

Aging population does not point to a crisis

Editor's Note:

Aging population and declining birthrates are now a global issue. What caused the phenomenon? What lessons can China draw from international practice against the backdrop? George Leeson (Leeson), director of the Oxford Institute of Population Ageing shared his views with Global Times reporter Ji Shuangcheng.

GT: Can you briefly state the current challenges posed by population, especially in industrialized countries?

Leeson: We are looking for major global demographic trends. Clearly, the main one is an aging population. When we talk about population aging, it means a combination of more people living longer and, at same time, families having fewer children, which is squeezing the pyramid base and expanding the top of the population pyramid. This is what we call population aging. This is a global trend pretty much in every county around the world. It takes 150 years for a developed country to meet this challenge. It is happening very fast in emerging economies.

GT: It seems aging populations have become a problem across the world. Why?

Leeson: I wouldn't call population aging a problem. Different demographics produce different challenges and opportunities but they are not necessary problems. In term of people living longer, more and more people living longer has been an ongoing process.

We have a global level. We have data going back to 150-160 years ago showing that our maximum life expectancy has been increasing by 2.5 years every decade.

Some countries do have policies which are designed to encourage families to have more children. But let us make it clear that populations are not declining. There is a chance they may decline if low levels of childbearing continues. For specific countries, international migration has been a compensating factor which softens population aging but also prevents populations from declining.

If we trace its development in the

West, in the most developed economies, Europe for example, we have to go back to the end of the Second World War, when the process really began. The process took out the level of child bearing down to a level below what we call the replacement level. In some countries, it was significantly below the replacement level. What was happening then? At that time, economies in parts of the world developed dramatically. Production was increasing after the war. Women were encouraged to join the labor market in great numbers never seen before. At the same time, there was an increasing movement, a good movement to empower women who wanted equal opportunities in terms of education and career before they would think of getting married or a partnership and then think about having children. I am afraid many children became victims of this development. Given young peoples' opportunity to make choices about how many children they wanted when they were allowed to have children, the result was people decided that one child was okay. Sometimes two might be okay. But increasingly, we see young families who remain childless.

What we see now, young women in particular, want to have an education and a career. The average age of a woman when she has her first child has increased dramatically.

GT: How do you see the contributions of Thomas Robert Malthus, a renowned scholar in the field of demography?

Leeson: We are in a post-Malthusian era or neo-Malthusian era. I think the theory of principle of Malthus outlines the pre-existence of population. I think they are still relevant in many parts of world. In some regions, they are increasingly relevant. We see a drain of resources in regions, slowing population growth which is a tragic reason. Malthusian principles are still apparent in the world, still relevant in the 21st century.

Malthus was an academic, a thinker. When he put his ideas forward, it was

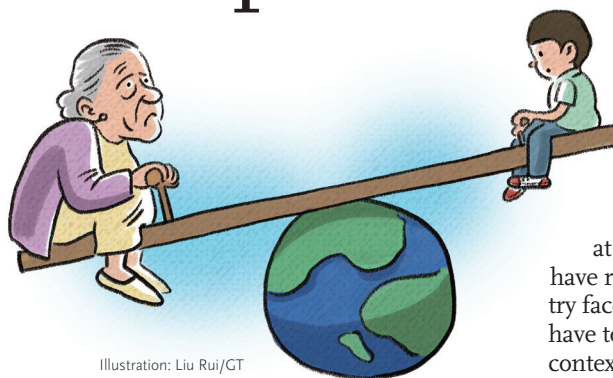


Illustration: Liu Rui/GT

just before British society changed. At the time of his writing what Malthus faced was absolutely true. But everything changed dramatically. We have industrialization as a workforce, industrialization of agriculture. We have improved sanitation. All of these things coming together meant people were living and having families, raising children changed completely. Not only did the people live longer, but fertility rates began to decline. There were no government policies driving this, it was society's reaction to the reality of the world around them.

GT: Many well-developed and industrialized countries are concerned about the low fertility rate. Do you think it is a "crisis"?

Leeson: I am not one of those people who think population aging is a crisis. I think it is a different demographic. The reason why it is causing so much debate is not that people live longer. We always want to live longer and healthier. The whole of society's infrastructure has developed to address a young population for the first time in history. We are seeing a mature population rather than a younger population. It is the slow pace of governments or institutions to address it that has caused the problem. It is not demographics. One example is restrictive retirement policies. Many of these policies are from the 19th century, not the 21st century.

GT: What lessons can China draw from international practice?

Leeson: I think we can always learn from one another. I wouldn't say look at the West to see how they addressed

population aging and do the same because not everything they have done to address this has been successful. If anything needs to be damned at all, I think some governments have reacted too late. For any country faced with population aging, they have to look at the social and cultural context and ask what their strengths are. Some governments feel that the biggest source of stress comes from our families. In some cases, governments should introduce policies which support families to have more children and look after older family members, which they like to do.

GT: How much longer can China's population dividend last?

Leeson: It is not only a question about demographics. As mentioned, technology has made human labor unnecessary in the manufacturing industry. The fear of a labor shortage might be overblown. In terms of learning from the West, models that support and care for older people are good, which is what we want. We need to learn about the quality of life and other good practices from the west.

GT: How do you see the relation between a country's population and its national strength?

Leeson: At the moment, we have an economic model and a labor model which is dependent on human resources. Therefore, given the global economic model, countries with large populations, and not only for the labor force but also with consumers, which drives the economy from a domestic economy to an international one. Is robotics continuing? One could say the biggest economic power in the world today is not the country with hundreds of millions, even billions of people. The countries with global technology firms that employ a few people and have an economy bigger than other countries. We are living in an exciting period. Younger generations are the citizens of the world, not just citizens of certain single economy.

By dramatically increasing forest cover, China sows seeds of ecological civilization

There are many ways to understand China's ecological civilization, among which is the indispensable knowledge that top Chinese leaders are serving as role models in the country's afforestation efforts.

President Xi Jinping and other state and party leaders made a tree-planting tour in suburban Beijing a day after China's Tomb-sweeping holiday.

Xi called for wide participation in China to plant trees, stressing that tremendous efforts are needed to increase forests, improve vegetation and tackle fragile ecological environment.

Afforestation has long been a tradition in China, a country which once suffered severe desertification. Since the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress designated March 12 as the National Tree Planting Day in 1979, it has become an annual ritual for top Chinese officials to plant trees in suburban Beijing around the Tomb-sweeping Festival, which fell on April 5 this year, a perfect time for spring plowing and sowing according to China's lunar calendar.

Actions like these by the top leadership are particularly meaningful as the country embarks on a carefully-designed

journey of realizing an ecological civilization, a new catchphrase in the country, to make the world's second-largest economy a more livable place.

Respect nature, follow its way and protect it. The Chinese leadership has been tirelessly promoting a simple, moderate, green, and low-carbon life for Chinese people, and asked them to treat the ecological environment with the same importance they treat their own lives.

While most industrialized countries in the world have bitter memories of pollution and environmental degradation in their early days of economic

growth, it is not too surprising that doubts emerge on whether China, the world's economic powerhouse, could keep its economy expanding at a reasonable pace while keeping its pollution and environmental degradation in check.

In 2018, China planted 7.07 million hectares of trees, and the country is home to the world's largest man-made forest in scale.

A recent Boston University study based on NASA satellite data shows that over the last two decades, "the greening of the planet represents an increase in leaf area on plants and trees equivalent to the area

covered by all the Amazon rainforests," with China and India leading the charge. China alone accounts for 25 percent of the global net increase in leaf area although the country holds only 6.6 percent of the global vegetated area.

This remarkable progress is a result of decades of persistent efforts by the Chinese government and people.

The article is a commentary from the Xinhua News Agency. opinion@globaltimes.com.cn