

# **DEMOGRAPHIC DESTINIES**

## **Interviews with Presidents of the Population Association of America**

### **Interview with David Lam PAA President in 2011**



This series of interviews with Past PAA Presidents was initiated by Anders Lunde  
(PAA Historian, 1973 to 1982)

And continued by Jean van der Tak (PAA Historian, 1982 to 1994)

And then by John R. Weeks (PAA Historian, 1994 to present)

With the collaboration of the following members of the PAA History Committee:  
David Heer (2004 to 2007), Paul Demeny (2004 to 2012), Dennis Hodgson (2004 to  
present), Deborah McFarlane (2004 to 2018), Karen Hardee (2010 to present), Emily  
Merchant (2016 to present), and Win Brown (2018 to present)

## DAVID LAM

PAA President in 2011 (No. 74). On September 27th, 2022, we were able to have a Zoom interview with Dr. Lam. The members of the PAA History Committee participating in the interview included John Weeks, Dennis Hodgson, Karen Hardee, Emily Merchant and Win Brown.

**CAREER HIGHLIGHTS:** David Lam was born in Texas in 1952, but the family moved to Durango, Colorado shortly after that, and he grew up in Durango. After graduating from high school there, he went on to receive a bachelor's degree in Latin American Studies from Ft. Lewis College in Durango in 1976. He then received a master's degree in Latin American Studies from the University of Texas, Austin in 1978, and moved on the University of California at Berkeley, where he received an M.A. in Demography in 1982 and his Ph.D. in Economics in 1983. That same year, he became Assistant Professor of Economics at the University of Michigan, where he has been ever since, rising through the ranks to Full Professor, and Chairing the department from 2014-2015. He has been associated with the Population Studies Center at the University of Michigan since his arrival in Ann Arbor in 1983, and has had three different terms as Director of the Center. He has also directed the Michigan Center on the Demography of Aging and, most recently (2015-2021), he was Director of the Institute for Social Research at Michigan.

### OUR INTERVIEW WITH DR. LAM:

John Weeks: We're interviewing Professor David Lam, Professor of Economics at the University of Michigan, who was PAA President in 2011, and, in fact is, let me see, you were the 74th PAA President at that time.

David Lam: I don't think I knew that.

John Weeks: Yes. And I was going to ask you, you said that you're in Colorado, and I saw that, in fact, you got your undergraduate degree in Durango. Did you grow up in Colorado?

David Lam: Yes, and I'm back in Durango. Yes, my parents moved me to Durango when I was one year old, from West Texas. So, I grew up, went all the way through school here in this beautiful town of Durango in the southwest Colorado mountains. And my wife also grew up here, and so we have moved back. I'm still an Economics professor at University of Michigan until May 2023, but I'm on leave this year, having finished my term as Director of the Institute for Social Research. I'm supposed to be in South Africa – I'm actually going to South Africa for the winter semester – but we have moved to Durango and are resettling in here and having a wonderful time.

John Weeks: Okay. I remember when you first said that you were in Colorado, what popped into my mind was that you might be in Boulder spending time with another past PAA president, Jane Menken [PAA President in 1985], who's there –

David Lam: Yes, which I do from time to time, but yeah.

John Weeks: Okay, all right. It's not necessarily an easy hop over the hills from Durango to Boulder, though.

David Lam: No, it's like a seven-hour drive over several mountain passes.

John Weeks: Okay, very good. Well, we'd like to kind of get a feel for how you became a demographer, how basically, you went from Durango, Colorado to greatness in the field of demography. And all of the committee members have ideas, questions, and things we'd like to talk to you about, so I think everybody will be weighing in over the course of the next hour or so.

But I'll kind of get things started with the question of how did you go from your undergraduate degree in Latin American Studies there in Durango to Berkeley, and demography, and then beyond that, to all the things that you've done over your years at Michigan?

David Lam: Yeah, well, I often like to tell this story to undergraduates, and even graduate students, about my kind of circuitous route to becoming an economist and demographer, because I think it's a typical kind of story that happens in the U.S. education system, and it doesn't always happen in other countries where you can kind of find your path in a long, circuitous way.

So, as an undergraduate and I think very influenced by growing up in southwest Colorado, I was very interested in the southwest, but also in Mexico, and Latin America, and at the time – I graduated from high school in 1970 – there was a lot going on in Latin American politics. I was very interested in Latin American politics, and I actually started in Colorado College, did a couple years there, dropped out, got married.

My wife and I decided to drive a van to Argentina. We never made it out of Mexico, but we spent quite a bit of time in Mexico, had some unfortunate events, so kind of aborted the trip. But anyway, we kept this love of Mexico and Latin America, and we enrolled in the college here Durango, which is Fort Lewis College, and created these independent study majors in Latin American studies. It included a lot of Spanish, history, political science, anthropology.

As an undergraduate, I took no economics, I took no math, I took no statistics. It's kind of shocking, actually, that the system let me do that, but it did. I got a nice fellowship to go to the master's program in Latin American Studies at University of Texas, Austin, which has always been a very strong Latin American Studies program, so we moved to Austin with our then 1 1/2-year-old child, and I continued to study a mix of Spanish, history, a lot of political science.

The Graduate Director of that program was an economist named Mike Conroy, and he kind of twisted my arm to take his undergraduate Economics of Latin America course, which I did not have the prerequisites for, but I took it. And he was also very interested in demography, so he basically turned me on to economics and demography in a single undergraduate course – I think a lot of people have an experience like that.

And because he was the Graduate Advisor and he was happy that I was excited

about economics, he let me take intermediate microeconomics and things like that that I needed to do economics as part of the master's program, and I kept taking lots of Latin American stuff, as well.

And then I actually entered the PhD program in economics at UT Austin after taking summer courses at Austin Community College, first pre-calculus, and then calculus, so I was completely catching up in math and statistics, which I loved, and I was always good at math. It's kind of interesting, because it was sort of like I found something that I could really use math for. And so, I was actually loving the math, and kind of like, "Why did it take me so long to figure this out?"

So, I did this whole circle back to getting what I needed to do a PhD in economics, being very interested in demography and in Latin America still, and that's what I really wanted to do. And I went through the first year of the PhD program in economics there, which of course is always a very demanding year.

And the same guy, Mike Conroy, I've always appreciated, he called me in one day, he said, "It looks like you're doing okay in economics, and this is a long slog. And if you're going to do this, you should apply to some other programs." Because at the time, the University of Texas was kind of going through a transition, it was kind of struggling in economics – it's now quite a good program, has been for some time, but when I was there, it was down a bit in the rankings. He said, "If you're going to do it, you should apply to other places."

And so, I did, I applied at Berkeley, moved to Berkeley, and redid the whole first year program. And the fortuitous thing about arriving at Berkeley in 1979, it was the same year that they reincarnated the demography program at Berkeley, and Ron Lee [PAA President in 1987] had been recruited from Michigan to come to Berkeley, and Ken Wachter was there. Eugene Hammel started the program, and so it was an interesting time.

I didn't even know that was happening, but when I met with the economics graduate advisor as a new student, and was just talking about my interest, and somehow demography came up, he said, "Oh, you need to learn about Ron Lee and the new demography program." And so, I went to meet with Ron. Ron, since he had just arrived, did not have any stable of students, and so he hired me as a research assistant right away, which was great. So, I started hanging out with the demography group, which was in an old house up on Piedmont Avenue and started taking demography courses at the same time as my economics courses.

So, that was really a serendipity of connecting up with Ron right when he arrived at Berkeley. And I worked with Ron all the way through my program, and I combined economics and demography in my program. I got a master's in demography along the way while I was getting my economics PhD.

I continued the interest in Latin America, continued the interest in development economics, that's really what I've always done. I wrote my dissertation about Guatemala, but I'd still never been to Guatemala, because there was at the time, a state department restriction on going there, so I wasn't able to go. And anyway,

eventually, I started working mainly in Brazil. And then, I guess, this will probably conclude the story, so at the end of my PhD, I went out in the job market, ended up basically taking Ron's old job at Michigan.

So, Michigan had spent four years looking for someone at the senior level to come in and fill Ron's very large shoes, both in the population center and the economics department. But by the time I was looking in the job market, they decided to look at the junior level. So, Ron spent four years sort of training a replacement to go back to Michigan. I went back into really what was Ron's position, which was a joint position in the Population Studies Center and the economics department--a 50/50 position, which was like my dream job, and so that's how I ended up at Michigan, and I never left.

Dennis Hodgson: I've got one quick question. I love the story, the beginnings in Latin American Studies, and then you took this trip down to Argentina, and this is in the early - mid '70s?

David Lam: Early '70s, yeah.

Dennis Hodgson: Wow.

David Lam: Seventy-two.

Dennis Hodgson: I remember we interviewed Alberto Palloni [PAA President in 2006], and he was an undergraduate who graduated in 1971 in Santiago, Chile, right in the middle of all this, Pinochet is –

David Lam: Exactly, yeah.

Dennis Hodgson: – and Allende. And in Argentina, you had Gino Germani, and in terms of economics, you had the dependency theory coming out. And particularly at that time, I think, there was a real sort of political left type perspective associated with both Latin American studies and this new type of economics.

So, I guess my question is--you were coming from that, and you were very familiar with it, and then you're getting a PhD in economics at Berkeley. Was it difficult to have the same kind of critical approach to the economics of development in the context of a PhD program in an American University as compared to sort of that very critical economic literature that had been developing, particularly in Latin America, at the time?

David Lam: Yeah. Well, of your question, yeah, I very much came from that kind of perspective. I was very into leftist politics, very interested in what was going on all over the continent. And I was mainly studying that sort of history, and political science, and reading lots of dependency theory.

And this guy, Mike Conroy at Texas, was an interesting guy, because he was kind of a leftist guy. Mike was quite a leftist. I suppose he maybe even called himself a Marxist. I don't know, I'm not quite sure about that. But he had this kind of

economist style of questioning. Even when he talked about demography, it was very much the kind of revisionist view of population that leftists had in the '70s, and a lot of it came out of Latin America associated with the Bucharest conference and so on, that family planning was a kind of imperialist activity, and so on. I'm not sure if that was exactly his view.

But, at any rate, the view was that the problem with these countries wasn't that they had too high a population growth rate, the problem was that they were part of the international capitalist system, and that that was the cause of poverty, and we should be focusing on poverty and empowering people and so on. But at the same time, he was very interested in demography, and he was associated with the Texas population center, which was very strong then, as it is now, and he really saw the value of understanding demography and what was going on.

So, yeah, that's kind of where I came from. I suppose some people would say that I'm just another example of as you get more into economics, it kind of pulls you back toward the middle. I'd say I became much less radical as I moved forward in economics, but I did have that perspective, and I sort of knew about it, and I felt like I had a critical eye toward what was going on in economics. I would say I moved away from dependency theory and some of those things over time. I would argue that was because the more I learned, the less it seemed like a really productive way to think about economic development. But yes, that is exactly the background I came from, and that's what pulled me in and kept me very interested in development economics.

Dennis Hodgson: Thanks, that was insightful.

Emily Merchant: Yeah, and I have follow-up question to that. And I apologize if I'm jumping too far ahead, but I'm wondering if that kind of background at all influenced your presidential address on how the world survived the population bomb, and what else kind of led you to that topic for your presidential address?

David Lam: Yeah, I think it did a lot. That address, in many ways, built on my research. It was a little bit of a step back to a big picture, but those ideas had been kind of cooking in my head for a long time. I think I always had been interested, in some ways, in the disjuncture between what was really happening in developing countries, in terms of – it was my perspective from the address that poverty was going down, things were improving in many of these countries.

I'm very influenced by my experience studying fertility in Brazil, where, as you probably all know, fertility fell very rapidly basically in the absence of any family planning programs. And the military government was pronatalist and if not opposed to family planning programs, it didn't encourage them at all. It was actually encouraging fertility. So, fertility fell very fast in Brazil, basically at about the same time it was falling very fast in Colombia.

Colombia, I mention in particular, because Colombia was a very compelling poster child for international family planning programs, where the programs had been very big and very well-studied. And I think in Brazil, where there weren't

any family planning programs, nobody was even really collecting any data – and it turned out once you got to the ‘80s, it was clear that Brazil was pretty much just tracking right along with Colombia at the same time with a completely different kind of institutional environment.

So, for me as an economist, it’s like, “Well something’s going on here that’s not really about family planning programs, but about economic development, and education, and women’s economic opportunities,” and those kinds of things. So, that’s what I’d been interested in from back in the ‘80s when I started working in Brazil.

And so, a lot of things may be covered, but I think Mike Conroy, back in Austin in 1977 or ‘78, made a plan, and some of these ideas were kind of stepping back and looking at what’s really happening to fertility in these countries and so on. Although, I probably wouldn’t have agreed with Mike. A very optimistic view of globalization, and free markets, and so on would probably not have been his approach, and that’s something that evolved in me over time, I guess.

John Weeks: I guess, David, one of the questions that would be a good follow-up from all the work you’ve done in Brazil, and your background in Latin American studies is, how then did you become interested in Africa, particularly in South Africa? Because you just said you were heading off there this winter as well.

David Lam: Yes, though that was a big transition. So, I had all this interest in Latin America, I got interested in Brazil because of – just quickly on that – I was involved in the National Academy of Sciences’ well-known assessment of population growth and economic development that Sam Preston [PAA President in 1984] led. And I was a young assistant professor – like I said. 1986 is the date on that report, I think, I’ve forgotten – but that was a very interesting experience.

And so, I was a third-year assistant professor. I got invited to write a paper about income inequality and population growth that’s in that big, fat volume that was all the collected papers from that National Academy assessment. And then I kind of watched Sam, and Ron Lee, and others putting together that little policy summary which I very much agreed with. Anyway, to write that paper, somebody suggested I should work on Brazil for looking at income inequality, because they had all these great data. And I actually didn’t work in Brazil and didn’t speak Portuguese – I spoke Spanish reasonably well – and I got just completely sucked into working on Brazil.

They had all this fantastic annual labor market data, and I had a sabbatical coming up. I did my first sabbatical in Rio at the Institute of Applied Economics in 1989-90, and that was a wonderful experience. I got very deep into Brazil for a number of years. So, then 1994 came around, and apartheid ended in South Africa, Mandela was elected, and there were a lot of South African academics who started touring the U.S., a lot of them supported by foundations--the Mellon Foundation actually played a big role in all of this.

So, some demographers came through – just an interesting little side here – there was an interesting kind of connection between Taiwanese and South African demographers – that I’ve always assumed that had to do with the fact that they were both kind of international outcasts, where they weren’t exactly part of a lot of the international networks.

Anyway, for whatever reason, Michigan has very strong ties in Taiwan, which was always one of the big strengths of the population center at Michigan. There were some South African demographers that came through Michigan starting back in the ‘80s, and as I recall, they had all kind of connected up in Taiwan.

But anyway, I got invited to take a trip to Cape Town. Here’s the background. David Featherman had moved to Michigan to become director of the Institute for Social Research in the late ‘90s. I can’t remember exactly when [*Editor’s note: It was in 1995*]. I was director of the Population Studies Center at the time, which I became in ‘95. But the trip was in ‘96, so in 1996, the Mellon Foundation suggested that David go to Cape Town to talk about a collaboration between Michigan and Cape Town in the social sciences, in particular, and David invited me to go along on this trip.

And the particular focus was on working on a Wellcome Trust proposal – Win probably knows the history of Wellcome Trust funding of these big population demographic surveillance sites across Africa. And they wanted to have one in South Africa. So, they did a competition for a pretty big Wellcome Trust grant to create a sort of reproductive health research center. This eventually went to the University of KwaZulu-Natal, which created the Africa center, which continues to be one of the big demographic surveillance sites in all of Africa.

So, anyway, we went to consult with the University of Cape Town on their bid, which was unsuccessful, but in the process met all these great people. It was my first visit to South Africa, really my first exposure to a lot of these people, and I ran into all these economists who were very interested in poverty, and inequality, and intergenerational mobility--all the same issues I was interested in Brazil. And I knew my next sabbatical was coming up in 1997, and my wife and I talked about maybe we should go somewhere other than Brazil. We love Brazil, but let’s try something different.

Once I hinted that to them, they were like, “Oh, you should come to Cape Town,” and of course, “Cape Town is beautiful.” And so this trip had been in December of ‘96, so the sabbatical was on my mind, and it was the heady days in South Africa, with Mandela coming into power, so much interesting stuff going on, absolutely fascinating.

I was still very interested, as I always have been, in inequality and race. And Brazil and South Africa had the distinction then, and still kind of stick to it, of being the most unequal countries in the world, measured by Gini Coefficients and so on. I used to joke that I kind of ran out of ideas, so I just changed countries and redid everything I did in Brazil in South Africa, and there’s a little bit of truth to that.



So, these people were great to meet. They had been so isolated, they were just like, “We would love for you to come.” I kind of, to be honest, felt like Brazil’s got fantastic economists. I’m not sure that I was adding a whole lot in Brazil. I mean, I was having a great time, but I sort of felt like in South Africa, I could really help get them back into the international network. Not to sound immodest, but it was just they were very excited.

So anyway, I applied for a Fulbright, got it, went to Cape Town. And my wife’s a newspaper reporter, a somewhat relevant background because it’s why she had the luxury of doing these long sabbaticals – which a lot of people can’t just go away for a year or two years – and we always had the advantage that her newspapers would give her a year off, and once they gave her two years off to go through these things. And she loves to travel, and so when we go, we tend to go deep on these things.

So, we went for a full year there, as we had in Brazil, and I just fell in love with it. These people were really interested in the same things I was. The University of Cape Town is a great university and great economics department, probably the best in Africa. And in particular, in the areas of labor, development, poverty, inequality, that kind of research, what we call applied microeconomics, they were just fantastic, and very eager to collaborate with people.

So, I’m still working with a lot of those same people 25 years later, and I just got sucked into all the really interesting things going on with the change of government, and the chance to – when you’re interested in what causes inequality to be high and stay high, and here’s a radical change of government, going from an officially racist government to a democratic government equalizing spending across the schools, at least officially, things like that, it’s like, “Well, what would happen, how much would inequality change?”

I mean, sadly, we know now, getting on to 30 years later, that it hasn’t changed very much, which is from a researcher’s point of view, kind of fascinating and interesting. From a human point of view, it’s very discouraging and depressing.

Dennis Hodgson: I don’t mean to interrupt, but I have one question about sort of the competition between the attraction of South Africa and Brazil. Now, you’d already been working in Brazil, and I’m trying to think. Fernando Henrique Cardoso becomes president of Brazil –

David Lam: Well, that’s going on there, too, yeah.

Dennis Hodgson: – dependency and development. And he’s in there in ’95 to 2002, and the generals are gone, and you’ve got this guy who’s really sort of – go back to your Latin American Studies leftist days – he’s now the president, and wouldn’t it be attractive to find out what he can do about equality in Brazil?

David Lam: Yeah. No, fair enough. Everything I said about South Africa, you could say about Brazil at that time, too, you’re right, because they were finally getting inflation under control, and yeah, a huge experiment going on there. In fact, it was Brazil

that actually lowered inequality. South Africa did not, but Brazil's inequality started going down by a lot. It was something I never thought would happen, but yeah, that's a very good point.

Well, and in my Fulbright application, what I proposed to do in South Africa was to compare inequality in Brazil and South Africa, and that was sort of the focus of my work. And I still have a paper that I'm working on that's been kind of off and on for years trying to do that. One thing I did learn along the way that is roughly true is that in Brazil, the inequality kind of gets produced in the education system. There's enormous inequality in education, and then you kind of take that to the labor market.

In South Africa, very over-generalizing, it's almost the other way around. It's like education is relatively equal, especially by race, compared to Brazil. But then you take that to the labor market, and it sort of gets exaggerated in the labor market. But yeah, in fact, inequality has gone down in Brazil, and Fernando Henrique probably deserves a lot of the credit for that, the role of government, and so on. I don't think we completely understand exactly why, because it happened in Latin America more generally as well, where in South Africa inequality has been kind of stuck. But yeah, the '90s were fascinating in both countries.

Dennis Hodgson: And there's continuity in your interest over time, too.

David Lam: Yeah, very much so.

Win Brown: I'm going to jump in. David, it's so great to hear all these stories. We're only a little over a half an hour, and I think we're all leaning on the edges of our seats. Thanks so much for being here. I want to pull you into the teacher domain for a little bit. It seems like, based on the political orientation you have, and the extent to which you have taught economics, and shared economic demography theory with an ideological slant, or kind of edge, would it really appeal to students back then, I might say.

These days, all my sort of on-campus friends and colleagues are talking about how it's not so easy to teach. Things have changed. And yet the dimensions of your work that have always interested you seem to be very much of interest to today's students. Maybe you're not in the classroom so much these days, but do you find that you can break through the kind of walls of – oh, I don't know, what you would even call it – but today's sort of heavy emphasis on social justice can, in a way, be the best thing, but can also trip up the extent to which open and honest dialog happens, and all those things.

I'm being a little bit clumsy about how I describe this, but I'm hoping you know what I mean. How would you compare teaching today as opposed to when you first got started? Is it harder, is it easier because of all you've brought?

David Lam: Yeah, that's a good question. Well, I should say I haven't taught much at all in almost 10 years, because I was chair of the Department of Economics, and then I was Director of the Institute for Social Research. I was keeping my hand in the

graduate level teaching of Economic Demography and Development Economics, which I've always done, but I kind of dropped out of the undergraduate teaching.

But back when I was teaching undergraduates, I wouldn't say there was a huge change that I noticed. So, I basically taught one undergraduate course that I did kind of forever that I had sort of inherited that was part of the curriculum. It was actually interesting, I think the name of it was Economics and Population Growth, or something. I think at some point I changed it, but that was what was on the books when I arrived at Michigan in 1983.

I turned it into kind of a general economic demography, population economics course, without just focusing on population growth. But at some point, I made that course into a course that satisfied our undergraduate requirement that students take what's called an upper division writing course. They take Freshman Composition in the English Department, but they're supposed to take another writing course in their own department later on, and we don't have very many of those in the Econ Department, which is probably not a big surprise, partly because we just have to keep up with the demand for our core courses.

But the reason I had it – well, there's a lot of reasons I would do that. I mean, I like the idea of them writing. The particular kind of writing I was focusing on was actually the presentation of data. So, it was a very data-intensive course, and I loved teaching that course, and it's partly background to why I think the clientele for the course is not just a random set of econ students. I mean, one, it's a requirement, so a lot of them are just trying to find a course that will meet it, so that's kind of an odd group. But then there are people that are really interested in data, and development, and statistics. And in that course, I would use the IPUMS-international census data that University of Minnesota does such an amazing job of producing. I started using it back when they were like five censuses. Now there's like 100, or 150, or I don't know how many.

But I'd say it was great for teaching, because you could basically tell students they had to pick a country, maybe two countries, maybe look at change over time, and write a relatively simple paper. I mean, it was actually kind of like, "I don't really want you to go and do a lot of research about these countries. I just want you to focus on the data, and think of an interesting question that you could do with the data." I taught them the statistical package Stata from square one in the computer lab.

The fact that it met this requirement meant that I got a graduate teaching assistant to help in the course, which you really need to do a computer lab. Because I started sort of dabbling in having them work with data, and then I decided just go full on. So, we would meet in the computer lab, we'd start with the U.S., we'd open up the census data, just look at the data, here's a record, here's what a record is, start at complete square one.

They had very different backgrounds in statistics, that was part of the challenge, because I couldn't actually impose a statistics econometrics requirement line. So, one of my other goals with the course was to try to get the students who never had

done much internationally to – we would start with the U.S., and then I would say, “Well, the beauty of these data is if we open up Brazil, it’s organized exactly the same way, the variables are the same.” So, that’s one of the great things about these IPUMS data that Minnesota produces. So, then we’d sort of look at the same thing in the U.S., and the same thing in Brazil, or the same thing in Kenya, and the same issues. What’s the distribution of education, and what’s the distribution of family size, and the number of children ever born. So, I think for a lot of students, it was eye-opening to just look at other countries, and I tried to get them interested in other countries. A lot of them would write a paper about the U.S., which was fine. But I wanted to get them excited about data, I wanted to get them interested in the rest of the world.

It’s probably a bad reflection on what I was doing in the course, to be honest, we didn’t have a lot of deep discussions about politics, or affairs of the day. Although I was always a little self-conscious, because I did a lot of comparing of what’s the black/white income gap in Brazil compared to the U.S., compared to South Africa, which I find fascinating, and how does it change if you control for education?

Once you start getting into race and how it’s classified, and as you say, these are sensitive areas, and everybody’s kind of anxious. But I never had any particular issues, I guess partly because I was sort of taking the approach of let’s just look at the data, and ask some questions, and see what the data have to say and get them to do the same thing.

And even in their papers, I would hate to say that I was trying to discourage them from doing critical thinking. That sounds like a terrible thing, but I was sort of saying let’s let the data speak. Ask some questions, see what you can get out of the data, and then start to think about what might be going on. Or maybe you’re trying to give a causal interpretation of something that’s not causal at all, and I did get into that.

But I loved teaching that course, and my colleagues used to kid me a bit that I used it as a training and recruiting ground for research assistants, which was actually true to some extent. I would get these students that when they’d come to office hours like, “I really love working with these data,” they’d never done it before. The trouble is, I often had graduating seniors taking the course because it was so hard to get these courses that met this requirement. But if I’d get the occasional precocious junior or something, I would hire those kids.

Dennis Hodgson: Here’s a follow-up question. In the context of looking at teaching over time – if you’re sitting back and reflecting on the discipline of demography over time – you’ve been a demographer during very, very interesting times, and it looks like we’re entering into a whole new era of huge demographic issues that are quite distinct and unique to our particular time period. How would you describe the changes in the discipline over your career as a demographer economist?

David Lam: Yeah, good question. I thought about that a little looking at your list of questions, I was thinking about that a bit. I think it’s changed a lot, and I came out of the Berkeley program – I mean, I was doing economics, but I did all their demography

program, so we did very much traditional demographic methods, formal demography.

I love mathematical demography, I studied it with Ken Wachter, and Ron Lee, and I've written a number of papers that are almost pure mathematical demography, which overlaps a lot with certain models of economics, so there's actually quite a lot of overlap there, and I've actually always taught that in my graduate economic demography course. I teach a lot of mathematic demography, actually. I think the Michigan program has always been a little different, but I think the teaching of demography has changed quite a lot, the field has changed quite a lot, and I think for understandable reasons.

Emily, I've read some of your writing on this. I think you describe what's happened accurately. The field has sort of followed the world in understandable ways. So, in the 1960s, when the population centers were pretty much all created – Michigan's was 1961, Princeton going way back – but the world was having these unprecedented population growth rates, everybody was starting to kind of understand what was going on.

I think it was very important to understand the nuts and bolts of population dynamics--fertility, mortality, age structure. Demography is wonderful for that, and it continues to be, but the issues have changed, and I think if you look at the Michigan center, focusing on Taiwan and the family planning programs there, I mean, with that big focus on fertility, both just sort of demographically how population dynamics work, and age structure, and age patterns, and fertility, and those kinds of things operate.

But then also starting to look at the social economic determinants of what's making fertility go down in Taiwan and not in Africa, or why was it going down so fast in Brazil, and the issues are different now. I mean, now the fertility's fallen everywhere. I think how all those are similarly interesting, especially in Africa where fertility hasn't fallen so fast.

So, I think all those issues are still very much on the table, but it's understandable why the interest of the funders has changed, why graduate students are coming through looking at different things, and I think demography is expanding. To some extent, its boundaries are getting blurry. Demography is spilling over – certainly within economics – spilling over into labor economics, and development economics.

In Michigan, there were two big traditions. There was the family planning research, and fertility research including in the U.S. that Ron Freedman [PAA President in 1964-65] had started, but then expanding especially to Taiwan and other countries. But then there was Otis Dudley Duncan [PAA President in 1968-69] studying inequality and social mobility, and that was as much a part of the population center at Michigan as the kind of more demographic stuff. So, I think when people talk about looking at the PAA program and now there's so many more things on race, and inequality, and so on, I think that was always there.

Ren Farley [PAA President in 1988], when I got to Michigan, was a major part of the center, and he worked on urban Detroit, and race, and so on, and he always did that kind of work. So, I think just what most people are working on has changed quite a bit. I mean, I've certainly seen it at Michigan, especially on the sociology side, which is a big bulk of our center at Michigan. We economists are kind of in the minority and sort of do our own thing to some degree.

But the sociologists have shifted a lot. They're working a lot more on broader health issues. Of course, aging for good reason has become a huge issue--health, and aging. I mean, I'm not one of these people who thinks it's terrible that students are coming out now, and they don't know how the life table works. I mean, it's definitely true, and I love life tables. I'm often at a party and my wife has to kick me because I'm talking about life tables, getting into how life tables work to explain something about life expectancy or something. So, I think it's great for people to learn those things, but a lot of people doing great work probably couldn't tell you what the columns of a life table represent, and I think that's okay.

Emily Merchant: Well, we were still learning life tables when I was a grad student in Michigan, so I think the kids are going to be okay.

David Lam: Okay, that's good, that's good. No, that's true, we still teach that. Did you take it from Barbara Anderson?

Emily Merchant: Yeah.

David Lam: Yeah, yeah, she's still teaching that. But I'm going to say, I don't know who's going to teach it when she – someday she's going to retire.

Emily Merchant: David, I have a follow-up question on that. So, just looking at your CV, it looks like that for a little while in the late '90s, you were working on issues about genetics and evolutionary biology, and then moved away from that. So, I'm wondering if you could tell us a little bit about that, and then related to that, whether you have any thoughts about current genetic approaches to demography or economics.

David Lam: Yeah, that was a little area I got interested in. I'm still very interested in it, but I didn't really keep working at it. Yeah, that kind of evolved from working with my colleague, Ted Bergstrom, in the economics department at Michigan, and Hillard Kaplan, who came to visit. And I suppose I was partly being pulled along by a group within our econ department, and in our public policy school, and kind of all over the Michigan campus are all these evolutionary biologists, and evolutionary anthropologists, and evolutionary psychologists.

And there's this group with Bob Axelrod and Michael Cohen, who were in the Gerald Ford School of Public Policy working on kind of evolutionary approaches to political behavior and so on, and so we had all these seminars going on. Within economics, there was an interest in evolutionary models of economic behavior. I got into it really building very much on the same thing that I was interested in, which is the intergenerational transmission of anything, but especially thinking

about inequality. So, I was always very interested in the link between fertility and investments in children. This comes up in my presidential address that I kind of think that, in very overgeneralizing, that one of the main things that happens with economic development is that we shift from large families with small investments in children to small families with large investments in children. And that's kind of what moves us from less developed to more developed, to use the old language.

So, evolutionary approaches seem very interesting there. And Hillard Kaplan, if you've ever run across his work – he's an evolutionary anthropologist – he wrote a paper that I think should be more famous than it is, though it is pretty well known, kind of challenging the Caldwell hypothesis about fertility decline in Africa.

Hillard's paper [*“Evolutionary and Wealth Flows Theories of Fertility: Empirical Tests and New Models”*] was published in ***Population and Development Review***, [Vol. 20, No. 4 (Dec., 1994), pp. 753-791], and he was basically arguing that on both theoretical and empirical grounds that Caldwell's simplified story was that fertility decline happens when we switch from resources flowing from children to parents to resources flowing from parents to children--that children are becoming a net cost. And Hillard's argument was that it would've never made sense in evolutionary terms for resources to flow from children to parents.

And one way of thinking about it is this. You've got two populations on opposite ends of the island and in one of them, the parents extract resources from the children, and in the other one, the parents do everything they can to support the children and send all the resources into the children. If you come back a thousand years later, which one of those is going to have prospered? I mean, basically we're all programmed to invest in children, and transfer resources to children.

The other was empirical because he did this work of hunter/gatherers and shared it. You basically can't find a hunter/gatherer population in which children are not contributors until they're at least 20 years old--at least 15 years old. Eva Mueller published a paper on that topic—she was at Michigan when I arrived there. So anyway, I got very interested in those issues because I was interested in what drives fertility decline, and what drives the link between smaller families and higher investments.

I wrote a paper for this National Academy of Sciences panel, which may be one of the papers you saw. Kind of on this issue of how do we explain why, when incomes go up, we have smaller families. I mean, there is some evidence now that this is not completely true. But broadly speaking, we could afford to be having very large families and, for the most part, we're not. I talked about the evolutionary explanations, and sort of the economic explanations, which are kind of similar in this quantity/quality tradeoff.

So, I continue to be interested in those issues. I read that literature a bit. And even the South African work, Hilly actually came to Cape Town, and we did some work there, kind of along those lines. So anyway, hopefully that answers the question.

Win Brown:

I've got a follow-up on that. I'm so glad that she raised that. I remember there was a day on the Michigan campus where I got pulled into a brown bag over at the Population Studies Center, and you were presiding, David. And you gave a talk, which I thought was fascinating, and it was on this topic. And I don't remember the title, but I remember your question was along the lines of "What is the evolutionary purpose of our surviving beyond the reproductive years?"

And it was super interesting, and I think you had even gotten into some kind of quirky data from a primate database. And it was really interesting, and I think we all were amazed that you could have been so broad in your studies. But it remains a pretty interesting question, and because I've got four grown children, none of whom is providing me with any grandchildren, this is particularly personal at this point. But you got into that for a while, and then you moved on. But that remains a really interesting question. Can you comment more on that?

David Lam:

Yeah. Well, anything I was presenting there, I probably picked up from Hillard Kaplan, and I used to teach some of that in my course. Yeah, I think it is a very interesting question--one of Hilly's lines of research that I got very interested in in this work that I was doing about investments in children, and this issue about fertility decline, and what drives fertility decline.

One of the points he liked to make was that if you compare humans to other primates, the biggest difference is that we have this long period of basically child dependency that you don't see in apes or other primates, where infants are kind of on their own pretty fast. And the question is sort of why, or what's the evolutionary story behind that? And the idea was that there's got to be some big payoff, there's got to be a big payoff evolutionarily to just supporting your children for 15 years before they can take care of themselves.

And the payoff – he and others argue– from an evolutionary point of view is basically big brains and intelligence. And so, you go through this big investment, and then you are able to bring down a sabretooth tiger or something like that. And so, you get this enormous amount of food and protein that other primates have never been able to do.

So, the idea of this life cycle where you go – and this connects up with a lot of work with Ron Lee that I was involved in early on, too, of the whole very fundamental economic problem that we face--we're dependents as children, then we're productive, then we're kind of dependents again, in the sense that we don't produce as much as we consume late in life. How do you solve that problem?

And then there's the question of why do we even live beyond reproductive age? And there are various theories about that--considering the grandmother argument that there's some return, in terms of childcare, and so on. One of the reasons we got very interested in this in South Africa is that we were kind of working on was this phenomenon of very early childbearing out of marriage, and those children are largely raised by their grandmother.



And it's almost like it's kind of displaced fertility. Like these are women who can't actually have children, but they're very good at raising children. And so, I got very interested in those things. I'm still very interested in it. When I started working in South Africa, we decided to do this longitudinal survey of young people that was going to be two waves and ended up being five waves, and that data collection project, which I think everybody should do if they have the good fortune to get some big NIH grants to fund it, they're absolutely fascinating. Because in Brazil, I'd always worked with data that I got from the statistical agency, which was fabulous. But in South Africa, you didn't have good data, and that was one of the things I was interested in there.

The apartheid government didn't like data, except on the white population, but there was this survey that the group in Cape Town had done that was very good. So, we decided to do this longitudinal survey. I just bring that up because, frankly, that's where all my energy went was into the data collection project for about six or seven years, and that was great fun, so I focused my energy there.

John Weeks: David, there's one thing that we want to ask you about, with respect to the PAA, not just about your research, which obviously is extremely interesting. But you have spent your career at the University of Michigan, which has produced more PAA presidents than any other place except Princeton. And so, obviously, you folks have a connection to the PAA that is very strong, and we'd like to hear your thoughts about how you think the PAA has helped the field of demography, continues to do that. How things are evolving and changing over time.

David Lam: Yeah, great. I'm very happy to talk about that. So, I love PAA, I've gone to almost every PAA except when I've been on sabbatical. I usually haven't come back, because I've been pretty far away. My first PAA, I should mention, was in 1983. I was a graduate student, I went to the PAA in Pittsburgh, and had the honor of being the fourth Dorothy Thomas Award winner at that meeting. That kind of sucked me in, it's like, "Oh, this is fun."

But yeah, I loved it then. Then I moved to Michigan, and as you say, PAA is a big deal at Michigan, so it was sort of a big tradition that all the faculty and all the trainees go to PAA. We try to provide funding for that. I got very active in the kind of small, but at the time, good, critical mass of economists going to PAA. Sadly, I think we're kind of dying out. I don't know, I keep trying to keep economists active in PAA, and there is a good group that's involved.

But, at that time, there was a very good group. Duncan Thomas, Paul Schultz, a lot of people on the developmental economics side. We started an economic demography workshop the day before the start of the PAA, which was always kind of controversial, because some people could view it as competing, but our argument was it brings us to PAA, and we stay, but we want our own little chunk of time to talk to each other and I always thought that was fine. And it's continued on. It's been very successful.

So, I always encouraged my students to go. I would go very regularly. I organized many sessions. I would always send my papers in. I think the size of the PAA as

a meeting – and as an association – is really good, big enough to be sustainable and thriving, but much smaller than the American Economic Association meetings. They are just gigantic and spread over four or five hotels in a small number of cities that can hold it.

So, I do go to those AEA meetings, but not as conscientiously as PAA, because at PAA, I always know I'm going to see my former students, and have a good chance to interact with people. I was noticing the messages about the PAA paper deadline coming up, but I'm probably not going to submit anything because I'm going to be in Cape Town then and probably won't go. But sadly, I really would like to. But the PAA paper deadline used to be such a focal point back in the days when we had all the students sitting in big computer labs, and we had to actually send the thing off by paper. And my wife once criticized me for inculcating terrible habits in my students, because we made this mad dash to the Detroit airport because we missed the FedEx deadline in town, so we actually drove out to the airport to do the last drop of the FedEx deadline at the airport, at 4:00 PM the day before the deadline or something. Anyway, that's all so much simpler now with online submissions.

So, I've always been very involved, been on a lot of committees, and was on the board, which was very interesting, and I liked seeing how the organization was working. So, I think it's been great to see it continue to thrive even with, as we were discussing, the changes in the field and so on. I think we've seen new generations come along. It continues to be like a real – it's one of those associations that's a true, interdisciplinary association, and I always enjoyed that about it. When I was president, I tried to have some sessions catering to economists, as that was part of what I was interested in. But I really encouraged the chairs to try to mix it up, and get people from different fields, and different perspectives into those sessions. So, it's been a very important part of my career. I've really enjoyed being part of PAA. I consider being PAA president one of the real fun highlights of my career. It was fun preparing and giving the address and that was an interesting part, but the whole year of just being involved in the leadership of the organization. It's sort of three years that you do--president-elect, and then the president, and then the past president.

That whole three-year period was very rewarding, and very interesting. Fortunately, it was a time the PAA was doing pretty well, which hopefully it still is. I had been on the board during the period about 10 years earlier when things were kind of struggling, and Jeff Evans had come in as Secretary/Treasurer, and had really tried to clean up the finances, and get good people involved in the administration, so I remember times when it was struggling. But when I was president, it was in quite good shape. We were having a big fundraising campaign, and the finances were pretty stable, I hope that's still true. But it's a great association.

Dennis Hodgson: One last question along those lines. Is there a set of issues that the PAA could focus on more closely that might be more attractive to economists coming? You end your PAA presidential talk with a big set of 21st century issues. We've got climate change, we've got resource scarcity, et cetera. Which, to me anyway,

seems to have a real significant economic component to it. Is there a way of coming up with a set of issues that can sort of force this greater interaction between economists interested in demography and the rest of us?

David Lam:

Yeah, that's a good question. I think partly what's happening with the number of economists going into PAA - which I have no idea what the data actually look like, but just my sense of people I know - it's partly there's just enormous competition, especially in the development economics area where I work, and the economics of Africa, and so on. There's like a conference a week, and sometimes a big conference a week.

So, there's a lot of forums for people who are doing things like randomized trials in Africa, or India. A lot of conferences, I can't make them all. The National Bureau of Economic Research hesitated a long time to have a development economics group, and now added one a few years ago. It's very active - I just went to their summer meetings - that's kind of pulled a lot of people in there, it's a very high-profile group.

So, there's just a lot of competition. I think we do still see the people working in the topics that really hit on core demography. So, economics and fertility, which is kind of undergoing a resurgence a bit, and a lot of its kind of revisionist view of fertility pointing out that this claim I made about as people get richer they have fewer children actually doesn't seem to be holding now. Of course, you get this interesting thing going on in Europe where the countries with high women labor force participation are also the countries with the highest fertility. And there are all these relationships that we thought were kind of fundamental are sort of getting turned on their head.

So, there's that group, there's a group working on economics of marriage, and interfamily bargaining, and those are kind of hot topics in economics. The impact of no-fault divorce, and things like that, there's a lot of people working on that. So, that group tends to find a home in PAA pretty naturally. And I don't know, it's one of the great things about these associations like PAA, but it's also maybe a challenge that they just follow the interests of everybody.

So, who knows what do people suggest in sessions, and what do the chairs do for sessions, and it's hard to kind of make it happen from the top, I think actually, it tends to be sort of organic. When I first started going to PAA, I do think in some ways, it was kind of a golden age. There were all these young economic demographers that we all kind of glommed onto the PAA as a place to connect up, and we mostly still go, but I think a lot of our students don't necessarily go, even as we try to get them to.

John Weeks:

Okay, we've used more of your time than we said we would, but Karen, you haven't asked any questions, and I didn't want to end our session without you having a chance to step in if you wanted to.

Karen Hardee:

No, I've just been listening, absolutely fascinating. David, I sort of follow the literature of the pushback on even using the term population. So, I'm curious what

your view is on that, and people who say we shouldn't even count what individuals do as building up to a population. So, I'm curious what your reaction is to that, of what your response would be?

David Lam: I don't know, can you say a little more? I must admit, I'm not sure I'm completely up on that.

Karen Hardee: It's the view that we should not even be talking about the term population, or doing anything about population, not even sort of count what individuals do, as building up to a population.

David Lam: Well, yeah, I'm not sure exactly where that's coming from, but I think I'm somewhat sympathetic. I mean, I think we can get kind of overly fixated on the numbers, and the population growth, and which countries are going fast, and slow. I do have this sort of hard-core demographer in me that's like I can't get away from thinking about those things, but it can certainly be abused and has been.

And Emily's written very eloquently about the dark side and history of PAA, and IUSSP. And I've been very active in IUSSP, I should say, as well, and trying to keep in mind there are not just economists, but Americans involved in IUSSP, because it's always been kind of a European – but very international. I love it because it's very international in scope.

But there is this dark side of the history that I think it's important to be aware of, and a history of bad things being done in the name of population control, and we want to always be very sensitive to that. I'm very focused on Africa, and I think it's hard not to look at Africa and ask what's holding it back when Africa is, in many ways, doing better than a lot of people think it is, at least some parts of it. Some parts are not, and that diversity is very important to understand.

But when you look at the parts that are really having the highest poverty rates and so on, it's hard not to look at the high fertility and rapid population growth and just at least think "What's going on? Why hasn't fertility gone down in these countries?" And I don't think, though, we should look at that as: that's what their problem is, the number one problem is high fertility. But it is off the scale now by international standards, and so what's going on?

I've always had this kind of very simplistic view of economic development that everybody just kind of eventually does the same thing. You move from high fertility with low investments, as I said, to low fertility with high investments. And that response to improving mortality, that once infant mortality falls, that sort of helps trigger this change. And, I mean, lots of things contribute and one has to be very skeptical of simplistic explanations. And so, that's what happened in Latin America, that's sort of my view of Brazil, and it just kind of went down this path.

And yet, a lot of African countries don't seem to be following the script, so to speak. And to me, the problem is the high poverty, that's what to focus on. What will make those people better off? What will reduce poverty? Reducing fertility is not a goal in and of itself, it may or may not be a means to the end, but I think

anyone can get overly focused on the numbers. I'm actually working on a paper for this special issue of *Population and Development Review* that is part of their 50th anniversary that I was going to call *The Next Three Billion* because the UN forecast said there would be 3 billion more people in the century.

But now, the new forecast that came out in whenever it was, June, July, on Population Day – World Population Day – July 11th. They've dropped those numbers down, so that they're actually not saying three billion. But anyway, the idea is, can the world absorb the next 2 1/2 - 3 billion, whatever it's going to be, when we're probably going to level out at that point.

And it's partly to make that same point I was making in the presidential address of we're about to get through this incredible, absolutely historically unprecedented period of population growth. And most of the 21st century population growth is just working out the waves of the population growth of the '60s, and 70s, and 80s.

Karen Hardee: Right, right.

David Lam: But I'm still kind of interested in this issue, in terms of the numbers and population that just another 3 billion people sounds like a big, scary number, how could we possibly absorb that? And I think part of my point is sort of the same one I was making in the presidential address.

We've added 5 billion people since 1960, and poverty's gone down. I mean, there's lots of problems, and I tried to talk about those in the paper. But it's been a period when we just absorbed an enormous number of people, did not have massive unemployment around the world, did not have massive poverty around the world, did not have mass starvation around the world. And so, I do think an idea of focus on the fundamentals of education, and food, and getting people's incomes up is where the focus should be, and not obsessing on the numbers.

Karen Hardee: I look forward to reading that chapter, and particularly, I look forward to reading what you say about population and climate change, since that seems to be on us right now.

David Lam: Well, I promised I would add a big section of that on the paper.

Karen Hardee: Thank you, good, looking forward to it.

David Lam: I could give you a sneak-peak, which is I ranked all the countries by population growth and looked at their contribution to CO2 emissions for the last ten years. And basically, you can take the fastest growing 25% of the countries, and their contribution of CO2 emissions is so low that you could triple the size of those countries, and triple their per capita incomes at the same time, and it would be kind of a drop in the bucket of global CO2 emissions. So, that's kind of where I'm going.

Karen Hardee: Adaptation, on the other hand, and the effects of climate change –

David Lam: That's huge.

Karen Hardee: – in those countries it is huge, so anyways.

David Lam: Yeah. I completely agree, that's an important one. Will, you have a point?

Win Brown: I did. I got my eyes on the clock here, so I hope it's going to be reasonably quick. But back to what Dennis was asking about PAA, I remember in all the years I've gone to PAA, the only standing-room-only panel must have been '94 or '95, it was Lant Pritchett.

Karen Hardee: Oh, my goodness, yup.

Win Brown: It was Lant Pritchett. And I thought in all the years that have passed since he wrote that really famous 1994 paper – I think that was *PDR* [Editor's note: Lant Pritchett, "Desired Fertility and the Impact of Population Policies," *Population and Development Review*, 20(1):1-55, 1994]. What are your thoughts today? How should we look at that article today, because that really was kind of a bomb that dropped on the family planning community. Does hindsight help us to understand Lant's paper? What's your take on that today if that makes sense?

David Lam: Yeah, about the argument that most of the fertility differentials are actually in desired fertility, and that family planning *per se* would not lower fertility unless desired fertility declined. Well, I went back to look at that in my presidential address, and I mean, I think he makes an important point. One thing I did there that I think is an important caveat is that if you look at change over time--we now have enough data in the Demographic and Health Surveys to look at that in changes, and not just in the cross-section.

So, if you looked at countries, and you looked at the change in actual fertility levels and the change in desired fertility, and back out the contribution of family planning, you get a fairly different story. And I've actually been sympathetic with his story, and I thought he made an important point, but it's actually not – you get this kind of – I love these kind of like 50/50 answers to everything. Actually, if you looked at the changes, there's about half of fertility decline in many of these countries that is not explained by a decline in desired fertility.

So, we don't know what it is, but it plausibly, actually, is the effect of family planning coming in and letting people meet their goals more. So, his result that it's 95% desired fertility, and 5% unexplained or something – that may be an exaggeration – is not actually true when you look the changes. So, I think just having to choose sides, I always sort of take the economist side of it's all about desired fertility, and people will figure out a way to get there, and that's how fertility fell in most countries, and family planning was always kind of overstated.

But I actually have backed off a bit from that, and I think nobody should be uncomfortable, I think, with the idea, that we need women to have the tools to meet their fertility goals. I get uncomfortable about trying to strongarm people or even induce people to have some different number of children than what they

were planning to. But giving them the health resources to meet their goals seems like something certainly economists ought to be comfortable with. That's very, very much in our world view, and I think it looks like that maybe has played a role. I think I'm not sure his paper quite holds up when you look at not just the cross-section but look at the actual changes.

John Weeks: All right, well, we really are essentially out of time, but I did, David, want to give you one last chance to say if there's something that we haven't discussed, haven't brought up with you, that coming into the interview you thought to yourself, "Well, I want to make sure that I talk about this." Have we missed anything?

David Lam: No, I don't think so. It's been a great interview, I've really enjoyed it, and I hope I haven't given too long-winded answers. I did want to emphasize – and I think it came through – the importance of PAA. I mean, it's a PAA activity, and I'm really glad you're doing this. I enjoyed looking back through some of the other presidential interviews, some of which I'd looked at before, and I really hope the PAA continues to be a thriving organization. I mean, it's evolved over time, it'll continue to evolve, but I think it's a lot of people doing great work, whose work gets highlighted at the PAA meetings, and it's a great association.

John Weeks: All right, well, thank you very, very much. Thank you for all the things that you have done and thank you for helping us have a really wonderful morning here. I mean, truthfully, I think we could sit around and talk about all the stuff that you've been doing for a long time.

David Lam: Well, thank you. I've enjoyed it, the questions have been great and it's been very, very fun talking with you all.

John Weeks: Well, thank you very much. All right.

David Lam: Okay.

Win Brown: Thank you, David.

John Weeks: We'll be in touch –

Emily Merchant: Thanks, David.

David Lam: Thanks a lot everyone.

Win Brown: Bye.

John Weeks: Bye-bye now.

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Edited by David Lam, John Weeks and Dennis Hodgson

# How the World Survived the Population Bomb: Lessons From 50 Years of Extraordinary Demographic History

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Published online: 18 October 2011  
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**Abstract** The world population will reach 7 billion in late 2011, a demographic milestone that is causing renewed attention to the challenges caused by population growth. This article looks at the last 50 years of demographic change, one of the most extraordinary periods in demographic history. During this period, world population grew at rates that have never been seen before and will almost surely never be seen again. There were many concerns about the potential impact of rapid population growth in the 1960s, including mass starvation in countries such as India, depletion of nonrenewable resources, and increased poverty in low-income countries. The actual experience was very different. World food production increased faster than world population in every decade since the 1960s, resource prices fell during most of the period, and poverty declined significantly in much of the developing world. The article considers the economic and demographic explanations for the surprising successes of this important period in demographic history. It also looks at regions that have been less successful, especially Africa, and at the lessons for dealing with the important challenges that still remain.

**Keywords** Population growth · Demographic transition · Poverty · Resources · Food

## Introduction

The world's population is projected to reach 7 billion in late 2011 (United Nations Population Division 2011). This important demographic milestone is motivating renewed interest in the challenges posed by population growth. It was only 12 years

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**Electronic supplementary material** The online version of this article (doi:10.1007/s13524-011-0070-z) contains supplementary material, which is available to authorized users.

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ago, in 1999, that there was similar attention to world population reaching 6 billion. With a population of 7 billion, and another billion projected in less than 15 years, the world faces daunting challenges, including global warming, a recent rapid increase in food prices, and more than 1 billion people living in extreme poverty.<sup>1</sup> As we think about the challenges facing the world as these billions of people are added, it is instructive to look back at the last 50 years of world population growth. In this article, I argue that the last 50 years represent one of the most extraordinary periods of demographic history the world has ever seen. Looking at what happened to food production, resource scarcity, and poverty during this exceptional period can provide us with valuable lessons about our capacity for dealing with the many difficult challenges yet to come.

In the 1960s, as today, there were optimists and pessimists among those looking at the challenges of population growth. Indeed, there have been optimists and pessimists about population and the economy since at least the time of Thomas Malthus. Malthus's (1803/1960) "Essay on the Principle of Population," which argued that economic growth tends to be choked off by the population growth that results from rising incomes, was a challenge to the optimistic utopianism of writers like William Godwin (1793/1798).<sup>2</sup> William Stanley Jevons (1866), another important early economist, predicted in 1866 that England's economic growth was unsustainable because England was running out of coal. The debate between pessimists and optimists looking at population and resources has gone on for hundreds of years and will surely continue for hundreds more. The debate may have reached a peak in the 1960s, with plenty of things for pessimists to worry about.

In this article, I will consider what the world looked like in the 1960s as researchers and policy makers considered the demographic challenges ahead. My characterization will be much more broad than deep, incorporating data on a wide range of economic and demographic outcomes. I will touch on several issues, any one of which would be impossible to do justice to in a article of this length. My goal is to look at the big picture of the last 50 years of economic and demographic change, recognizing that this inevitably allows only a superficial look at many complex issues.

## Concerns About Population in the 1960s

In 1960, the world's population reached 3 billion. This received considerable attention at the time, including a January 1960 cover story in *Time Magazine* under the banner "That Population Explosion" (*Time Magazine* 1960). Even more important than the population of 3 billion was the unprecedented rate of population growth. The increase from 2 billion to 3 billion took about 35 years,<sup>3</sup> whereas the increase from 1 billion to 2 billion took about 125 years and the addition of the first

<sup>1</sup> These trends will be documented and discussed in more detail later in the article.

<sup>2</sup> For a history of the debate between Malthus and Godwin, see Petersen (1971).

<sup>3</sup> McEvedy and Jones (1978) estimated that world population reached 2 billion in 1925, roughly consistent with other estimates compiled by the U.S. Census Bureau (2011) and the United Nations Population Division (1999).

billion took from the beginning of the human race until about 1800. The annual growth rate of world population reached 2.2% in 1962 (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). This may have been the first time in human history that the world's population grew at 2% per year, since, as discussed later, 2% growth requires an unusual set of demographic conditions. It is easy to see why there was concern about population pressures and what they might mean for our future.

Concern about population growth was widespread in academic circles and the media in the 1960s. The University of Michigan's Population Studies Center was founded in 1961. Many other U.S. population centers were also founded in the 1960s, a reflection of the interest in population among the foundations that funded the centers and among the researchers that created them (Caldwell and Caldwell 1986; Donaldson 1990). Numerous books and articles expressed concern about the dangers posed by rapid population growth. These concerns are typified by Paul Ehrlich's 1968 book *The Population Bomb*. The words on the cover of the paperback edition, "Population control or race to oblivion" (Ehrlich 1968), give a sense of the book's alarmist tone. Many other books and articles sounded the alarm about population growth, although *The Population Bomb* continues to be the best-known book on population from the period.<sup>4</sup>

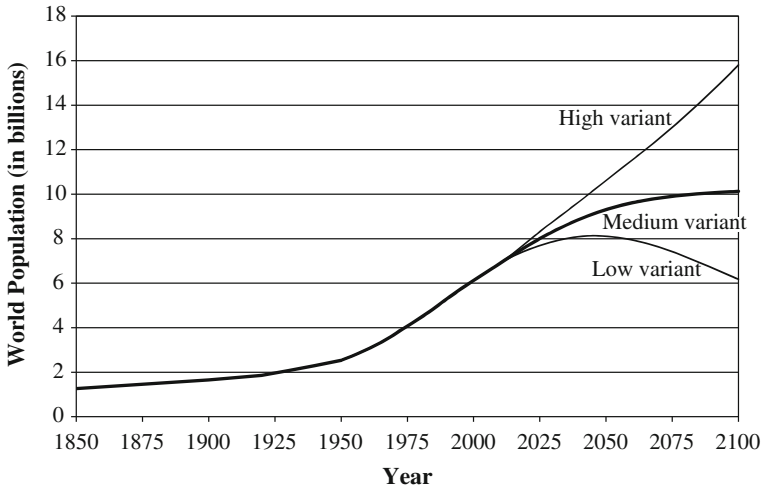
### How Unusual Was the Demography of the 1960s?

Was the demographic experience of the 1960s unusual enough to deserve the attention it received? One way to look at this is to examine doubling times of world population. World population increased from 3 billion to 6 billion between 1960 and 1999, a doubling time of 39 years. The previous doubling time—the time it took the world to grow from 1.5 billion to 3 billion—was about 70 years.<sup>5</sup> The doubling before that took about 150 years, the one before that about 500 years, and the doubling before that about 1200 years (see Fig. A1 in Online Resource 1). The sequence of doubling times from AD 1 to 1999, then, is something like 1,200 years, 500 years, 150 years, 70 years, and 39 years. My undergraduate students are good at "what is the next number in this sequence?" problems, so I have them guess the next doubling time—the time from 1999, when the world had 6 billion people, until the world population reaches 12 billion. Given the choice of 20, 30, 40, 60, or 100 years, most students choose 20 or 30 years, with almost none choosing 60 or 100. The correct answer is almost surely more than 100 years, as will be discussed later in the article. Those who have worked on population projections might even prefer an answer like more than 500 years or perhaps even "forever," since it's very plausible that the world will never reach a population of 12 billion.

How can we say that world population won't double in the next 100 years, given the doubling from 1960 to 1999 and given uncertainty about future fertility and mortality? Figure 1 shows the U.N. Population Division's population projections to 2100 using

<sup>4</sup> Other frequently cited books that raised concerns about population growth include *Famine 1975!* (Paddock and Paddock 1967) and the Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth* (Meadows 1972).

<sup>5</sup> The doubling times in this paragraph are rough estimates based on the U.S. Census Bureau's (2011) compilation of a number of historical estimates of world population.



**Fig. 1** Estimates of world population, 1850 to 2100, and U.N. high, medium, and low projections to 2100

their high-, medium-, and low-variant projections.<sup>6</sup> According to the medium-variant projection, world population will reach 9.3 billion in 2050. That's another 2.3 billion people, a sobering increase. But it is an increase of 33% in the next 39 years, far from the 100% increase that occurred between 1960 and 1999. The U.N. medium-variant projection reaches 10 billion in 2083 and 10.1 billion in 2100. The addition of 3 billion people in 72 years can be compared to the addition of 3 billion in just 39 years between 1960 and 1999. Using the high-variant projection, which assumes slower fertility decline, world population will reach 10.6 billion in 2050 and 12 billion in 2065. Using the low-variant projection, which assumes faster fertility decline, world population reaches a maximum of 8.1 billion in 2046, then falls to 6.2 billion by 2100. None of these scenarios predicts a doubling in anything close to 39 years.

Other projections have reached similar conclusions. Lutz et al. (1997, 2001, 2004), using models of probabilistic population projections, have argued for some time that the world population growth rate will approach zero by 2100. Their median forecast predicts that world population will peak in 2070 at a level of 9 billion people, with an 85% chance that the world will reach population stability by 2100. While it is difficult to make precise forecasts of world population, a great deal of information can be garnered from analyzing the current age distributions in different countries and recent trends in fertility and mortality (Bongaarts and Bulatao 2000). It is virtually certain that world population will never again double in 40 years, making the 1960–2000 experience absolutely unique in human history.

To understand why world population will not double again by 2100 or even by 2200, it is useful to look at population growth rates. Population growth was very slow before the industrial revolution, although there may have been short periods with annual growth rates above 1% (Lee 2003). Figure 2 shows annual growth rates

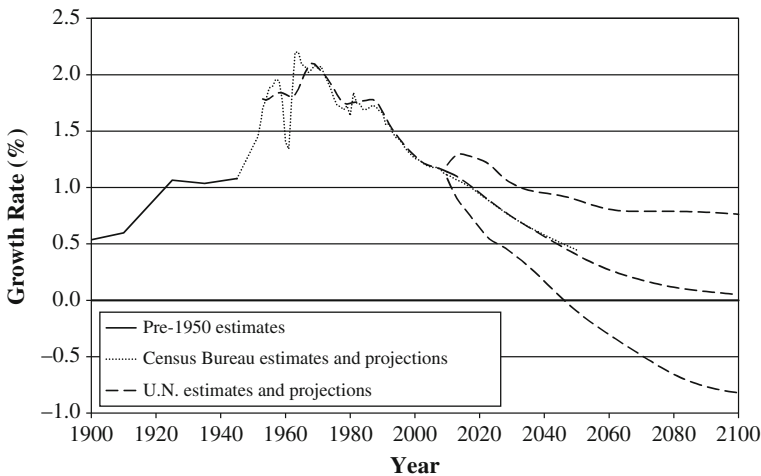
<sup>6</sup> The main source of population estimates and projections in this article is the 2010 Revision of World Population Prospects (United Nations Population Division 2011). Details about the assumptions in the low-, medium-, and high-variant projections are available at the United Nations Population Division (2011) website.

and projections from various sources from 1900 to 2100. The growth rate probably reached 1% around 1925. Better estimates are available starting in 1950 and show the growth rate rising in the 1950s. Census Bureau estimates show a dramatic drop in 1959, the result of increased mortality and decreased fertility in China's Great Famine. According to the Census Bureau, the peak annual growth rate for the world was 2.2% in 1963, implying a doubling in 32 years if this rate stayed constant. Interpolations from the U.N.'s five-year estimates imply a peak annual growth rate of 2.03% in 1968. The big picture is that population growth rates reached just over 2% per year in the 1960s and have fallen rapidly since.

The 2011 growth rate is estimated at 1.1%. If this rate stayed constant, world population would double in 60 years. But there is little doubt that the growth rate will continue to fall. The growth rate is as high as it is only because of population momentum, with many women at childbearing ages because of earlier population growth. Figure 2 shows growth rates to 2100 for the U.N.'s high-, medium-, and low-variant projections. The 2050 medium-variant growth rate is 0.38%, implying a doubling time of about 175 years. The 2100 medium-variant growth rate is 0.05%, implying a doubling time of 1,400 years. Although these projections, especially when taken to 2100, must be interpreted with caution, it is clear that the world population growth rate is falling rapidly. These growth rates demonstrate why the world population is unlikely to reach 12 billion in the foreseeable future or even the unforeseeable future.

### Why Was the Demography of the 1960s so Unusual?

Clearly, the last 50 years represent an exceptional period in demographic history. The 2% growth rates of the 1960s really were a population explosion by historical



**Fig. 2** Annual growth rate of world population, 1900 to 2100. The estimates before 1950 are rough estimates based on the U.S. Census Bureau's (2011) compilation of historical estimates. Estimates from 1950–2010 are taken from the U.S. Census Bureau (2010) and the United Nations Population Division (2011). Projections beyond 2010 are from the United Nations Population Division (2011)

standards, almost surely never seen before and never to be seen again. To understand the consequences of these growth rates, we first need to understand why they happened. This is best done with a quick tour through the demographic transition, which is fundamental to understanding what we've been through.<sup>7</sup>

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the demographic transition in detail, but a few points are important for an understanding of what caused the exceptional demographic history of the last 50 years. The demographic transition begins from a regime with high birth and death rates that are roughly equal, implying little or no population growth. The transition starts with a decline in death rates, resulting in a period of population growth. This is followed with some lag by a decline in birth rates, reducing the population growth rate. The transition ends with a new equilibrium characterized by low birth and death rates that are once again roughly equal, returning to low or zero population growth. This stylized description provides quite an accurate picture of the recent demographic history of most developing countries.

Figure 3 shows the case of Southeast Asia, a fairly typical pattern that demonstrates a number of key points (data are from U.N Population Division 2011). Southeast Asia had the highest population growth rate in the world in the 1950s, the result of rapid mortality decline that was already well underway. The crude death rate (CDR) in the 1950s was 23 per 1,000, well below the crude birth rate (CBR) of 45 per 1,000. It is important to keep in mind that these are simply births and deaths as a proportion of the total population and are very sensitive to the large changes in age structure that take place during the demographic transition. The rate of natural increase—the difference between the CBR and the CDR—was about 20 per 1,000, or 2% per year, in Southeast Asia in the early 1950s, reaching a peak of 2.5% in the 1960s. Rapid declines in the birth rate caused the growth rate to fall to 1.2% in 2010, a rate that is as high as it is only because of the continuing large numbers of women at childbearing ages. Reaching a gap between birth and death rates of 25 per 1,000 requires the unusual conditions that occur during that fairly brief period in which the death rate has fallen but the birth rate is still high. We see that this gap existed for only about a decade in Southeast Asia—roughly the 1960s—and is very unlikely to return.

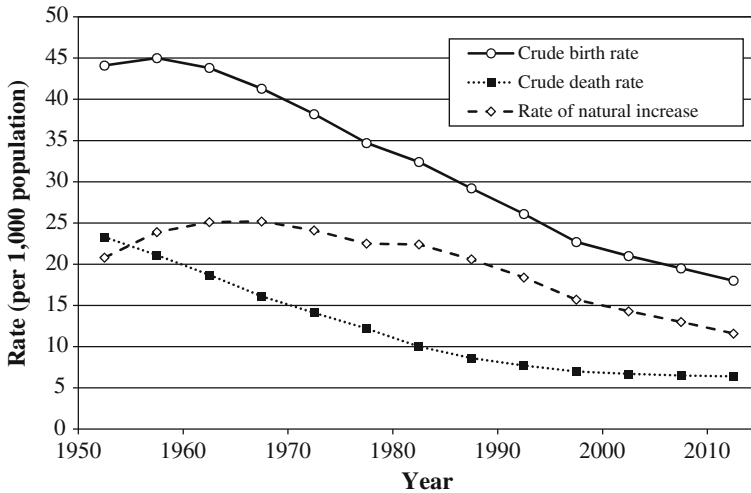
One reason we won't see population growth of 2.5% again in Southeast Asia is that the CDR is already below 10 per 1,000, with little room to fall further. In fact, CDRs are leveling off or rising in most countries that are well advanced through the demographic transition. This is not because of a leveling off in life expectancy but is the result of population aging. Life expectancy actually increased by 8 years in Southeast Asia between 1985 and 2010, but the aging of the population meant there was only a slight decline in the CDR.

The demographic transition since 1950 for Latin America looks very similar to Southeast Asia in terms of magnitudes and timing, evidence of the similar demographic change across the developing world in the last 60 years.<sup>8</sup> South Asia

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<sup>7</sup> I use *demographic transition* to refer to empirical patterns in birth rates, death rates, and population growth rates, as in Lee (2003). For a discussion of the demographic transition as a theory of demographic change, see Kirk (1996).

<sup>8</sup> The demographic transition for other regions and the world as a whole since 1950 are presented in Figs. A2 and A3 in Online Resource 1.



**Fig. 3** Demographic transition, Southeast Asia. Data are from United Nations Population Division (2011)

is also quite similar, although its population growth peaked in the 1980s rather than the 1960s. Sub-Saharan Africa exhibits some important differences, however, with a later and slower fertility decline. In the 1950s, sub-Saharan Africa had a CBR of 48 per 1,000 and a CDR of 26 per 1,000, generating a natural increase of 2.2% per year. The CBR had declined to only 46 by the early 1980s, while the CDR had fallen to 17, generating the highest annual growth rates observed for any region—just under 3%. Sub-Saharan Africa has nonetheless experienced declines in fertility and a resulting decline in the population growth rate since the 1980s, with a current CBR around 36 and a CDR around 13, for an annual rate of natural increase of 2.4%.

The demographic transition for the world looks similar to that of Southeast Asia. The CDR was already well below the CBR in 1950. The gap between them increased to cause the 2% growth rate of the 1960s, and then narrowed to cause growth rates to fall. Trends in the CDR help explain why the world is unlikely to ever again see population growth rates of 2% per year. The current world CDR is about 8 per 1,000, permitting little room for further decline, with a leveling and an eventual increase projected as a result of population aging. The current world CBR is about 19 per 1,000. Reaching 2% annual growth, given current death rates, would require a CBR of 30 per 1,000, a rate last seen in the early 1970s.

Dramatic changes in age structure are an intrinsic feature of the demographic transition (Lee 2003) and are a key component of demographic change in the last 50 years. The rapid growth resulting from declines in infant and child mortality caused very young age structures in developing countries in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1975, the proportion of the population under age 15 was 40% in Brazil, 43% in Thailand, and 50% in Kenya, creating enormous pressure on schools. Declining fertility eventually caused declines in cohort size, reductions in the size of the school-aged population (Lam and Marteleto 2008a), and the “demographic dividend” of a population concentrated in working ages (Bloom et al. 2003). The current concentration of women at childbearing ages creates continued population growth even in countries with near-replacement fertility. Rapid growth of the elderly

population is already emerging as a challenge in many developing countries (Kinsella and Velkoff 2001).

What we learn from looking at the demographic transition from 1950 to 2010 is that the period of rapid population growth was relatively short and is quickly coming to an end. A doubling of world population in 40 years has never happened before and will almost surely never happen again. The concern that population was growing at unprecedented rates in the 1960s was unquestionably correct. However, the rate had already reached a peak by the mid-1960s, shortly before the publication of *The Population Bomb*, and was already beginning a rapid decline.

### Three Big Concerns of the 1960s

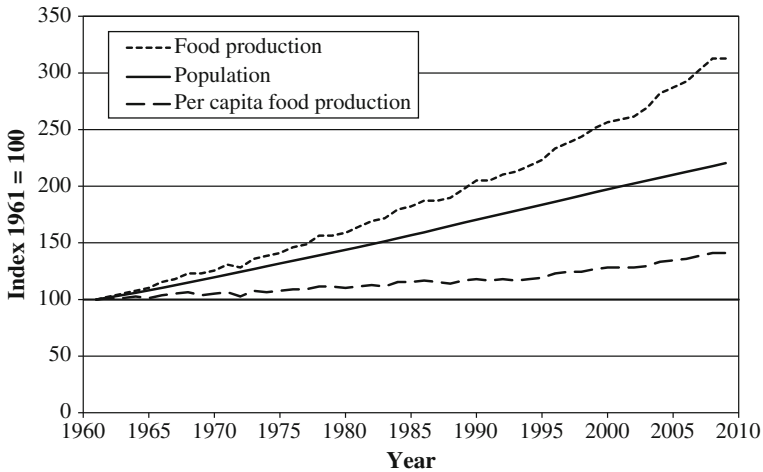
Observers in the 1960s worried about a number of potential challenges created by rapid population growth. In this section, I focus on three of the most important areas of concern. First, and perhaps the biggest concern, was that we would not be able to feed everyone, especially in the poorest and fastest growing countries. Second, we were worried about depletion of many critical, nonrenewable resources. Third, we were concerned that levels of poverty, already high in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, would increase. In the subsequent sections, I address each of these three issues, drawing on data from a number of sources. As we will see, the big lesson is that the world survived the challenges of the population bomb amazingly well.

#### Food Production

Concerns that the population will grow faster than food production have been fundamental to the population debate since Malthus, who argued that while populations tend to increase geometrically (or, we would say, exponentially), food production increases only linearly. Because of this, these arguments suggest, population growth will eventually lead to starvation and will thus be checked by increased mortality (Lee 1997). Many pessimistic statements were made about the world's ability to feed the rapidly growing population in the 1960s. One famous quote from Paul Ehrlich in *The Population Bomb* reads, "The world, especially the developing world, is rapidly running out of food . . . . In fact, the battle to feed humanity is already lost, in the sense that we will not be able to prevent large-scale famines in the next decade or so" (Ehrlich 1968:36).

Figure 4 presents indices of population and food production from 1961 to 2009 for the world using the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization's (FAO) food production index, with 1961, the first year of the index, set to 100 (FAO 2011).<sup>9</sup> Looking first at the period from 1961 to 1980, we see that the world did quite well in food production in the 1960s and 1970s. World population increased by 44% but food production increased by 59% from 1961 to 1980, resulting in per capita food production being 10% higher in 1980 than it was in 1961. I mention the 1961–1980

<sup>9</sup> The food production data are based on the production index for food from the FAOSTAT online database (FAO 2011), converted to a base of 1961=100. As of June 2011, the index covered the period 1961 to 2009. The population estimates are from the United Nations Population Division (2011).



**Fig. 4** World food production, 1961 to 2009. Data are from FAO (2011)

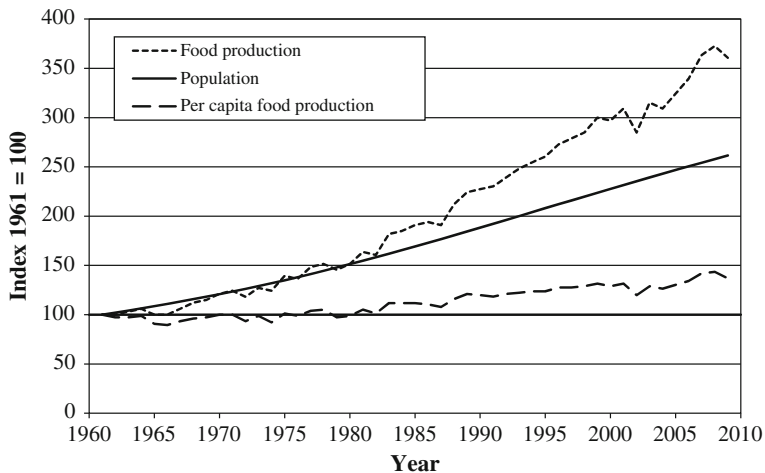
period first because concerns about food production continued to be voiced during this period, including some pessimistic predictions for the 1980s. Lester Brown argued in a 1981 *Science* article, “As the 1980s begin, the growth in world production is losing momentum and its excess over population growth is narrowing” (Brown 1981:1001). However, Fig. 4 shows no evidence of such a slowdown in the 1980s, and the growth of world food production continued to be impressive in the following decades. Food production in 2009 was 3.1 times its 1961 level, while population was 2.2 times its 1961 level, implying that that per capita food production increased 41% between 1961 and 2009.

These numbers are for the world as a whole. It might be argued that the real concern in the 1960s was with particular countries or regions. India was the focus of a great deal of concern in the 1960s and was a particular focus in Ehrlich’s *The Population Bomb*. He quoted the agricultural economist Louis Bean, who said, “My examination of the trend of India’s grain production over the last 18 years leads me to the conclusion that the present 1967–1968 production . . . is at a maximum level” (Ehrlich 1968:41). This was one of the reasons Ehrlich and others predicted mass starvation in India in the 1980s.

Figure 5 shows food production and population for India. Looking at the 1960s, we see that the pessimistic predictions for India had some basis. India’s food production was fairly flat through the mid-1960s, with per capita production falling by 7% between 1961 and 1967. Around that time, Green Revolution hybrid seeds were first used, leading to large increases in yields in the late 1960s (discussed in more detail later in the article). Food production grew impressively in the 1970s and 1980s, and by 1990 was 2.3 times its 1961 level. India’s population also grew rapidly during this period, reaching growth rates of 2.3% per year in the 1970s. Its 1990 population was 1.9 times the 1961 level. As a result, per capita food production declined in the 1960s, remained roughly flat in the 1970s, and then rose in the 1980s. Per capita food production in 1990 was 20% higher than its 1961 level.

There were concerns in the late 1980s that the impressive gains of the Green Revolution had played themselves out. In *The Population Explosion*, a 1990 sequel





**Fig. 5** Food production in India, 1961 to 2009. Data are from FAO (2011)

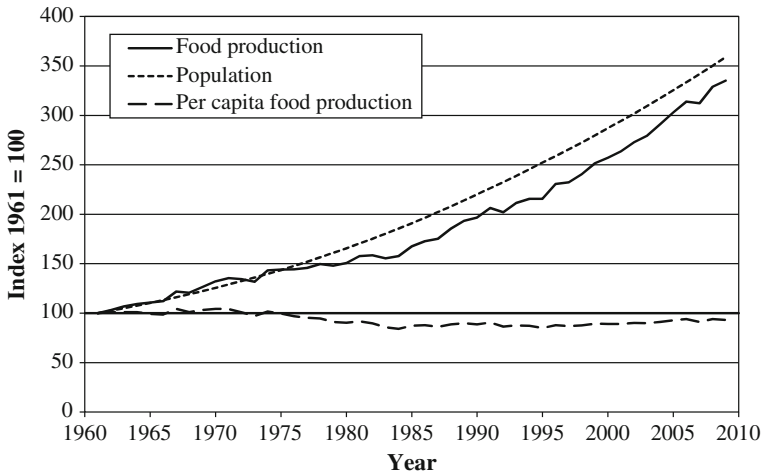
to *The Population Bomb*, Paul Ehrlich and his wife Anne Ehrlich made the following pessimistic forecast about Indian food production: “Since 1983, India’s rising grain production has lost momentum . . . the country appears to be facing a catastrophic problem in the 1990s” (Ehrlich and Ehrlich 1990:70). But as seen in Fig. 5, Indian food production continued to increase in the 1990s, growing at an average rate of 2.3% per year.<sup>10</sup> In 2009, Indian food production was 3.6 times its 1961 level, while population was 2.6 times its 1961 level. The net result is that per capita food production in 2009 was 37% above its 1961 level.

Looking at Fig. 5, it is important to note that there were bad years as well as good years. For example, 2002 saw a sharp decline in food production. One of the lessons of a 50-year record like this is not to focus too much on 1 or 2 years. The overall record of food production in India is one of impressive increases in output, far from the pessimistic predictions.

At the regional level, sub-Saharan Africa has lagged behind the rest of the developing world in both economic growth and fertility decline. Sub-Saharan Africa’s record for food production is actually quite impressive, however. As shown in Fig. 6, its total food production in 2009 was 3.4 times the 1961 level, a larger increase than for the world as a whole during the same period. Africa’s problem is that population increased even faster, with 3.6 times more people in 2009 than there were in 1961. Although per capita food production fell by about 7% since 1961, the African situation is far from being a total disaster. Food production has grown faster than population since about 1995, although the modest increase in per capita food production since then has not occurred fast enough to offset the declines of the 1970s and 1980s.

Before discussing other outcomes, it is worth noting the famous statement that “it’s difficult to make predictions, especially about the future”—an observation that has been attributed to many people, among them Yogi Berra and Neils Bohr, and is

<sup>10</sup> The results shown here are for total food production, but the trend for grains is very similar. The FAO’s cereals index grew at an average rate of 2.2% per year in the 1990s (FAO 2011).



**Fig. 6** Food production in sub-Saharan Africa, 1961 to 2009. Data are from FAO (2011)

relevant to this article. A corollary is that it is easy to look back and find inaccurate predictions, especially from 40 to 50 years ago. We can all be glad that we didn't make any predictions for others to look back and scrutinize. But, as we'll see in the next section, some people's predictions were a lot better than others'.

### Resource Depletion

I now turn to the concern that rapid population growth would cause depletion of essential nonrenewable resources. To economists, the best place to look for evidence of increasing resource scarcity is in resource prices. Non-economists don't always agree with this view, but to economists, it's hard to develop a model in which a resource that is about to be depleted has a price that is declining, especially a resource owned by private individuals or governments. So in this section I will look at what's happened to resource prices during the last 50 years.

In discussing population and resource prices, it is useful to bring up Julian Simon. Simon, who died in 1998, regularly attended the annual meetings of the Population Association of America (PAA) when I started attending in the early 1980s. He was a gadfly, always taking provocative positions, and he had a substantial impact on the population-resource debate. His 1981 book, *The Ultimate Resource*, was filled with graphs of things like the price of coal and copper over time. The overall pattern was of falling prices, although with lots of short-term volatility. The cover of the paperback, second edition of *The Ultimate Resource* says "Every trend in material welfare has been improving—and promises to do so, indefinitely" (Simon 1996). You can't get much more optimistic than that. Simon is certainly the poster child for optimism about the world's ability to survive the population bomb. The "ultimate resource" of the book's title is human ingenuity, which Simon argued is never in short supply and always generates solutions to the pressures created by population growth.

*The Ultimate Resource* included predictions that were in many ways more audacious than the predictions Ehrlich and Brown made about food shortages.

Simon offered to bet that the price of any mineral would decline in the future (Simon 1981:27). Ehrlich and some Stanford colleagues famously took Simon up on his bet, choosing five metals—chromium, nickel, copper, tin, and tungsten—and the future date of 1990 (Tierney 1990). It was essentially a futures contract in which Simon bet that the amount of the five metals that could be purchased for \$1,000 in 1980 would cost less than \$1,000 in 1990, adjusting for inflation. They began with \$200 worth of each metal. The inflation-adjusted price of each metal declined between 1980 and 1990. The amount of tungsten one could buy for \$200 in 1980 cost \$86 in 1990, adjusted for inflation. The amount of tin, copper, nickel, and chromium that could be bought for \$200 in 1980 fell to \$56, \$163, \$193, and \$120, respectively. The total cost of the five metals fell from \$1,000 to \$618, a 38% decline. Ehrlich wrote Simon a check for the difference. It's worth remembering that world population increased by 28% during these 10 years, an addition of 830 million people.<sup>11</sup>

The big picture of commodity prices is a bit more complicated than this 10-year bet implies. Figure 7 tracks the real price of these five metals from 1960 to 2010, setting 1980 values at 100 (data are from Kelly and Matos 2010). The “average cost” is the inflation-adjusted cost of the \$1,000 worth of metals in the Ehrlich-Simon bet, indexed to 1980 = 100. Prices rose in the 1960s and 1970s (the average almost doubled), perhaps the reason the Ehrlich team picked them. Prices fell in the 1980s (except for a spike around 1989), and fell still further in the 1990s. The bundle purchased for \$1,000 in 1980 cost only \$415 in 2000 (in 1980 prices). We also see a lot of volatility: these are traded in commodity markets with lots of speculation and short-term price movements. Figure 7 also shows the recent increase in commodity prices. Simon would have lost \$200 if the bet had ended in 2007 (prices were about 20% higher than 1980), although evidence of the volatility is that he would have won \$200 if the bet had ended in 2009 (prices were about 20% lower than 1980). The big picture is that these important nonrenewable resources cost about the same today as they did 50 years ago, despite the addition of 4 billion people.

Expanding the analysis from these five metals, Fig. 8 shows indexes for three broad sets of commodities: food, non-energy, and energy, taken from the World Bank Global Economic Monitor Commodity Indices (World Bank 2011). Much attention has been devoted to the spike in food prices in 2008 and 2010, and the general increase that began around 2005. It is striking, however, that food prices are about the same as they were in 1960. They were much higher in 1974, a result of the OPEC oil embargo. Food prices in 2000 were roughly half of their 1960 level, an important fact to put the recent increases in perspective. An index of all non-energy commodities, of which food is one component, looks very similar to the food price index. Energy prices are dominated by the rise of OPEC in the 1970s, followed by price declines in the 1980s, then large increases in recent years. Energy prices are so dominated by OPEC's market manipulations, however, that they provide little information about actual resource scarcity.

The big picture in commodity prices has something for both pessimists and optimists. For pessimists, there is the fact that non-energy prices more than doubled since 2000. For optimists, we have the fairly amazing fact that while world population doubled from 1960 to 2000, the price of non-energy commodities fell

<sup>11</sup> Ehrlich's perspective on this bet can be found in Ehrlich and Ehrlich (1996).

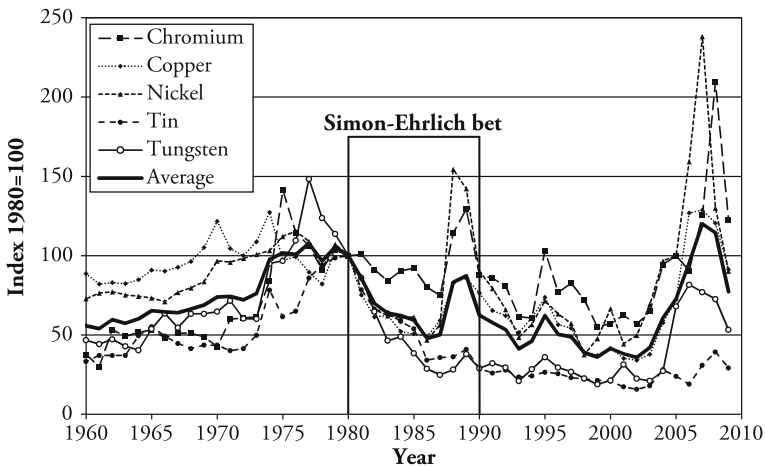


Fig. 7 Real prices of metals, 1960 to 2010. Data are from Kelly and Matos (2010)

almost 50%. These two facts roughly offset each other, with the price of non-energy commodities in 2009 almost exactly at its 1960 level.

Poverty

I now turn to the concern that rapid population growth would lead to increased poverty in low-income countries. The World Bank has invested considerable resources in trying to make consistent estimates of poverty across countries and across time, going back to 1981 (Chen and Ravallion 2010). Angus Deaton’s 2010 presidential address to the American Economic Association (Deaton 2010) is a cautionary tale about comparisons of poverty across countries and about the World Bank’s poverty line, but it leaves some room for believing that the World Bank’s estimates of trends in poverty represent real trends.

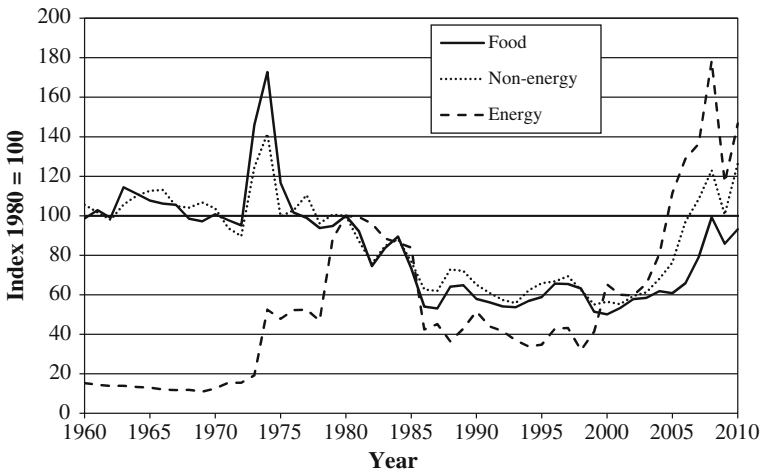
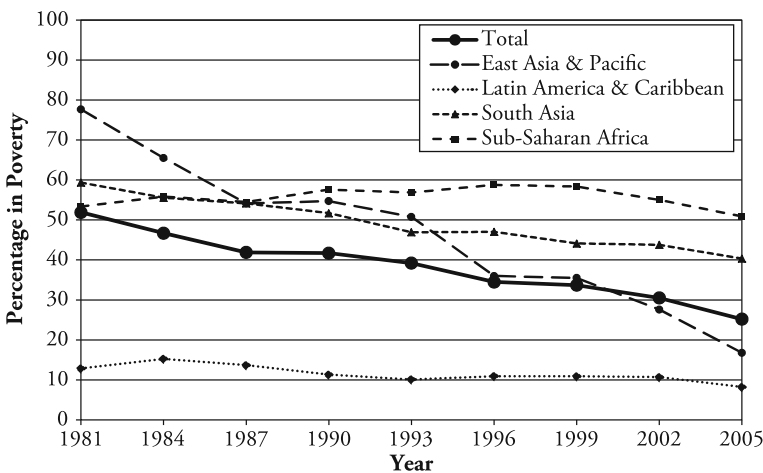


Fig. 8 World Bank index of real commodity prices, 1960 to 2010. Data are from World Bank (2011)

Figure 9 shows the World Bank's estimates of poverty from 1981 to 2005 for all low- and middle-income countries and for separate regions (Chen and Ravallion 2010). Using a poverty line of household per capita consumption of \$1.25 per day, the World Bank estimates that the percentage of the population in poverty in low- and middle-income countries fell from 52% in 1981 to 25% in 2005. Based on a poverty line of \$2.00 per day, there was a decline from 69% to 47% (see Fig. A4 in Online Resource 1). Large declines in poverty in China play a major role in the aggregate picture. If we leave out China, the poverty rate for all low- and middle-income countries fell from 40% to 28% (see Fig. A4).

The success in reducing poverty varies greatly by region, as seen in Fig. 9. The pattern for East Asia is dominated by the experience of China and shows a remarkable decline in poverty from 78% to 17% based on the \$1.25 poverty line. Estimates for China separately show a decline from 84% in 1981 to 16% in 2005 (Chen and Ravallion 2010). Latin America had much lower poverty in 1981, at a little over 10%, and has had modest declines since then. Poverty in South Asia, dominated by the experience of India, declined from 59% to 40%. Estimates for India separately (not shown) indicate a decline from 60% to 42%. Sub-Saharan Africa has been less successful in reducing poverty, with a slight decline from 53% in 1981 to 51% in 2005.

Given the rapid population growth during this period, we might wonder whether the declines in poverty rates were large enough to cause a decline in the absolute number in poverty. For all countries at the \$1.25 poverty line, the answer is yes. The absolute number in poverty is estimated to have declined from 1.9 billion in 1981 to 1.4 billion in 2005 (see Fig. A5 in Online Resource 1). Based on the \$2.00 per day poverty line, the number increased until 1999 and then declined to about the same level in 2005 as it was in 1981. The large decrease in poverty in China once again has a big impact on the numbers. If we leave out China, the absolute number in poverty at the \$1.25 poverty line increased from 1.1 billion in 1981 to 1.2 billion in



**Fig. 9** World Bank estimates of percentage in poverty for all low- and middle-income countries and by region, poverty line per capita household consumption less than \$1.25 per day, 2005 U.S. dollars. Data are from Chen and Ravallion (2010)

2005, although the recent trend is downward. Given the relatively constant poverty rate and rapid population growth in sub-Saharan Africa, the number living below the \$1.25 per day poverty line in the region is estimated to have increased from 214 million in 1981 to 391 million in 2005.

## How Did We Survive?

In the previous sections, I have tried to make the case that the world really did have a population explosion, that we are well through the worst of it, and that we have made it through in remarkably good shape, with increased per capita food production, declines in commodity prices during the period of most rapid growth, and declining rates of poverty. As I've noted, not every indicator is positive, and at the end of the article I will return to some of the challenges that remain. Still, it is surely worth marveling at the fact that we did not experience mass starvation given a doubling of world population in 39 years. So how did we do it? Obviously, many factors were involved. At the risk of greatly oversimplifying a complex period of rapid economic and social change, I will highlight six factors, three of which I have labeled economic and three of which I have labeled demographic. A common theme throughout this section is the adaptations made by individuals, firms, and policy makers in response to the pressures created by rapid population growth. Arguably the biggest mistake made by the pessimists of the 1960s was in underestimating the impact of these adaptations.

### Economic Factors

I will begin by discussing the three economic factors, which I have identified as (1) market responses, (2) innovation, and (3) globalization. These are far from cleanly separable, but each captures some important economic forces that deserve credit for understanding how we survived the population bomb.

#### *Market Responses*

By market responses I mean things like the fact that when food prices go up, farmers grow more food. We have already seen evidence of market responses in the preceding discussion. The fall in the prices of the five metals in the Simon-Ehrlich bet is explained by factors such as cartels falling apart because of market pressures and producers switching to alternative materials. While the magic of the market may not seem all that magical in the current economic crisis, we should not lose sight of the powerful positive force the market can be. Economic agents all over the world, from small farmers to seed producers to clothing manufacturers to parents sending children to school, have responded to economic incentives created by population growth. In some cases, there have been dramatic changes in incentives, with exactly the results that economists would predict.

Consider the case of food production in Vietnam. Total food production in Vietnam in 2009 was 5.5 times its 1960 level (see Fig. A6 in Online Resource 1). Vietnam's population increased 2.6 times during the same period, implying that per

capita food production in 2009 was more than double its 1960 level. While many factors were involved in this success story, one of the most important is the market liberalization reforms that took place between 1981 and 1989. The well-known Doi Moi reforms began in 1986, but reforms that decollectivized farms and gave farmers more incentive to increase output began in 1981 (Che et al. 2006; Pingali and Xuan 1992). These reforms helped stimulate a huge increase in food production, with output more than doubling between 1990 and 2010. Vietnam went from one of the world's largest rice importers to the second largest rice exporter in the world (FAO 2011).<sup>12</sup>

Market reforms have also played a critical role in China, India, and many other countries. GDP has been growing at rates of 10% per year in China and 6%–7% per year in India, growth that has led to substantial declines in poverty. When we see growth rates of food output or GDP of 7% and 10% per year, it becomes clear how countries like Vietnam, China, and India outraced the Malthusian devil in recent decades. The point is not that population growth does not create challenges for economic development, but that these challenges can be overcome when forces like market liberalization lead to this kind of rapid economic growth.

### *Innovation*

It's a bit arbitrary to separate innovation from market responses, since innovation is one of the most important kinds of market response. But I want to distinguish between what economists would call movements along a production possibility frontier—choosing among known technologies as prices change—and outward shifts of that frontier—developing new technologies that produce more from a given quantity of inputs. Food production is certainly one area where innovation has played a major role. Gale Johnson (2000:2) put it this way in his presidential address to the American Economic Association: “What made it possible for the world to escape from . . . the Malthusian trap? The answer is simple: the creation of knowledge.”

There is no better poster child for innovation in agriculture than Norman Borlaug, the American agronomist often called the “father of the Green Revolution” and winner of the 1970 Nobel Peace Prize. Borlaug developed new varieties of wheat in Mexico in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, taking them to India and Pakistan beginning in 1965.<sup>13</sup> The results of the hybrid varieties developed by Borlaug and others were spectacular. As Bongaarts (1996) pointed out, increased yields are by far the most important factor explaining increased food production, with increased cropland and crop frequency playing much smaller roles. FAO data can be used to analyze agricultural productivity per hectare of land since 1961 (FAO 2011). For the world as a whole, rice yields were 2.2 times higher and wheat yields were 2.8 times higher

<sup>12</sup> The latest milled rice exports by country from the FAOSTAT online database trade statistics are for 2008.

<sup>13</sup> For a history of Borlaug's life, see Hesser (2006). For overviews of the Green Revolution technologies, see Beddington (2010), Brown (1970), Cohen (1995), Dyson (1996), Evenson and Gollin (2003), and Glaeser (1987).

in 2009 than in 1961 (see Fig. A7 in Online Resource 1). In India, rice yields made impressive increases, although not quite as fast as the rest of the world. Wheat yields, however, increased even faster in India than in the rest of the world, with yields increasing 60% between 1967 and 1972, the early years of Borlaug's high-yield wheat, and more than tripling between 1961 and 2009.

Data on yields provide evidence for pessimists as well, however. Yields have leveled off since 1990, and especially since 2000. And the Green Revolution has certainly had its critics. The high-yield hybrid seeds require intensive use of fertilizers and irrigation, raising concerns about environmental consequences such as soil degradation, aquifer depletion, and chemical pollution (Cohen 1995; Evenson and Gollin 2003). Recent problems in food production and rising food prices have been the focus of influential articles in publications such as *The Economist* (2011) and the *New York Times* (Gillis 2011). Many factors affect current food prices, some of them with disturbing implications for the future. There have been major crop failures in recent years in several countries, possibly related to global warming (Beddington 2010). Increased demand for meat in fast-growing countries like China is also playing a role, as is the diversion of 30% of the U.S. corn crop into ethanol for automobiles (Beddington 2010; *The Economist* 2011).

Looking back, we can see that impending famine in India, Pakistan, and other countries was a legitimate concern in the mid-1960s. It is understandable that the dramatic increases in crop yields following the introduction of Green Revolution varieties around 1967 seemed almost miraculous at the time, producing recognition such as Borlaug's 1970 Nobel Peace Prize. It's important to recognize that these new varieties and the technology that accompanied them did not just appear overnight. They were the result of decades of research supported by major funding from the Rockefeller Foundation, the U.S. government, and other organizations (Evenson and Gollin 2003; Hesser 2006). The lesson from the great success in food production in the last 50 years is not that we should be complacent and assume that current pressures on food supply will take care of themselves, but rather that we need to recognize the challenges and invest in the research and sound public policy necessary to meet those challenges.

There have also been many other innovations in the last 50 years: computers, cell phones, the Internet, and more efficient ways of producing almost everything. Although some of these innovations were the result of good luck, many of them were a response to population growth and actual or anticipated resource pressures. The idea that population growth would induce technological change has been suggested by, among others, Boserup (1981) and Simon (1986). Lee (1988) presents a formal model synthesizing this "Boserup" effect with standard Malthusian diminishing returns, and Kremer (1993) found empirical evidence that larger populations lead to faster technological change using historical population data. Many of the innovations of the last 50 years, including Green Revolution innovations in agriculture, are arguably examples of population-induced technological progress. These innovations are also part of the market response. There is a lot of money to be made in selling high-yield variety seeds and a lot of money to be made by farmers in growing them. Although the many technological advances of the last 50 years do not guarantee that we will come up with equally successful innovations in the future, they are certainly a reason for optimism.



## *Globalization*

The third economic factor I want to highlight is globalization: the increased economic integration of countries through international flows of goods and capital. Globalization has many critics, but there is no question that it has led to increased efficiency in production and distribution.<sup>14</sup> World Bank data on exports and imports show that exports as a percentage of GDP more than doubled between 1960 and 2008 in high-income countries, rising from 12% to 29%, declining recently with the global recession (see Fig. A8 in Online Resource 1).<sup>15</sup> The increase was even larger in low- and middle-income countries, where exports as a percentage of GDP more than tripled between 1970 and 2008, from 10% to 33%. This is a big change from the protectionist policies many of these countries had in the 1960s. Increased trade is linked to increased fragmentation of production (Jones et al. 2005). A single product may now use components from all over the world. This has lowered the costs of products while also shifting jobs to places like India and China, a key factor driving poverty reduction in those countries. While not all countries have benefited from globalization, some of the big winners have been the very countries we were most concerned about in the 1960s.

India is in many ways the embodiment of all of the economic factors I have discussed. In the 1960s, it was the focus of many of the concerns about the potential for disastrous consequences from rapid population growth, including mass starvation. As we have seen, the actual experience was very different, with food production growing faster than the population and with rapid economic growth leading to significant declines in poverty. India was one of the primary beneficiaries of innovation in the form of Green Revolution agriculture and the development of computers and the Internet as a vehicle for economic growth in international provision of services. It is also an excellent example of the success of market reforms in producing rapid and sustained economic growth. Finally, India has benefited greatly from globalization, with its call centers and software industry being some of the best-known examples of globalization in the service sector.

## Demographic Factors

Demographic change has also played a key role in explaining how the world survived the population bomb. I focus on three demographic factors: (1) urbanization, (2) fertility decline, and (3) investment in children. Although investment in children is closely linked to fertility decline, I will discuss it as a factor in its own right because of its fundamental importance.

## *Urbanization*

The world in 2011 is much more urban than it was 50 years ago. The 4 billion people that have been added to the world since 1960 have mainly been absorbed in

<sup>14</sup> For a broad discussion of the debate regarding globalization, see Bhagwati (2007) and Stiglitz (2002).

<sup>15</sup> Data on exports of goods and services as percentage of GDP are taken from World Development Indicators in the World Bank's online World DataBank (World Bank 2011). Data on imports for these large aggregates of countries look almost identical.

urban areas. Figure 10 shows U.N. projections of urban and rural populations to 2150.<sup>16</sup> The medium-variant estimate for the total population, as noted earlier, reaches 9.3 billion in 2050. The urban population is projected to reach 6.4 billion, or 69% of the total. The rural population was overtaken by the urban population around 2009, and is projected to decline after 2020. Of the 4 billion more people in the world in 2011 compared with 1960, 65% are in towns and cities.

The population explosion, then, has mainly been absorbed in cities and towns, not in rural areas. This is partly because rural areas grew to become urban. But it's also because of rapid rural-urban migration, a response by individuals to the economic and educational opportunities in cities and the decreased need for rural labor as a result of increased agricultural yields. Urbanization is one of the challenges of population growth, but it is also one of the important ways that the world was able to absorb a doubling in 40 years without mass starvation or increased poverty. Why did putting people in cities help us survive the population bomb? Economist Edward Glaeser's (2011) recent book, *The Triumph of the City*, argues that cities are one of our greatest inventions, allowing us to make and trade things more efficiently and to interact with others to develop new ideas. Similar points are made in the National Research Council's overview of urbanization in developing countries (Panel on Urban Development, National Research Council 2003). Cities have been fundamental to economic progress in the last 50 years, and most low-income countries would do well to encourage rather than discourage increased urbanization.

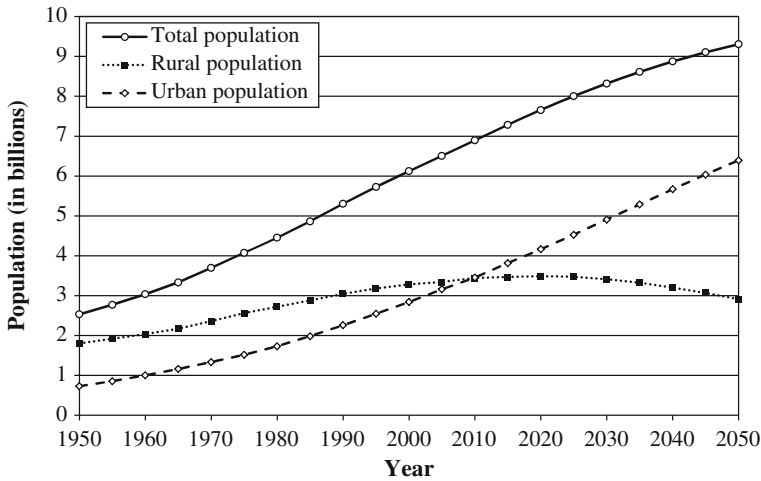
### *Fertility Decline*

Fertility decline was obviously fundamental to surviving the population bomb, since it is the reason world population growth has declined rapidly since the 1960s. Figure 11 shows U.N. estimates of the total fertility rate (TFR) for the world and major developing regions. The decline in the world TFR is quite remarkable, falling from 5.0 births per woman during her lifetime in the early 1950s to 2.5 births in 2010. This is a decline of 50%. If, as my late colleague Ronald Freedman liked to do (Freedman and Blanc 1992), we make the benchmark not zero but replacement fertility of 2.1, the decline is 85% of the decline necessary to reach replacement fertility.

Looking at the TFR for different regions in Fig. 11, East Asia, led by China, had the largest declines, falling to below replacement fertility by the 1990s. Latin America and Southeast Asia had declines almost as fast, both having a TFR in 2010 of around 2.3. The TFR in South-Central Asia, dominated by India, fell to 2.8 by 2010. Africa has had a later and slower decline, with a TFR around 5 in 2010. The period from 1960 to 2010 was surely the fastest fertility decline the world will ever see. With the important exception of Africa, women in developing countries moved from having around six births during their lifetime to having closer to two births. This fertility decline alone would make the last 50 years one of the most exceptional periods in demographic history, even in the absence of the historically unprecedented population growth.

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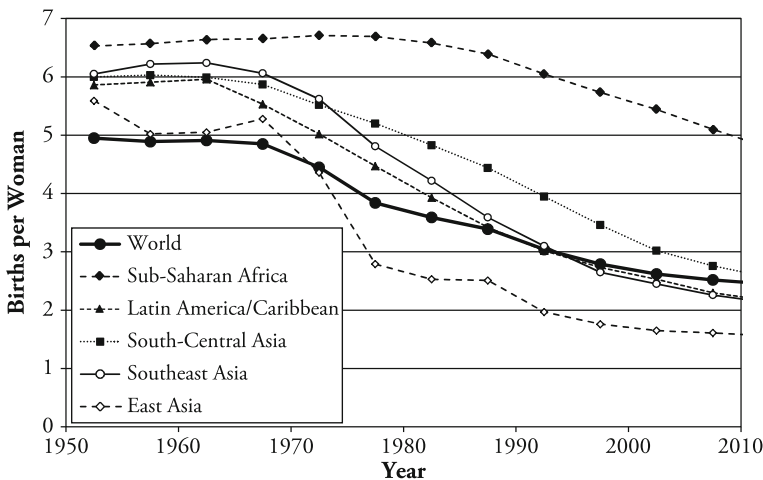
<sup>16</sup> These combine the proportions rural and urban in the most recent U.N. urbanization projections (United Nations Population Division 2009) with the 2010 population projections (United Nations Population Division 2011).



**Fig. 10** Estimated and projected urban and rural population in billions, world, 1950–2050. Data are from United Nations Population Division (2009, 2011)

*Why Did Fertility Fall so Rapidly?*

How do we explain this rapid fertility decline? Many distinguished researchers have contributed to answering the question, and there is no single answer or clear consensus. One of the most important factors is surely the rapid declines in infant and child mortality that were the main cause of the population explosion. As Karen Mason (1997) argued in her 1997 PAA presidential address, mortality decline is fundamental in understanding fertility decline. The fertility response to falling infant mortality was surprisingly fast, taking place in most countries within one generation. In this sense, the cause of the population explosion also helped bring about its end.



**Fig. 11** Total fertility rate for world and regions, 1950–2010. Data are from United Nations Population Division (2011)

Declining infant mortality caused populations to grow, but it also helped drive the fertility reductions that brought growth rates back down.

Although mortality decline is fundamental in understanding the fertility decline of the last 50 years, it is certainly not the whole story. Many would argue that access to contraceptives and family planning programs was essential for women to achieve a goal of smaller families. Others, especially economists, would focus on determinants of the demand for children, including income, wages, and the education and employment opportunities of women.

One approach to the question of what caused the fertility decline is to look at whether it resulted from a decline in women's desired fertility or from women's improved ability to achieve their desired family size. The latter emphasizes the role of increased access to contraceptives, while the former emphasizes the role of change in the demand for children. One way of looking at the issue is Lant Pritchett's (1994a) comparison of total fertility rates with various measures of wanted or desired fertility.<sup>17</sup> Pritchett's paper used World Fertility Surveys and Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) from the 1970s and 1980s. We now have much more data covering a longer period of time.<sup>18</sup>

Table 1 shows the TFR along with the "wanted total fertility rate" developed by Bongaarts (1990), using 185 DHS surveys for 74 countries (Demographic and Health Surveys 2011), a much larger set of surveys than Pritchett used. The wanted fertility measure counts only births of women who say they want another birth, with an adjustment for incomplete childbearing. Note that it is not a question about "ideal family size," and it is not based on *ex post* statements about children being wanted. It assumes only that women who want more children must have wanted all their previous children. Column 1 shows the means for both variables, with the mean TFR almost exactly 1 birth higher than the mean wanted TFR. In other words, on average, about one birth in the TFR for each country is due to unwanted fertility. The regression coefficients in column 1 are almost identical to Pritchett's earlier results (as is the scatterplot, shown in Fig. A9 in Online Resource 1). Pritchett's interpretation was that while there is unwanted fertility in virtually every country, the variation in the TFR across countries is almost entirely explained by variation in wanted fertility. The regression coefficient implies that a one-birth increase in wanted fertility leads to a 0.98 increase in the TFR. The  $R^2$  implies that 83% of cross-country variation in the TFR is explained by cross-country variation in wanted fertility. In other words, while unwanted fertility exists almost everywhere, there is little evidence that some countries have higher fertility because they have a larger gap between actual fertility and wanted fertility.

When Pritchett wrote his paper, only a few countries had more than one DHS, so it wasn't possible to look systematically at the relationship between changes in wanted fertility and changes in actual fertility. With the wealth of DHS data in the last 20 years, we can look more directly at changes in fertility. The means and regression coefficients based on annual changes are in column 2 of Table 1 (the

<sup>17</sup> Pritchett's paper generated considerable debate. See, for example, Bongaarts (1994), Casterline and El-Zeini (2007), Knowles et al. (1994), and Pritchett (1994b).

<sup>18</sup> This section has benefited from helpful discussions with John Casterline, who also provided his estimates of the fertility measures used here.

**Table 1** Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regressions of total fertility rate (TFR) on Bongaarts's wanted TFR using Demographic and Health Surveys

	Level (1)	Annual Change (2)
TFR, Mean (SD)	4.45 (1.49)	-0.060 (0.076)
Wanted TFR, Mean (SD)	3.47 (1.39)	-0.038 (0.063)
Number of Observations	185	111
Number of Countries	74	48
OLS Intercept (SE)	1.067 (0.122)	-0.028 (0.006)
OLS Slope Coefficient (SE)	0.976 (0.033)	0.829 (0.085)
$R^2$	.830	.466
Predicted Mean	3.39	-0.031
Predicted Mean/Actual Mean	0.76	0.53

scatterplot is shown in Fig. A10 in Online Resource 1). The first thing to note is that while wanted fertility declined by an average of 0.038 births per year, the TFR declined by 0.060 births per year. Clearly, changes in wanted fertility cannot explain all of the change in the TFR. The regression coefficient implies that a one-birth decline in wanted fertility is associated with a 0.83 decline in actual fertility. This is reasonably close to 1, providing support for Pritchett's argument that changes in wanted fertility drive fertility decline. But many countries experienced fertility declines that were considerably larger than their declines in wanted fertility. Given the mean annual decline in wanted fertility of 0.038 and the regression coefficient of 0.829, the predicted decline in the mean TFR is 0.031, 53% of the actual decline.<sup>19</sup>

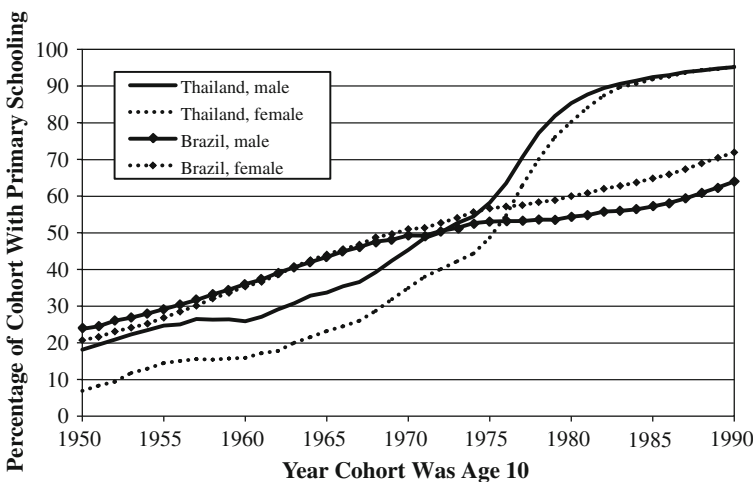
The analysis of changes in fertility gives a considerably different picture than we saw in the cross-sectional relationship between wanted fertility and actual fertility. Declines in wanted fertility explain 53% of the mean decline in TFR. The remaining 47% of the decline occurs without any change in wanted fertility, implying that women are now better able to reach their fertility targets. This could be due to improved family planning services, although a closer match between wanted fertility and actual fertility could occur without any change in access to family planning. It could indicate that women are better able to use the services that were previously available, perhaps because of increased education. It could also occur if women feel more strongly about their stated fertility objectives in more recent surveys, an indication of how difficult it is to disentangle fertility desires from the ability to meet those desires.

<sup>19</sup> Or, equivalently, the intercept of -0.028 means that 47% (0.028 / 0.060) of the decline in the TFR would have occurred in the absence of any decline in wanted fertility. Using the Casterline and El-Zeini (2007) measure of wanted fertility to decompose fertility change into a wanted and unwanted component for 44 countries, Casterline (2010) found that the median estimate is that 46% of the decline is due to a decline in wanted fertility, a result roughly consistent with the results in Table 1.

While economists have emphasized demand-side determinants of fertility decline, with considerable supporting evidence, it is certainly consistent with economic models of fertility that women would take advantage of being better able to control their fertility. Joshi and Schultz (2007) showed that the Matlab family planning program not only reduced fertility in Bangladesh but also improved the lives of women and their children up to 20 years later. In Brazil, on the other hand, family planning programs seem to be a very minor factor explaining that country’s rapid fertility decline (Lam and Duryea 1999; Martine 1996; Potter et al. 2002). There is obviously no one explanation for the incredible fertility decline of the last 50 years. In terms of understanding the enormous economic progress of the last 50 years, one key dimension of the fertility decline is that it has gone hand in hand with increased investments in children.

*Investment in Children*

I have listed investment in children as a third demographic factor explaining how we survived the population bomb. This is arguably just as much economic as demographic, and it is inextricably linked to fertility decline. It is so fundamental, however, that it merits discussion in its own right. In documenting the accomplishments of the last 50 years, I might well have included increases in education. To give just two examples, Fig. 12 shows the percentage of each cohort with primary schooling in Brazil and Thailand, using 2000 census data (via IPUMS-International; Minnesota Population Center 2011). Each cohort is plotted against the year it was age 10, roughly matching the years it was in primary school. In Thailand, the percentage of males with primary schooling rose from 18% in 1950 to 95% in 1990 (the 1980 birth cohort, the last cohort with complete schooling data in the 2000 census). Female schooling increased even more, starting at a primary completion rate of 7% in 1950 and catching up to the 95% rate of males by 1990. During the 1960s,



**Fig. 12** Percentage of cohort with primary schooling, by year cohort was age 10, Thailand and Brazil. Three-year moving averages based on 2000 census data accessed via IPUMS-International (Minnesota Population Center 2011)

the population aged 7–14 was growing as fast as 4.5% per year, doubling between 1950 and 1970.

Brazil's education performance was not as good as Thailand's, but it was still impressive. The percentage of males completing primary school rose from 20% in 1950 to 64% in 1990. Female schooling increased even more and surpassed male schooling in the 1960s, with more than 70% of girls completing primary school in 1990. During much of this period, the school-aged population grew at a rate of 3%–4% per year. The population aged 7–14 almost doubled between 1960 and 1990, a period in which the proportion of girls finishing primary school more than doubled.

We find similar patterns all over the world. Even in Kenya, a country with disappointing economic performance and slow fertility decline, the percentage of girls finishing primary school increased from 9% in 1950 to 71% in 1990, eliminating the gender gap. This is especially impressive considering that half of Kenya's population was under 15 in the 1970s. This is one of the most remarkable accomplishments of the last 50 years—providing more and more schooling at a time when the number of children was growing at historically unprecedented rates. It is also important to point out that these increases in schooling, especially for women, are likely to produce further declines in fertility and increased investment in children in the future, given the considerable evidence that better-educated women have lower fertility and invest more in children's health and education (Lam and Duryea 1999; Schultz 1993).

### *Why Did Schooling Increase so Rapidly?*

We don't have a Norman Borlaug of education to point to in explaining how schooling increased so much during a period in which school-age populations were growing by 3%–4% per year. Many actors get the credit: governments building schools and hiring teachers, parents sacrificing to send their kids to school, and young people doing their homework and staying in school. Market incentives also play an important role, since the returns to schooling in both earnings and employment have been very high in most countries.

Evidence from South Africa illustrates the determination of young people and their families to become educated. I've been involved in the Cape Area Panel Study (CAPS), an NICHD-funded longitudinal study of young people in South Africa conducted in collaboration with researchers at the University of Cape Town (Lam et al. 2008). Although South Africa's young people face many challenges, an important finding in CAPS is the persistence of young people in trying to finish secondary school. As an illustration, we find high enrollment rates among black (African) respondents aged 18 and older who have not yet finished secondary school. In 2005, 67% of black 19-year-olds, 45% of 20-year-olds, and 30% of 21-year-olds who had not completed grade 12 were still enrolled in secondary school (see Fig. A11 in Online Resource 1). This is not an entirely positive picture. Results from CAPS demonstrate the problems with the high rates of grade repetition that delay completion of secondary school (Lam et al. 2011), including the problems caused by having 21-year-olds in the same grade as 16-year-olds (Lam et al. 2009). But the good news is that young people show incredible persistence in trying to complete secondary school. As further evidence, 60% of our 18-year-old female respondents

with a child were enrolled in secondary school. Our results suggest that these young people are doing the right thing: finishing secondary school substantially increases earnings and the probability of finding a job (Lam et al. 2010a,b). South African youth clearly understand these incentives and respond by staying in school.

One reason schooling increased so much during a period of rapid growth in the school-age population is declining family size. As Leticia Marteleteo and I have shown, many countries in recent decades experienced declines in the family size of school-aged children simultaneously with increases in the size of the school-aged population (Lam and Marteleteo 2008a). Family size fell because of declining fertility, while cohort size grew because of population momentum—that is, the growing numbers of women of childbearing age due to earlier population growth. It is the link between declining family size and increased schooling that I believe is fundamental.

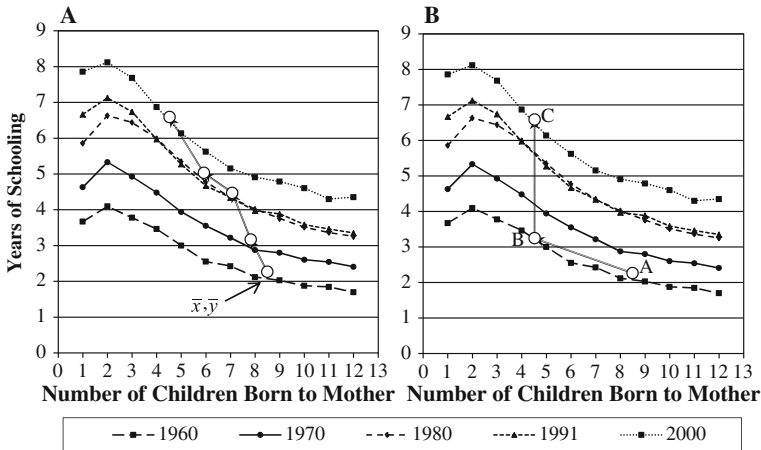
### *The Transition From Quantity to Quality*

Declining fertility and increased investments in children go hand in hand. A key point I want to emphasize is that the shift from couples having large families and making small investments in their children to having small families and making large investments in their children is one of the fundamental dimensions of economic development. This is one of the most dramatic changes of the last 50 years, and it is essential in understanding how we survived the population bomb. Economists think of this as trading quantity of children for quality of children, drawing on the pioneering theoretical work of Gary Becker (Becker and Lewis 1973) and Robert Willis (1973).

Several factors influence this shift. Declining infant mortality makes it rational to invest heavily in a small number of children. Rising incomes lead couples to increase their demand for “high-quality” children with good health, lots of schooling, and high consumption, a goal achieved by having fewer children. Suzanne Duryea and I have argued that increased education gives parents greater ability to produce well-endowed children, inducing a switch from quantity to quality, an argument for which we found strong empirical support in Brazil (Lam and Duryea 1999).

A quantity-quality model assumes that fertility and children’s education are outcomes of the same decision process, making it impossible to interpret one as causing the other. With that important caveat, it is interesting to look at the relationship between family size and children’s schooling during the demographic transition in Brazil. In Fig. 13, I use census data for Brazil to look at the relationship between the schooling of 16- to 17-year-olds and the number of children ever born to their mothers. I focus on 16- to 17-year-olds because they are old enough to exhibit considerable variation in schooling but young enough to be living with the mothers, allowing us to have data on their mother’s fertility. The vertical axis is years of schooling of 16- to 17-year-olds. The horizontal axis is the number of children born to their mother—the family size experienced by the child. The figure shows a significant negative relationship between schooling and family size. Looking at the 1960 census, children whose mother had two children had 4 years of schooling, while children whose mother had nine children had 2 years of schooling. The negative relationship between family size and children’s schooling is





**Fig. 13** Years of schooling of 16- to 17-year-olds, Brazil, 1960–2000. Estimates based on census data for each year accessed via IPUMS-International (Minnesota Population Center 2011)

fairly similar across years, with the slope becoming somewhat more negative over time. Increased schooling in Brazil clearly involves more than just reductions in family size, however. For example, children with 10 siblings in 2000 had more schooling than children with 1 sibling in 1960.

It is instructive to look at mean family size and mean schooling in every year, shown by the  $\bar{x}$ ,  $\bar{y}$  dots in Panel A of Fig. 13. The dot for 1960 shows that mean family size was 8.5 and mean schooling was 2.3 years.<sup>20</sup> Looking at the combination of mean family size and mean schooling for each year, the movement up and to the left shows that family size decreased and schooling increased over time. Schooling of 16- to 17-year-olds increased by 4.3 years between 1960 and 2000, while their family size fell by four children. Brazil has moved from large families in which children received little schooling to small families in which children receive considerably more schooling.

Increased schooling is not simply due to couples having smaller families, however. We can compare movements along the curves, indicating that children in smaller families get more schooling, with upward shifts of the curves, indicating that children of a given family size get more schooling over time. This approach is shown in Panel B of Fig. 13. If we take the curve for 1960 and move everyone to the 2000 mean family size of 4.5 (moving from Point A to Point B), schooling increases by about 1 year, about 25% of the overall 1960–2000 increase. When we then shift up to the 2000 curve (moving from Point B to Point C) schooling increases by 3.3 years, about 75% of the 1960–2000 increase. So a simple decomposition is that smaller family size accounts for about 25% of increased schooling between 1960 and 2000, with the remaining 75% due to a host of factors affecting both schooling supply and schooling demand.

<sup>20</sup> If it seems odd that mean family size was 8.5 at a time when the TFR was about 6, the explanation is provided in Sam Preston's classic paper on family size of women and family size of children (Preston 1976). As Leticia Marteleto and I have shown, a good rule of thumb is that the mean family size for school-age children is about 40% larger than the TFR around the same time (Lam and Marteleto 2008b).

The increase of 4.3 years of schooling for 16- to 17-year-olds in Brazil between 1960 and 2000 is a substantial increase, especially in light of the rapid growth of the school-aged population during this period. Schooling growth in many other countries was even more impressive, with a general pattern in the developing world of today's young people being much better educated than their parents. This improvement in education helps explain the economic progress of the last 50 years and is another reason for optimism about the decades to come.

## Have We Really Survived?

In the preceding sections, I provided evidence of a number of positive—in many ways remarkably positive—developments during the last 50 years. Many of these can be viewed as direct responses to the pressures and incentives created by declining mortality and rapid population growth. There are many less-positive trends that I have not discussed, however, including environmental problems such as climate change. Although it is impossible to do justice to the many complex environmental challenges we currently face, I will briefly touch on a few issues.

### Global Warming and Pollution

Looking at one piece of evidence on global warming—mean global annual temperature—recent temperatures are 2 degrees Fahrenheit above their 1880–1920 level, with about a 1-degree increase since 1980 (Fig. A12 in Online Resource 1).<sup>21</sup> It is beyond the scope of this article, to discuss global warming in detail, but two points deserve emphasis. First, it is no surprise to economists that some things have worked out better than others as world population has increased. In domains with ownership of resources and well-functioning markets, as with food and most other commodities, market pressures and price signals induce increased supply, behavioral change, and innovation extremely well. In domains without markets and resource ownership, problems are much more likely. With a few exceptions, there is no cost to polluting the air or oceans—no market mechanism to make polluters bear the costs of the externalities they impose on their neighbors or the world. This was a key conclusion of the 1986 National Research Council Working Group on Population Growth and Economic Development: population growth is more likely to create environmental damage when externalities are important (National Research Council 1986). As the report pointed out, the problem is not population growth *per se*, but the fact that environmental resources are common property. The challenge is to find solutions that address the problem of externalities.

Second, there are some environmental success stories. Sulfur dioxide emissions, the major cause of acid rain, increased from 1900 until about 1970 in the United States (data based on Smith et al. (2011) are shown in Fig. A13 in Online Resource 1). Emissions decreased sharply starting around 1970 because of better technology, use of lower-sulfur coal, and regulation. The 1990 Clean Air Act created the Acid

<sup>21</sup> These data are from the U.S. National Aeronautics and Space Administration's Goddard Institute for Space Studies (NASA 2011).

Rain Program, a very successful market-based cap-and-trade system. The result is that U.S. sulfur dioxide emissions in 2005 were less than half their 1970 level and were below the 1910 level. Another success story is the massive reductions in chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs)—a leading cause of the hole in the ozone layer—resulting from the 1987 Montreal Protocol (Guus et al. 2007). These examples must, of course, be weighed against the many environmental problems with which we have not achieved similar successes. But they do suggest that environmental problems do not always get worse and that there are frameworks for solutions in the presence of adequate commitment.

### Are Consumption Levels Sustainable?

Rising incomes in countries like China and India have increased the demand for food, automobiles, air conditioning, and the kinds of consumption that have contributed to the high commodity prices and environmental challenges we currently face. With more than 2 billion people in China and India alone, and with consumption levels in these countries sure to increase in the future, many are understandably worried about whether the world's level of consumption is sustainable. There is no question that these are difficult challenges and that we will need the creativity of many future Norman Borlaugs to meet them. I do not want to minimize the magnitude of those challenges. But I do want to emphasize how amazing it is that in 2011 we are worried about the problems resulting from such rapid increases in consumption in India and China. Imagine someone writing in 1961 that in 50 years we would be worrying about how fast per capita consumption is growing in India and China, rather than worrying about mass starvation in those countries.

### Conclusions

There is much to worry about in the coming decades. Between 2011 and 2050, the world will add 2 billion people, the equivalent of two more Indias. Evidence of flattening crop yields, increasing food prices, and climate change provides plenty of cause for concern. But the lesson of the last 50 years is that the world survived challenges that were in many ways much more daunting. Instead of adding 2 billion people in 39 years, we added 3 billion people in 39 years. Rather than the 30% increase that's projected between 2011 and 2050, we increased by 100% between 1960 and 1999. The world is projected to reach 10 billion people by 2083. The challenge of adding 3 billion people in 72 years seems somewhat less challenging when we keep in mind that we added 3 billion people in 39 years between 1960 and 1999, an increase of 100% rather than the 43% from the next 3 billion.

We have seen that during the last 50 years of historically unprecedented population growth, we experienced substantial increases in food production per capita, declines in resource prices during the period of most rapid growth, and decreases in poverty rates in developing countries. School-age populations grew faster than they will ever grow again, yet we saw the largest increases in schooling we'll ever see. Given all this, I remain in the camp of the optimists. I'm sure that by

the time of the 2050 PAA annual meeting, the world will still face important challenges, but I also expect that it will have improved in many ways, including lower poverty rates, higher levels of education, and plenty of food to go around. I'm optimistic not because the problems posed by continued population growth are simple or because they will take care of themselves, but rather because the last 50 years have demonstrated our capacity to recognize the challenges and to tackle them with hard work and creativity. I'm confident that the members of PAA will continue to make important contributions to these efforts by collecting the data necessary to track demographic and social change, by rigorously analyzing those data, and by having lively debates about what the results mean.

**Acknowledgments** This is a revised version of the presidential address presented at the annual meeting of the Population Association of America on April 1, 2011, in Washington, D.C. The article draws on previous work, including Lam (2005), Lam and Duryea (1999), and Lam and Marteleto (2008a). Excellent research assistance was provided by Kendra Goostrey and Laura Zimmermann. Valuable comments were provided by many of my colleagues at the University of Michigan and by two anonymous reviewers. Financial support for the research that is presented here was provided by the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

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