people, poverty & the environment

It's an impressive figure – 7 000 000 000 000 – and an alarming one when you consider that it represents the number of people in the world today. It's even more alarming when you also consider the effect of a growing human population on the planet and its dwindling resources. But, says **Ian Michler**, there's more to it than that.

IAN MICHLER

New housing blocks have sprung up in Nairobi, one of the fastest-growing urban centres in Africa.

AS YOU READ THIS, IN OCTOBER 2011, the world's population is set to pass the seven billion mark, according to the United Nations (UN) Population Division (*www.un.org/esa/population*). That makes for a density of just over 46 people for every square kilometre of habitable land on the planet.

With more than 1.33 billion citizens, China has the highest count. India comes next with 1.2 billion and the US a distant third with slightly more than 310 million. In Africa, Nigeria is the most heavily populated country with in excess of 150 million inhabitants, followed by Ethiopia with 82 million and Egypt close behind with just over 80 million.

To put the 2011 figure in perspective, it took until 1804 for the global population to reach one billion. The second billion was achieved by about 1930, and the third less than 30 years later. Incredibly, within four decades that figure had doubled: six billion by 1999.

Of even greater significance are the forecasts for the future. Based on current demographic trends, the number of people in the world is set to pass nine billion by 2050. Thereafter, the UN projects that growth will level off, or perhaps even begin to fall. If it doesn't, we could be looking at a global population in excess of 40 billion by 2100.

An analysis of the statistics is of little value if it does not embrace the environmental impact of an ever-increasing population. It was the Reverend Thomas Malthus who first raised such concerns in his *An Essay on the Principle of Population*; in 1798 he was already questioning whether the earth had the capacity to feed everyone. He also touched on an issue that has become the nub of current debates: whether continued population growth would lead to a rise in poverty levels. Little did he realise that by 2010 95 out of every 100 people born would come from countries in which poverty levels are high.

It is this statistic that frames the discussions of decision-makers today. It's true that overpopulation in the developing world has obvious environmental impacts, but is it not also true that overconsumption in the developed world poses the greater long-term threat to the planet? It's the 'your kids' versus 'my carbon footprint' shoot-out.

[Malthus] touched on an issue that has become the nub of current debates: whether continued population growth would lead to a rise in poverty levels

The overpopulation scenario is straightforward: the earth is already in resource overdraft (*www.footprintnetwork.org*) and every additional person pushes it further into the red. All the prime land has been utilised, which means that an already precarious situation is made worse as communities are forced to exploit marginal lands and waters to survive. According to WWF's 2010 Living Planet Report, 'Humanity uses the equivalent of 1.5 planets to provide the resources we use and absorb our waste.' In other words, it takes the earth one year and six months to regenerate what we use in a year.

For many policymakers, an even bigger issue is the identity of those responsible for the unsustainable use of resources. As it turns out, they are not the countries with the highest population growth rates. The culprits are the high-income, high-consumption nations of the world, where population growth has levelled off or is in decline.

With about four per cent of the global population, the US consumes approximately 25 per cent of the world's fossil fuels. The average footprint of a citizen of North America is equal to that of 250 Ethiopians. Carbon emissions are a commonly used marker, and according to *National Geographic* the one billion high-income earners in the world emit 13 tonnes of carbon per capita. By comparison, the approximately five billion people categorised as lower-middle to low-income earners produce four tonnes per capita.

There is a paradox in this debate that accentuates the difficulties faced by decision-makers. It is widely accepted that the most effective way to cut population growth is to reduce poverty. But there's a catch: reduce poverty and you boost consumption and waste levels. If poverty decreases on the scale proposed by the UN's Millennium Development Goals, there will be serious implications for the environment. We all need to accept responsibility to some degree and to aim for a reduction in poverty, the unsustainable use of resources and population growth, as they are inextricably linked. **AG**

Follow Ian's take on other environmental issues at www.africageographic.com/blogs/?cat=5