

## CONTRASTING CONTEMPORARY POPULATION ISSUES – THREE CASE STUDIES

### Introduction

In the last 100 years, the total amount of people living on Earth has grown by a staggering 5 billion (5,000,000,000). The consequences of this so-called 'population explosion' impact on various contemporary global issues, including economic development, global warming and the sustainable use of resources. However, in the absence of any all-embracing international demographic strategy, individual nations, both in the identification of the nature of their particular 'population problem' and in their response, have shown markedly different perspectives. In this **Geofile**, three contrasting case studies illustrate the nature and regionalism of contemporary population issues.

### China

China is a nation inviting superlatives describing every socio-economic indicator known to geography. Media attention, for example, focuses currently on the country's astonishing economic growth, with descriptions such as 'the world's workshop' – more familiar to us in references to Britain's nineteenth century 'industrial revolution'. Raw statistics fail, arguably, to illustrate adequately the rate of this contemporary economic development. Only comparisons against familiar established perceptions demonstrate the scale. For example, China will soon overtake Britain as the world's fourth richest country. It built more power stations last year than already exist here! It uses 40% of the world's concrete and 25% of its steel. The list could go on *ad infinitum*. Simple statements of an economy growing three times faster than the USA's, and projections 25 years from now that it will overtake America as the world's richest nation, perhaps say it all. The socio-economic and political changes behind this development are as complex as they are interesting, and beyond the scope of this **Geofile**. However, a key variable – for many, the basic, singular reason – is population. China is the most populous country in the world. Its population of over 1.3 billion (2005) represents over one-fifth of the world's total! This means low – very

Figure 1: Beijing, China - priority education for the first child



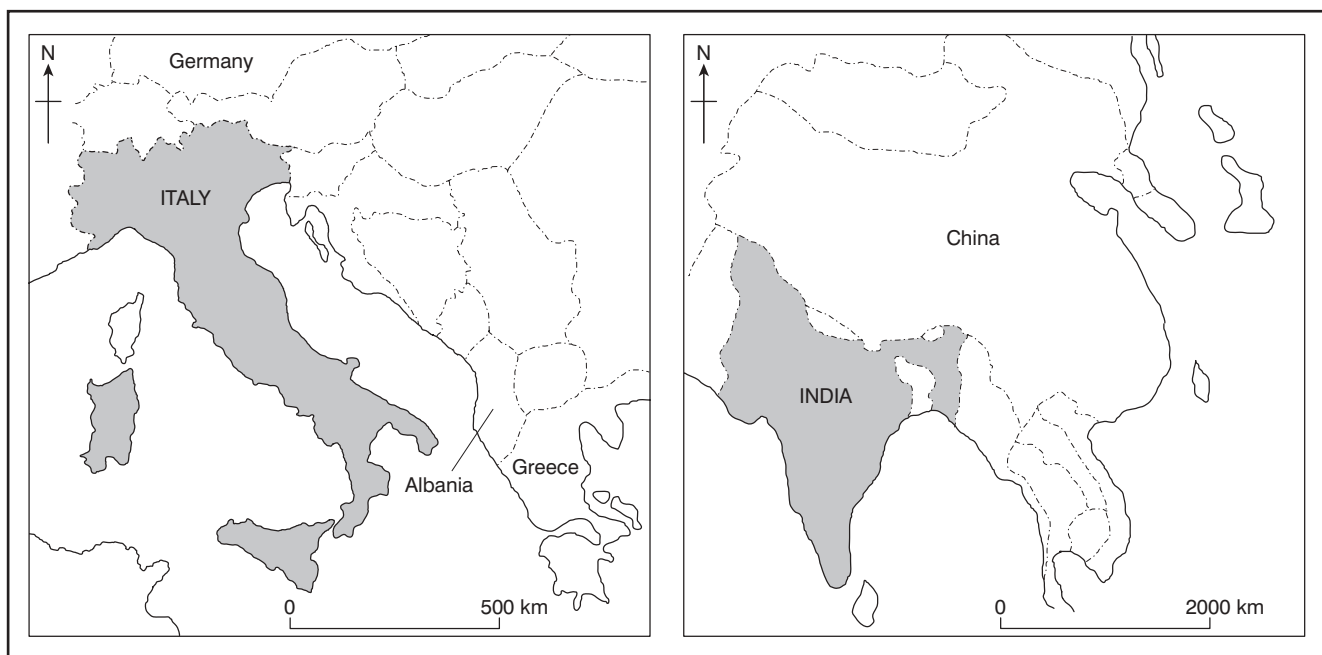
low – labour costs. Population, therefore, is central to understanding China's significance in the world today.

China's evolving **demography** is, rightly, both well documented and of enduring significance. It is worthwhile, therefore, to recap the reasons for, means of, and longer-term consequences of China's population and family planning programme. This originated from the political realisation by the mid-1970s that the country's average family size of three children and 'excessive' population growth might lead to mass starvation by the end of the 20th century.

As a response, the most drastic and controversial population policy the world has ever seen – the infamous 'One-Child' policy – was introduced in 1979. Although altered since its introduction, the policy, operating through national, provincial, prefectural, county and township levels, encouraged couples to have only one child through various incentives and restrictions, including:

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- a 5–10% salary bonus for limiting to one child
- a 10% salary reduction for having two children
- priority in housing, education and health care for 'only' children
- no extra space allocation for second or third children
- higher pensions on retirement for limiting to one child.
- These measures have undoubtedly been successful, particularly in urban areas – changing a reproductive pattern of high birth rate, low mortality and high natural increase to one of universally low rates for all. In addition, both maternal and infant mortality rates have reduced significantly, and average life expectancy has increased. Should the policy continue beyond 2030, it is anticipated, for example, that:
- the falling population growth rate will decline ultimately into natural decrease
  - population will eventually fall from a peak of around 1.5 billion
  - there will be significantly more food and resources to go round
  - literacy rates, for both sexes, will approach 'western' standards.
- China's authoritarian One-Child policy has, undoubtedly, provoked

Figure 2: Italy, India and China (NB scales differ)



international criticism. This is centred primarily upon claimed abuses of human rights. The population policy certainly challenges a Chinese culture and tradition based around the large family – with male offspring being particularly important. In rural areas, for example, a couple failing to produce a boy to carry on the family name are still regarded as ‘without face’. Reports persist, as in India, of the use of ultrasound foetus sex determination and selective terminations. Likewise, suggestions of increasing female **infanticide**, infant abandonment and even child trading continue to invite scrutiny. Furthermore, over-zealous ‘grassroots’ family planning ‘service providers’ have been accused, following the birth of the first child, of forcing both late terminations and sterilisations.

China’s population balance has certainly been upset, resulting in a male weighting threatening a suggested ‘marriage squeeze’ of insufficient brides for unkindly termed ‘little Emperors’. (This derogatory phrase stereotypes over-indulged single boys as typically obese, greedy, bad-tempered and lazy.) This challenges both the country’s moral and social fabric. More familiarly, from a ‘western’ perspective, is the ageing demographic structure – threatening too few young people of working age to provide for the elderly. However, the economic consequences of this are at best uncertain, given the booming economic development, referred to at the outset of this overview.

It is worth noting that government policy has been relaxed, at least for those relatively wealthy families who are able to pay to have two or more children.

### India

Each year India adds more people to the world’s population than any other country. Indeed, only since 2000 has the annual population growth rate of India fallen significantly below 2%. With a current population of approximately 1.1 billion people, India is forecast to overtake China in population size in as little as 20 years. In its pursuit to curb this dramatic rate of growth, India has followed similar population policies to China. Certainly, there has been a dramatic decline in **total fertility rates**, although the difficulties of implementation within deprived rural communities, and again, the moral dilemma of high rates of both termination and sterilisation, persist. Similarities and analogies with China should, however, not be overstated. In its political background, legacy of British imperialism, cultural mix and religious beliefs, India represents a subtly different set of challenges for population planners.

Unlike comparable LEDCs, population policies are not a recent phenomenon in India. The national family planning programme, established in 1952, has played an important role in India’s fertility decline. Despite a marked decline in the total fertility rate of 5.7 children

per woman in the mid-1960s to 3.3 children in 1997, concerns were raised over wider reproductive welfare. Following discussion at the International Conference on Population and Development, held at Cairo in 1994, a **paradigm shift** occurred in India’s family welfare programme.

The Reproductive and Child Health programme was implemented in 1997 and later embedded in the National Population Policy (2000). The policy affirms the government’s commitment to ‘voluntary and informed choice and consent of citizens while availing of reproductive health care services’. The policy aims to draw attention to issues such as sexuality, quality of care, men’s roles, informed contraceptive choice, adolescents’ needs, reproductive tract infections and HIV/AIDS. However, following subsequent rounds of the National Family Health Survey and the 2001 census, the ‘informed and expanded choice’ has yet to become a reality. Female sterilisation remains the dominant method of birth control, and sex-selective terminations continue as a hidden fact. Furthermore, cultural, religious, socio-economic and geographical constraints result in widely different fertility, mortality and contraceptive prevalence rates. In general, there is a north/south gradient – most western and southern states in India have lower mortality, lower fertility and higher contraceptive use.

The states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu, occupying the southernmost tip of India, are illustrative of the challenges facing population policies in India. Since 1971, these states have witnessed, consistently, the lowest rates of population growth whilst establishing themselves simultaneously amongst the more affluent states in India. For example, Kerala, with the highest literacy rate (91%, compared with the national average of 65%) and growing service economy is often quoted as indicative of the middle class society that has allowed India to establish itself as a newly industrialising country. Here, as in Tamil Nadu, the National Population Policy has seen significant success, with, for example, female empowerment and a majority of married women choosing to use contraception. However, even in these favourable social and economic conditions, challenges still need to be met.

The goal of 'expanded choice' is not yet a reality. Indeed, as stated earlier, female sterilisation remains the dominant form of birth control in India – over double the world average. This is particularly true in both Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The concept of spacing births has not really been promoted even within these more developed states and total fertility rates have fallen to close to **replacement level**. In Kerala, many couples have their children in quick succession, do not use any spacing methods and then 'opt' for sterilisation. Similar restriction of life choices appear replicated within Tamil Nadu. Here, the termination rate has increased consistently from 1971, with recent findings suggesting, that of the total estimated terminations, 40–75% could be attributed to sex-selection.

The last decade has seen a dramatic shift in population policy in India. India continues to grow in both economic stature and absolute population size. The challenge remains of continuing to offer individuals fertility choices. Innovative communication strategies are needed to reach out to all sections of the population, but particularly adolescents, the deprived, and rural populations, in order to deliver family planning advice, beyond the 'sterilisation option'. The mass media must be used in both raising awareness and communicating this advice to all communities – but

Figure 3: Kerala, India – 91% literacy rate



particularly to the rural, less accessible poor. Furthermore, within diverse social, cultural and religious backgrounds, changing approaches towards empowerment are also needed. For example, contemporary research suggests both men and women preferred going to persons of the same age, sex and social class as themselves in order to access contraceptives and advice on family planning. Raising the age of marriage, as in China, and removing any lingering pressure of sterilisation targets, are also noteworthy for consideration by state authorities.

### Italy

Italy shares a debatable stereotype with China as a land that has always loved children. Italy, particularly in the South, however, faces acute opposing fertility issues to both China and India. It has a slightly smaller population (58 million in 2005) than Britain, but due to falling birth rates over recent decades – Italy now has the second lowest rate in Europe – faces steady population decline throughout the 21st century. Predictions of 'extinction as a nation' within 150 years may well be alarmist, but deserve scrutiny nonetheless. Certainly, as with most European countries, Italy's ageing population presents its government with considerable socio-economic problems. Since the 1960s, its declining rate of natural increase has led, now, to natural decrease becoming established as the 21st century pattern.

Projections for this century suggesting over 40% of Italians being over 60 and less than 15% under 20 emphasise, graphically, the country's ageing demographic structure. It is interesting to note also that the similar factors of industrialisation, prosperity and improved education (particularly for women) that are eroding populations throughout the West are not dissimilar to the socio-economic themes raised in demographic studies of contemporary China. Furthermore, of particular note, is how dramatically the **emancipation** of women contrasts with Italy's arguably male-dominated Catholic culture. Italian society has, in the past, been identified with restricting opportunities for working mothers through limited part-time work placements and child benefits, restricted school hours, and a perception of too many men retaining their machismo and accepting no responsibility for childcare or domestic work. Repeated surveys emphasise the freedom, independence and material benefits enjoyed by single women – cars, travel, clothes and so on. This contrasts to a perception of unremitting domestic chores centred on 'mothering' a husband and rearing his children!

The consequences of this situation are potentially dire. State pensions are paid out of current tax receipts, yet there are fewer young workers coming onto the market. Forecasts that all workers' wages may be required to finance government debt and state benefit obligations suggest a bleak

economic future. Furthermore, towns and cities could be left with thousands of unwanted apartments, surplus classrooms leading to school closures, and many rural areas becoming depopulated.

The Italian government faces monumental challenges, having now to encourage private pension provision, part-time work and job sharing, in addition to evaluating school hours and the child benefit system. Proposals, for example, (along with Germany) to raise the retirement age by up to five years (from an average of 57 to 62) have not proved exactly popular! Certainly, continual review of immigration legislation is necessary. Italy changed in the mid-1970s from a country of net emigration to one of net immigration. It is also of note that Italy, along with Spain, Portugal and Greece, has enacted amnesty programmes for unauthorised migrants. This is a pertinent reminder of the undoubted potential for mass emigration of economic migrants from LEDCs to replenish Italy's dwindling stock of workers. However, low-status, low-skill, low-pay jobs in agriculture, domestic service and the 'informal economy' dominate their opportunities, and too often the issue is perceived as a 'problem' rather than an opportunity. Indeed, illegal immigration from, for example, Albania over recent years has tested traditionally tolerant attitudes throughout Italy. Racial attacks remind most societies of deep-seated **xenophobia** and Italy is no exception – hence governmental immigration policies currently emphasising 'control'.

## Conclusion

We live in a world of marked contrasts and rapid changes in economic development, and concerns regarding global warming and the sustainable use of resources. Population issues remain pertinent, however. They are certainly challenging and, as shown by the examples of China, India and Italy, one must avoid misleading oversimplification through sole focus on 'controlling' a 'population explosion'.

## Glossary

**Demography** The 'science' of population – especially statistical analysis of its variables.

**Emancipation/empowerment of women** Levelling of rights between the sexes regarding, for example, domestic roles, educational, employment and career opportunities.

**Infanticide** The deliberate killing of newly born children – predominantly female.

**Machismo** An exaggerated assertion of masculinity.

**Paradigm shift** A dramatic change of approach.

**Replacement level** A situation when there are just sufficient children born in any one year to balance the number of people who die in any one year.

**Sustainable** A widely used term that attempts to make a link between the level of resource use today and the need to balance this with the demands of future generations.

**Total fertility rates** The average number of children born to a woman in a particular population.

**Xenophobia** An irrational fear of foreigners.

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## Useful websites

[www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/](http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/) – CIA World Factbook.

This includes up-to-date socio-economic and demographic data on all countries. It is particularly easy to navigate.

[www.un.org/esa/progareas/pop.html](http://www.un.org/esa/progareas/pop.html) – United Nations Population Division.

This website includes extensive material associated with the so-called World 2004 Population Prospects. Using information extracted from national census' and specialized surveys, this population database details population estimates and projections for all countries. It is arguably the most up-to-date and comprehensive global population database available – particularly useful in extrapolating information on future trends in population growth.

## FOCUS QUESTIONS

1. Copy and then complete the summarising table below; include outline points only.

	China	India	Italy
Population problems	• •	o o	★ ★
Attempted solution(s)	• •	o o	★ ★

2. The International Conference on Population and Development takes place every decade. It is an opportunity for all countries to participate in the 'global population debate'.

(a) Suggest reasons why the conference includes both 'Population' and 'Development' in its title.  
(b) Imagine that you are the government minister representing China, India or Italy at the conference. Write a short opening speech outlining your main areas of concern, and any ways in which the international community may be able to help your country.

3. Some commentators describe global population growth as 'unsustainable'.

(a) What do you understand by the term 'unsustainable'? Illustrate your answer with reference to one named country you have studied.  
(b) In no more than 300 words, discuss the possible consequences of an enlarged global population in the next 100 years. You may wish to consider issues associated with the sustainable use of resources, regional differences in economic development and the accuracy of any medium to long-term predictions.