Africa's population is growing rapidly, and the country's resources may not be able to keep up.

Keywords

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Transcript

Africa's Population Explosion

BRYANT GUMBEL, co-host (Victoria Falls National Park, Zimbabwe):

Spectacular shot at 7:43 on a Friday morning in Africa. You know, in our mini-tours this week we have graphically noted the population of various countries. Yet, in all honesty, we must tell you that those numbers were grossly outdated as soon as we printed them because the fact is Africans are having babies at alarming rates—record rates that threaten to offset any and all strides being made on this entire continent.

From Egypt in the north, to Nigeria in the west, from Kenya in the east, to even Madagascar off the coast, Africa's population is exploding like nothing the world has ever seen. This is the fastest growing region in all the world. Thirty years ago, there were only 200 million people in all of sub-Saharan Africa. Today, there are almost half a billion, and there may be twice that by the end of the century. With more people straining the continent's limited resources, Africans face crippling problems, unless they can get their birthrates under control.

Dr. DJIBRIL DIALLO (UNICEF): Family planning needs to go hand in hand with measures like education, with measures like controlling child deaths, and with measures like raising income levels of families.

GUMBEL: Even if economic development in the near future exceeds optimistic projections, at current population rates, African incomes will actually decline.

Dr. DIALLO: Overpopulation brings about pressures on meager resources. Therefore, it leads to destruction of the environment. People cut down trees for their own daily needs. The result is that the desert encroaches on fertile land, and you have the degradation that we all see in West Africa, in southern Africa, with thousands, if not millions, of lives being at risk.

GUMBEL: Periodic pictures of mass starvation are the most extreme illustration of the difficulty Africans face in feeding their growing population. But there are many others that warrant concern. In parts of Africa, the population explosion has already played a major role in depleting resources dangerously close to the point of no return.
It's easy for outsiders to look at this continent's population problems and point to obvious Western solutions, but here in sub-Saharan Africa, there is a resistance to birth control that's rooted in culture and economics. You see, in this part of the world, one's status is often tied to the number of children they have, and since most Africans are farmers, children are of great practical value, too.

Throughout an often turbulent and uncertain history, the extended family has always been the bedrock of African life, but on a continent where good health care is still not widespread, many rural families can expect to lose several of their children to diseases that are easily cured elsewhere.

Dr. DIALLO: My mother and my father were not lucky enough to go to school, and for six of my brothers and sisters to survive, my mother had to have 12 children. Six children died, and six survived.

GUMBEL: Until Africans can be more confident that the children they bring into this world and love so much will survive, many will continue to resist the concept of family planning.

Between the 11th and 15th centuries, a great civilization flourished here at great Zimbabwe. More than 20,000 people depended on this city, which was a center of international commerce and trade, but gradually victimized by overpopulation, the city-state disintegrated, in part because the land simply couldn't sustain so many people.

Without significant population control, there will be one billion people on the African continent just 20 years from now. Cultural reasons notwithstanding, birth control may prove an urgent necessity lest much of Africa go the way of great Zimbabwe.