**It’s not overpopulation that causes climate change, it’s overconsumption**

Africa’s population growth is often linked to ecological risk – yet the real danger lies in the west’s infinite appetite for resources

[](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/sep/19/not-overpopulation-that-causes-climate-change-but-overconsumption%22%20%5Cl%20%22img-1)

 If the prediction of 11 billion is correct, will overpopulation be the driver of ecological apocalypse?

Fears about overpopulation, once the apocalyptic vision du jour, have disappeared from the headlines in recent years. The consensus had been that we can look forward to peak population by late this century – maybe at 9 or 10 billion, compared to the current 7 billion. The only question seemed to be precisely when and at what level. But a new forecast this week in the journal Science suggests this is complacent. It states that population is unlikely to peak at any time soon, and [that the century will close with a tally of 11 billion and rising](http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/sep/18/world-population-new-study-11bn-2100).

Is this right? And if so, should population resume the status it held half a century ago as the driver of ecological apocalypse? I think the answer to both questions is no. The new projections say more about the fevered presumptions of the forecasters than any change in demographics.

The debate about peak population is focused specifically on what we think will happen in sub-Saharan [Africa](http://www.theguardian.com/world/africa), where in some countries people still have five or more children.

[Population](http://www.theguardian.com/world/population) numbers in the rest of the world have been declining for years: the average woman in the world today has half as many children as her grandmother: 2.5 bouncing babies, compared to more than five back in the 1970s. In half the world today, the fertility rate is at the long-term replacement level of just over two, or lower. In countries like Britain, only migrants keep the numbers ticking up.

But the view as to what is happening in Africa is divided. Some demographers have assumed that the continent will eventually follow the Asian and Latin American path to small families. Asia’s population will be falling by mid-century, as even the new study agrees. This gloomier forecast relies on the presumption that fertility in Africa will defy the global trend and remain high. It assumes that sub-Saharan Africa will instead follow the path of Nigeria, where the country’s notoriously unreliable demographic data suggest that a decline in fertility has stalled at about five children.

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If that prognosis – based on dodgy data from one country – played out, the continent’s population could rise from a billion today to as much as five billion by 2100. This would be a dramatic and devastating reversal of recent trends. But it is also very unlikely.

Almost everywhere else on the continent, including the poorest countries, families have been getting smaller. In Kenya, for instance, women had eight children each a generation ago; today they have an average of 3.5.

This decline is especially marked as people move to cities, where extra children are a burden rather than a valuable source of farm labour. Teeming megacities may seem to us like a symbol of overpopulation, but in reality they are a powerful means to curb population growth.

More than that, Africans are learning what the rest of the world already largely knows. Thanks to the increasing eradication of childhood diseases, for the first time in human history most children now get to grow up. Even in Africa. When that happens, five or six children are unnecessary to create the next generation: two or three will do. And that is where Africa’s fertility is most likely headed. Just like most other countries.

Of course, you might argue the world is already overpopulated. Given the way we plunder its resources, that seems so. But why do we blame the poor in Africa for having babies when the real issue is overconsumption closer to home? It is the ravenous demands of the rich world that is enlarging the human footprint on our planet – pumping greenhouse gases into the air, polluting the oceans, trashing forests and the rest. Any further rise in numbers of poor people will barely figure in that.

That is not to say there aren’t local environmental crises caused in part by soaring population numbers, such as falling levels in water reservoirs. Nor that rising African numbers won’t complicate their efforts at economic development. But let’s not blame them for the state of the planet. That is down to us – the overconsumers, whose numbers are largely stable but whose appetites seem infinite.