

Population bomb: 9.3 billion by 2050

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Remember the population bomb? Years back it ticked in every American ear, but these days no one seems to hear it. Perhaps that's because U.S. fertility rates have dropped through the floor, and global rates have been cut in half in just three decades. So why can't we stop worrying the bomb might blow?

Not at all, says former Sen. Tim Wirth of Colorado, and he should know. Now president of the United Nations Foundation, Wirth spends a lot of time mulling the world's hard facts – and coaxing Americans to face them. Recently, he discussed the U.N. Population Fund's latest report, which highlights the link between global crowding and environmental ruin.

The recent fall in fertility rates is heartening, Wirth grants, but it's no reason to relax. The planet is already so packed that it can't afford even today's slower growth rates. In the next 50 years, world population will rise by almost half – from today's 6.1 billion to 9.3 billion. None of the increase will occur in the wealthy West. But over those five decades, the world's 48 poorest countries will triple in size.

So what will the world be like with 9.3 billion people on board – 85 percent of

them living in developing countries? The U.N. report offers an ominous portrait. By 2050, it says, nearly half the world's citizens will lack sufficient water for drinking, sanitation and cooking. If population growth continues to outpace food production, billions are sure to be hungry as well. The upsurge in greenhouse gases will turn up the global thermostat by nearly 43 degrees Fahrenheit – melting icecaps, flooding coastland, spurring storms and redrawing the resource map. The human clamor for survival will strip forests, destroy habitat and propel many species to extinction.

Don't imagine this calamity can be blamed on the developing world. Its prime culprits are the fat-and-happy TV-watchers here at home. These comfortable few may not be having lots of babies, but they're definitely doing lots of gobbling. Representing just one-fifth of the world's population, developed nations nevertheless account for more than 85 percent of total consumption. They're responsible for 65 percent of greenhouse-gas emissions— while the poorest 20 percent put out just 2 percent of the total. The destitute many thus subsidize the gluttonous few – while the planet suffers.

This is certainly cause for hand-wringing, but Wirth is more interested in world-saving. “We know what we have to do,” he says, “and in most cases we know

how to do it.” Some of the “how” involves nudging the world away from fossil fuels – a venture from which the treaty-shirking United States has been shamefully absent. Some of it involves ingenuity and resource-saving technology.

But the rest of the enterprise involves simple human decency. If we really want to save the world, Wirth observes, all we have to do is share.

With small splashes of cash, the world's wealthy can help the United Nations do its most important work: assuring that all children go to school, that all women have access to family-planning services, that all families have a livelihood. It may seem strange, but it's true: Investing in human happiness is the surest way to control population, protect the environment – and buy a better future for the planet.

What choice do we have but to buy, and what better time for the purchase? As Wirth insists, the time has plainly come: “The profound and important lesson that we must take from the horrific acts of Sept. 11th,” he says, “is that the future of America and all nations will be cut from the same cloth. No nation can wall itself off from the rest of the world. Global issues are not ‘over there’ and ‘later.’ They are ‘here’ and they are ‘now.’”

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