

Book Review

Decline and Prosper! Changing Global Birth Rates and the Advantages of Fewer Children by V Skirbekk

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A recently published book by the productive demographer Vegard Skirbekk has the commendable title “*Decline and Prosper!*” (Skirbekk, 2022). It is a valuable resource, presenting much research on fertility around the world. The book also raises questions about how to deal with high fertility and population growth in many countries.

The book has the sub-title “*Changing global birth rates and the advantages of fewer children.*” It is refreshing to see such a title after several alarmistic, one-sided books on the subject, like “Empty planet: the shock of global population decline” (Bricker et al, 2020). On the last page of *Decline and Prosper!*, Skirbekk concludes, “It is my view that countries should accept – if not embrace – low fertility and focus on how to make the most of a world with fewer children.”

The focus of the book is on fertility (children per woman, birth rate) rather than population growth. The book reads partly like a textbook on demography, and the title is thus a bit misleading. However, Skirbekk makes clear that the literature on fertility per se is huge. The reference list runs over 139 pages. I have marked 124 references that I would like to check or read.

The book contains 20 chapters including an introduction. Each chapter is short but substantive and concludes with a sort of summary and list of references cited in the chapter. The book covers a range of issues related with fertility as is reflected through chapter headings:

- Chapter 2: Measuring fertility
- Chapter 3: How many children can humans have biologically?
- Chapter 4: Fertility from the dawn of humanity to the nineteenth century
- Chapter 5: Demographic transition: fewer deaths and eventually fewer births
- Chapter 6: Contemporary global fertility
- Chapter 7: The new have-nots: childlessness in the twenty-first century
- Chapter 8: More education: fewer children
- Chapter 9: An era of choice: childbearing has become more planned
- Chapter 10: Fertility preferences: how many children do people want?
- Chapter 11: Delaying parenthood, for better and for worse
- Chapter 12: Finding a mate: contemporary partnership and conception

- Chapter 13: Money matters: economics of fertility
- Chapter 14: Fertility in the aftermath of disaster
- Chapter 15: New times, old beliefs: religion and contemporary fertility
- Chapter 16: Contemporary fertility from an evolutionary perspective: are the fittest still surviving?
- Chapter 17: How low will it go? Projecting future fertility
- Chapter 18: Fertility, population growth, and population composition
- Chapter 19: Fertility policies: past, present, and future directions
- Chapter 20: Low – but not too low – fertility is a good thing

Skirbekk starts by introducing basic concepts and tools for measuring fertility that are needed to grasp the research. I, however, miss the concept of population momentum which, combined with high fertility, helps explain strong population growth in many countries, although this mechanism is dealt with briefly on page 333.

Overall, the book is quite focused on “the West” and low fertility. The book does not focus on high-fertility countries, although chapter 19 treats issues related to high fertility under the heading “What countries should be doing.” However, problems of high fertility get a third of a page while low fertility occupies almost two pages. Skirbekk repeatedly emphasises the tension between the “West” and the “South”, religion-linked population growth, and other global factors.

The author stresses that “The increase in education is probably the main reason why global fertility has decreased” and that “it appears to be the most effective way to reduce fertility without resorting to coercion.” This argument and its evidence are elaborated in chapter 8 where Skirbekk presents fertility-education relationships as causal. This is backed up by results from the so-called natural experiments. However, several recent studies are not cited here. A review on the role of education in low- and middle-income countries has concluded that the effect of education on fertility is weak (Psaki et al, 2019). Another study has examined both education levels and the strength of family planning programmes in shaping fertility in Sub-Saharan Africa and showed that family planning programmes had great influence on contraceptive use, combined with education of women (Bongaarts and Hardee, 2019). The findings of a model published in 2020 are also consistent with a strong role of family planning programmes in deciding the level of fertility (de Silva and Tenreyro, 2017).

The international family planning revolution took place over about 35 years (1960-1995) and several researchers have concluded that family planning programmes were important for the decrease in fertility in many developing countries (Robinson and Ross, 2007). A separate chapter covering family planning programmes and the impact of these programmes on fertility decline, therefore, would have been motivated. The book mentions family planning and its history only briefly in different chapters.

There is no doubt that education, especially secondary and tertiary education, helps reducing fertility, and there is evidence for this, but the key question is: “Is education the main factor in fertility decline?” The content of education may be critical, but as far as I know there exist no comprehensive quantitative study on this aspect.

There are many issues that should have been discussed while emphasizing the role of education in fertility decline. Is sex education included in the school curriculum? Does the school curriculum include aspects of gender roles and family size? Has teaching contraception been included in the curriculum, especial in developing and other countries? Where such teaching does exist, it has very rarely been linked to environmental aspects, even in a developed country like Sweden. I presume that voluntary family planning programmes, where they are successful, have included these and other related aspects.

Fertility and migration are discussed but this aspect deserves a separate chapter. There are many chapters in the book, where many interesting studies are mentioned, such as increase in migration-related conflicts, and influence of migration on elections in many countries. Moreover, in pre-modern societies, 27 per cent of newborns died in their first year of life, and 48 per cent died before attaining puberty (Page 41). As Christianity spread, monogamy replaced polygamy; pre- and extra-marital sex faced harsh penalties, even imprisonment (Page 44). Marriage and its social conditions, and early forms of contraception, contributed to reducing human fertility.

An interesting graph on page 92 illustrates how replacement fertility (a pre-condition to zero population growth) is related to the life expectancy at birth. When the life expectancy at birth is 30 years, the replacement fertility is 5 live births per woman of reproductive age; when life expectancy at birth is 50 years, the replacement fertility is 3 live births per woman of reproductive age; and when life expectancy at birth is 80 years, it is 2.1 live births per woman of reproductive age. Clearly, mortality is critical, and will remain so. In Europe, childlessness was common, even more common a hundred years ago than today as 20-30 per cent of women remained childless (Page 109). Between 1940 and 1979, childlessness increased from a low level, especially among the least educated men. Few people prefer to remain childless. This proportion is the highest, about 10 per cent, in (East) Germany, Austria and the Netherlands (Page 123). In most of the developing countries, this proportion is less than 5 per cent.

The complexities of finding a partner in the West, especially for women, received much attention in the book. Can the Internet offer help and affect fertility? In the United States, during 1999-2007, regions that got such access earlier had stronger decline in adolescent fertility, which was confirmed in Germany too, but, in addition, childbearing also increased among women aged 25 years and older in this country (Page 167). Women in Europe want more children than men do, while in poor countries the opposite is the case, according to surveys presented in the book. Television may be helpful in reducing fertility. The show *Shuga*, addressing safe sex and unwanted pregnancies, reached 40 African countries and up to 550 million viewers (Page 183). Many other interesting examples are given.

Chapter 13 discusses the role of economy in influencing fertility, and financial costs and benefits of having children. Skirbekk notes that the “dollar models” of Becker and other economists are partly unrealistic as 40 per cent of global pregnancies are unplanned. However, a subheading “It’s still the economy, stupid” in the chapter makes it clear that economy matters – people, and their fertility respond to changes in the

economy, and its implications. The dramatic drop in fertility in Eastern European countries after falling apart the Soviet Union could have been added as an example.

Skirbekk and colleagues have done important work in quantifying the association between religious affiliation and fertility levels. The findings reveal that globally, between 2010 and 2015, the average fertility of unaffiliated women was 1.7 births per woman of reproductive age while the average fertility for women affiliated with any religion was 2.6 births per woman of reproductive age (Pew Research Center, 2016). Moreover, average fertility was 1.6 births per woman for Buddhists; 2.4 for Hindus and Jews; 2.7 for Christians; and the highest (3.1 births per woman of reproductive age) for Muslims. In Sub-Saharan Africa, fertility is higher in Muslims than in Christians, according to a recent review (Turner, 2021). Across European countries, fertility in Muslims is 47 per cent higher than the national average, and the consequences are discussed and dealt with in several chapters.

Skirbekk emphasises that “low – but not too low – fertility is good” and mentions the environment in support of his argument. Ecosystems and wild nature do not get much attention, although the author describes the threat of population growth to biodiversity, natural environment, and climate conditions. This section could have been expanded, since ecosystems are critical for humans, not the least for food. Environmental ethics and the purpose of our lives could also have been discussed. Demographers often neglect environmental matters, but it is good to see that Skirbekk includes the threats and the need to “bend curves.”

Returning to family planning programmes in the nineteenth chapter of the book, Skirbekk describes their remarkable success in East Asia (Pages 359-63) and in Iran (Page 368). He states that historians have concluded that family planning also had an intention by the rich countries to reduce and control foreign populations. These delusions of historians, especially the influential professor Matthew Connelly who argues that “the West” (mainly the United States) conspired to force population control on the Third World are misleading (see Götmark, 2021). The demographer John Cleland (2008) has described Connelly’s book “Fatal Misconception” (Connelly, 2008) as “bizarre and fundamentally flawed” and remarked “To equate efforts to reduce population growth with coercion is to ignore the fact that most poor countries pursued clear demographic goals by entirely voluntary means.” We know of exceptions, especially coercion in China, which should be condemned.

Although human fertility is the focus of this book one must not forget the global population increase, which, according to 2022 projections prepared by the United Nations Population Division (United Nations, 2022), is likely to continue up to 2086 under the assumed decline in global fertility. Unfortunately, the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda of the United Nations lacks a goal “Dampen Population Growth” which could have been valuable in realising the goals United Nations has set under its Agenda towards a more sustainable world. At present, population of only about 30 of the 200 large countries are decreasing (beside Japan, and European countries). The decrease in the population of Japan began in 2011 and its population has now decreased from 128 million in 2011 to 125 million today according to United Nations.

This means that there is no apparent problem for the economy or the environment of the country. Actually, some recent reviews argue that “ageing countries” and population decline are, overall, favourable for societies and for biodiversity (Götmark et al, 2022). In this context, I would have liked to see research on “optimal population” to be presented in Skirbekk’s book. What is the size of a global human population that can be supported sustainably without degrading the ecosystem on which the humanity depends? Assuming that all people had the standard of an average European, one study has calculated the optimal population of the world at 3.1 billion, less than half of the present 7.9 billion (Lianos and Pseiridis, 2016). A recent study, by the economist Partha Dasgupta (2019) also arrived at low estimates, ranging from 0.5 to 5 billion people that the Earth can sustain, depending on the standards of living and average income.

The book lacks an Index, making it hard to search for a subject or an author. References are listed after each chapter, which also makes it time-consuming to search for specific references (the e-book may therefore be better to buy). The text contains lot of data (numbers are given in the text). More data could have been provided in figures and in tables. The book contains 29 figures but no Tables.

There are very few typos in the book. It is well written, and easy to read. I recommend it to anyone interested in human fertility and demography.

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