 billion people living on the Earth. Then the UN expects the population will start to decrease.

If the UN is right, the increase in the world's population is already slowing down. So the time when it was increasing at its fastest was towards the end of the 1960s. There have been several reasons for the slow down. But the main one is a change in **fertility** rates. This is the average number of children each woman in the world has.

In the early 1970s the fertility rate was around 4.45. So it was not unusual for there to be at least four or five children in a family. Now the average worldwide

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fertility rate is about 2.52. In many countries it is even lower than this.

Of the world's seven billion people, about half now live in countries where the fertility rate is 2.1 or less. This, says the UN, is an important number. It's known as the replacement rate. If a country has a fertility rate of 2.1 or less, its population will start to decrease.

Several countries in Europe, including Russia, as well as Japan and South Korea, now worry that their populations may soon start to shrink. Many women in these countries choose to have no more than one child. Even some countries with populations that once grew very quickly are now below the replacement rate. Examples of these include Brazil, Tunisia and Thailand.

Some people say the recent drop in worldwide fertility rates is because more women now have access to [contraception](#). But many organisations say this isn't the main reason. They claim it has more to do with education and with where people live.

The UN figures show fertility rates decrease at the same time as the female literacy rate, or the number of women who are able to read and write, rises. Also, the more urbanised a country becomes, or the greater the number of people who live in towns and cities, the lower its fertility rate.

Around 60 years ago some people warned that because of the quickly rising world population there would not be enough food for everyone. They argued that there is only a certain amount of land that can be

used to grow food crops. Yet their predictions have not happened. So far enough food has been produced to feed everyone.

This is partly because farmers have been able to greatly increase the yield, or the amount of food grown on their land. Improved farm machinery and the use of chemicals and fertilizers have all helped to increased yields.

A good example of how the Green Revolution increased crop yields is India. Today the country has a population of around 1.2 billion (the second-highest after China, with 1.3 billion). Yet it is able to grow enough food for its population. India also sells some of the food it produces to other countries.

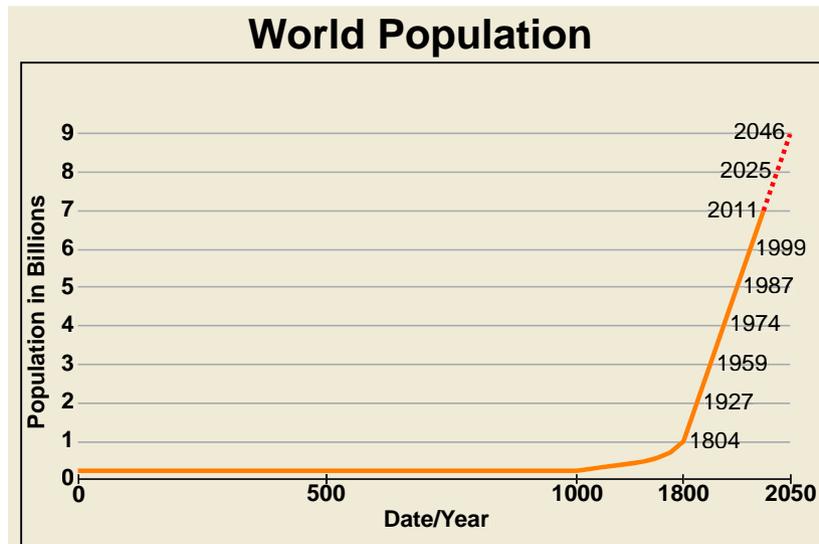
The UN figures say the world population will increase by at least another two billion – almost the combined current populations of China and India. Nearly all of this population growth will happen in Africa and parts of Asia. In these places, crop yields are much lower than in other areas of the world. There are also droughts and many types of pests and in-

sects, which can damage crops.

Many people therefore believe another 'Green Revolution' is needed. Some say genetically-modified (or GM) crops are the answer. Today scientists can quickly modify, or change, the genes of plants to make them produce more, grow with less water, or be [resistant](#) to pests.

Not everyone thinks GM crops are a good idea. Some believe that not enough research has been done into finding out if they damage other plants, or what effect they may have on people who eat them.

Others say there is nothing dangerous about GM crops. They are already used in many foods. These people insist that using GM crops will be the only way to stop the old predictions, about there being too many people in the world to feed, from coming true. ■



One of the main reasons, though, was the work of the American agricultural scientist Norman Borlaug (1914 – 2009). In the 1950s and 1960s Professor Borlaug managed to create new varieties of wheat and rice. He did this by making [hybrids](#) from different types of the same plant. Over many years, he succeeded in growing wheat plants that did not rot or fall over, and rice plants that produced more grains.

Professor Borlaug was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1970. He is often called the 'father of the Green Revolution'. His new plants were grown in many countries, including Mexico, India and Pakistan. Other scientists then used his methods to improve other types of crops. Many scientists say that Professor Borlaug's work saved millions of people from starvation.