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The Surprising Global Variation in Replacement Fertility

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Abstract: It is frequently assumed by the general public and also by some population experts that the value of replacement-level fertility is everywhere an average of 2.1 lifetime births per woman. Nothing could be further from the truth. The global variation in replacement fertility is substantial, ranging by almost 1.4 live births from less than 2.1 to nearly 3.5. This range is due almost entirely to cross-country differences in mortality, concentrated in the less developed world. Policy makers need to be sensitive to own-country replacement rates. Failure to do so could result in fertility levels that are below replacement and lead to long-run population decline. For example, the current replacement total fertility rate for the East Africa region is 2.94. Lowering fertility to 2.10 would, under current mortality conditions, result in a regional birthrate 29 percent below replacement.

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