

10 Reasons to Rethink 'Overpopulation'

by the Population and Development Program at Hampshire College

Fears of overpopulation are pervasive in American society. From an early age we are taught that population pressure is responsible for poverty, hunger, environmental degradation and even political insecurity. Conventional wisdom, however, is not always wise. It is important to rethink 'overpopulation' in relation to the following:

1

NUMBERS

The population 'explosion' is over.

Although world population is still growing and is expected to reach 9 billion by the year 2050, the era of rapid growth is over. With increasing education, urbanization, and women's work outside the home, birth rates have fallen in almost every part of the world and now average 2.7 births per woman. The UN projects that world population will eventually stabilize, falling to 8.3 billion in 2175.

2

POVERTY

The focus on population masks the complex causes of poverty and inequality.

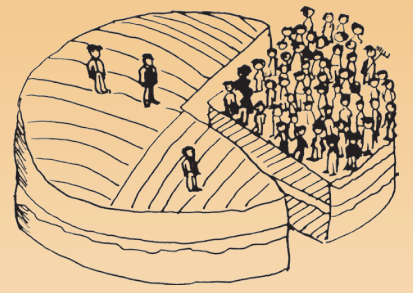
A narrow focus on human numbers obscures the way different economic and political systems operate to perpetuate poverty and inequality. It places the blame on the people with the least amount of resources and power rather than on corrupt governments and rich elites. In the late 1990s, the 225 people who comprise the 'ultra-rich' had a combined wealth of over US \$1 trillion, equivalent to the annual income of the poorest 47% of the world's people.

3

HUNGER

Hunger is not the result of 'too many mouths' to feed.

Global food production has consistently outpaced population growth. People go hungry because they do not have the land on which to grow food or the money with which to buy it. In Brazil, one percent of the land owners control almost half of the country's arable land. The U.S. is the largest food producer in the world, yet more than one in ten American households are either experiencing hunger or are at the risk of it.



numbers • poverty and inequality • hunger

4

ENVIRONMENT

Population growth is not the driving force behind environmental degradation.

Blaming environmental degradation on overpopulation lets the real culprits off the hook. The richest fifth of the world's people consume 66 times as many resources as the poorest fifth. The U.S. is the largest emitter of greenhouse gases responsible for global warming. Militaries worldwide are major agents of environmental destruction. War ravages natural landscapes and military toxins pollute land, air and water. Focusing on population blinds us to the positive role many poor people play in protecting the environment, such as preserving plant biodiversity.

5

POLITICAL INSTABILITY

Population pressure is not a root cause of political insecurity and conflict.

Blaming population pressure for instability takes the onus off powerful actors and political choices. Especially since 9/11, conflict in the Middle East has been linked to a 'youth bulge' of too many young men whose numbers supposedly make them prone to violence. Missing from this simple picture is how oil politics, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the Bush administration's war on Iraq are causing unrest in the region.

6

REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

Population control targets women's fertility and restricts reproductive rights.

All women should have access to high quality, voluntary reproductive health services, including safe birth control and abortion. In contrast, population control programs try to drive down birth rates through coercive social policies and the aggressive promotion of sterilization or long-acting contraceptives that can threaten women's health. In India, a number of states punish poor parents who have more than two children by denying them access to government assistance, employment and election to public office. In China, the one-child policy is still enforced through forced sterilizations and abortions.

7

HEALTH

Population control programs have a negative effect on basic health care.

Under pressure from international population agencies, many poor countries made population control a higher priority than primary health care from the 1970s on. Reducing fertility was considered more important than preventing and treating debilitating diseases like malaria, improving maternal and child health, and addressing malnutrition. This not only took a tragic toll on human life, but left countries without the public health infrastructure needed to face new threats like HIV/AIDS. The World Bank and International Monetary Fund have further undermined primary health care by forcing countries to cut and/or privatize health services, putting them out of the reach of poor people.

environment • political instability • reproductive rights • health

8

HUMAN RIGHTS

Population alarmism encourages apocalyptic thinking that legitimizes human rights abuses.

Dire predictions of population-induced mass famine and environmental collapse have long been popular in the U.S. Population funding appeals still play on such fears even though they have not been borne out in reality. Fear does more than sell, however. It convinces many otherwise well-meaning people that it is morally justified to curtail the basic human and reproductive rights of poor people in order to save ourselves and the planet from doom. This sense of emergency leads to an elitist moral relativism, in which 'we' know best and 'our' rights are more worthy than 'theirs.' Politically, it legitimizes authoritarianism.



9

RACE AND IMMIGRATION

Threatening images of overpopulation reinforce racial and ethnic stereotypes and scapegoat immigrants and other vulnerable communities.

Negative media images of starving African babies, poor, pregnant women of color, and hordes of dangerous Third World men drive home the message that 'those people' outnumber 'us.' Fear of overpopulation in the Third World often translates into fear of increasing immigration to the West, and thereby people of color becoming the majority. Eugenics programs and punitive welfare policies have subjected African Americans and other marginalized communities to sterilization and contraceptive abuse because of racist assumptions that their fertility is out of control. Even though women on welfare have on average fewer than two children, the image of the overbreeding 'welfare queen' remains firmly fixed in the white imagination.

10

GLOBAL SOLIDARITY

Conventional views of overpopulation stand in the way of greater global understanding and solidarity.

In order to solve the world's pressing economic, political and environmental problems, we need more global understanding and solidarity, not less. Fears of overpopulation are deeply divisive and harmful. Population control programs distort family planning and diminish human rights. In order to protect and advance reproductive rights in a hostile climate, we urgently need to work together across borders of gender, race, class and nationality. Rethinking population helps open the way.

human rights • race and immigration • global solidarity

... must rethink 'overpopulation'

To view the full text and references of the article from which this publication was adapted, see <http://popdev.hampshire.edu/projects/dt/dt40.php> or contact the Population and Development Program.

For more information on population issues, see:

- *Population in Perspective: A Curriculum Resource*, by Mary Lugton with Phoebe McKinney, <http://www.populationinperspective.org>
- Population and Development Program at Hampshire College, <http://popdev.hampshire.edu>
- Committee on Women, Population and the Environment, www.cwpe.org
- The Corner House, www.thecornerhouse.org.uk

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