



In the  
**name of**  
development



INTER PARES

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Exploring Population, Poverty and Development



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# Preface

*This booklet is written by activists, for activists. It is the product of a process of learning, action and interaction among social justice groups, particularly women's groups, in Canada and the Third World. This process began not with a preoccupation with population control, nor with a clear perspective on the issue of population. Rather, it emerged out of concern and activism on issues of women's health in general.*

*As Inter Pares' programmes and relationships with women's organizations developed in the early 1980s, it became obvious that if we were to try to help build environments in which women could flourish, we had to confront social conditions and pervasive practices that endangered women's health. It also became clear that we had to deal with structural issues of power and politics as we sought women-centred, community-based approaches to sustainable health.*

*Our work began to focus more specifically on a few key issues. The harmful impact of prescribed pharmaceuticals on women's bodies and lives, and the medical control and manipulation of women's health and fertility were among them. In our support for women's organizing efforts and community-based health initiatives, we were confronted in particular with the preoccupation of the medical profession, pharmaceutical companies, and international aid donors with reproduction or, more specifically, with conception and fertility.*

*Throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, women's health activists challenged the policies and programmes of the United Nations, the World Bank, and governments in both the North and South that, in the name of development, had become obsessed with population control. In an inversion of logic and a denial of the historical experience of women, fertility and childbearing had come to be identified as major causes of poverty. And the victims of poverty had become the targets of "anti-poverty" strategies entirely predicated on population control.*

*Women's stories from around the world spoke of the disastrous health effects of this obsession, and of how women's more fundamental health needs were being reduced to the need for contraception alone. Drug-dumping and experimentation, covert and open sterilization of women and men, as well as coercive and subtle economic incentives, had become pervasive in the lives of poor women throughout Asia, Africa, and Latin America, as well as in the lives of marginalized groups in industrialized nations. Promoting women's health had become synonymous with promoting contraception and reducing fertility. Reproduction and birthing were increasingly medicalized, and authentic freedom and choice remained distant possibilities. Women's health was significantly undermined as their control over their bodies and lives diminished.*

*Activists responded by developing a critical stance on the ideology of population control. Third World women insisted upon the distinction between family planning and population control, maintaining that where family planning implies a woman's freedom to choose whether to have children, population control implies the opposite: the subordination of individual freedom to the will of the state.*

*At the same time, women in the North and South pointed to men's collective responsibility for the deterioration of women's health and for population control. From global political structures to male-dominated households, and from multinational corporations to individual male doctors prescribing contraceptives, male perceptions and patriarchal systems have created the environment in which women experience and organize*

*their lives. The focus on controlling women's fertility, the absence of full responsibility on the part of men for their reproductive behaviour, and women's ill-health must all be understood within this context — as must women's efforts to gain control over their health.*

*Our work on these issues with women's organizations, both in Canada and the Third World, developed into an extensive collaborative education and advocacy programme which included the preparation of this booklet. Our conclusions have not emerged merely from research and analysis; they have evolved with our understanding of the circumstances and conditions of women's lives, as shared with us by women and marginalized groups from different parts of the world; and they have emerged from fifteen years of interaction with organizations working to create change, locally and globally.*

*We view this booklet as an opportunity to promote discussion among activists — that is, among those for whom poverty, conflict, environmental crisis and injustice are driving and immediate concerns. Divided into six parts, this booklet explains how population control programmes are in conflict with both the goals of development, and the efforts of women to plan their families. The booklet is designed to challenge popularly-held assumptions about population growth and its perceived connections to poverty and underdevelopment<sup>1</sup>. Equally important, it is meant to offer a window through which those uncomfortable with prevailing analyses can gain alternative perspectives.*

*Each section is comprised of a set of assumptions commonly cited in discussions about population. These assumptions are followed by facts and statistics, along with accompanying analysis. It is not without hesitation that we chose to use a statistic-driven approach. In the battle over numbers which characterizes the population debate, the complexity and diversity of human lives have been lost. The apocalyptic forecasts presented by environmentalists, economists and scientists alike — all of whom derive their arguments in large part from equations, graphs and numerical surveys — further this objectifying process. Still, we choose to use the facts and statistics because they are thought-provoking and stimulating in a way that challenges us to reexamine our assumptions. They also attempt, in a small way, to reposition human beings at the centre of this discussion. The essays accompanying each set of facts attempt to reach beyond the numbers to give life to the people whose experiences the figures represent.*

*This booklet is addressed to all of us whose work may be affected by the present emphasis on population control, and who may not have had the opportunity to fully and critically reflect on the issues involved. It does not pretend to offer the "last word" on these issues. Rather, it is meant to engage us more deeply in thoughtful discussion. To be sure, our experiences and perspectives are diverse. But what we share is a commitment to justice and social change. It is to this shared commitment that this publication speaks.*

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1. The term *underdeveloped* is used here to refer to a context in which poverty, unemployment, lack of access to clean water, food, shelter, health care and education remain tragic realities for particular groups of people.

# Introduction: In the Name of Development

## If you believe that



**O**ur planet is overpopulated . . .

Population growth is out of control . . .

There are not enough resources — renewable or non-renewable — to support the increasing number of people . . .

Poverty, illness, and hunger are greater in more densely-populated countries, and in countries with high rates of population growth . . .

Population size and growth cause and perpetuate Third World poverty and hunger, and are the main source of environmental degradation and ethnic conflict . . .

Reducing the number of people inhabiting this planet is an effective development strategy that will help to end poverty, hunger, conflict, epidemics, illiteracy and environmental destruction. . .

## Let's look at the facts

**A**verage number of children born to a Third World woman in the early 1960s: **6**

Average number of children born to her in 1994: **4**

•

Average number of children born to an Asian woman between 1970-75: **5**

Average number of children born to her between 1990-95: **3**

•

Average fertility rate in South America between 1970-75: **4.6**

Average fertility rate today: **2.9**

•

Year by which the U.N. estimates the world's population will actually begin to decline: **2045**

The United States, China, Cuba and South Korea ranked in order of family size, from largest to smallest family: **1, 2, 3, 4**

Estimated percentage of world population represented by Asians and Africans:

In 1650: **78.4**; In 1990: **71.2**; In 2050: **78.5**

•

Population of the United States in 1990: 249 million

Population of the entire African continent in 1990: 550 million

•

Number of people per square kilometre between 1980-1988 in the cities of Dhaka (Bangladesh) and Nairobi (Kenya): 9,930 and 1,587 respectively

Number of people per square kilometre in Paris and Hong Kong during the same period: 20,647 and 5,048 respectively

•

Number of people per 1,000 hectares in India, Mexico and Indonesia in 1990: 2,870, 461 and 96 respectively.

Number of people per 1,000 hectares at the same time in the Netherlands, Japan, and the United Kingdom: 4,349, 3,280, and 2,357 respectively.

The 14 countries whose combined populations China would have to hold for its population density to achieve that of England's: China, India, Japan, United States, the Russian Federation, Brazil, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Pakistan, Mexico, Vietnam, Germany and the Philippines.

•

Projected rate of population growth for Malaysia, India and East Timor respectively for the period 1990 - 2000: 2.4, 1.9 and 1.9

Their expected infant mortality rates per 1,000 live births for the same period: 14, 88, and greater than 194

•

Fertility rate of China in 1991, more than a decade after the introduction of its coercive one-child policy: 2.0

Fertility rate of the Indian state of Kerala in 1991, more than a decade after the introduction of its comprehensive health, education, and basic needs programme: 1.8

Infant mortality rates (per 1,000 live births) in China for boys and girls in 1991: 28 and 33 respectively

Infant mortality rates (per 1,000 live births) in Kerala for boys and girls in 1991: 17 and 16

•

UN estimate of annual costs to cover the health, nutrition, education and family planning needs of Africa in the 1990s: \$9 billion

Collective annual debt repayment of African nations in 1993: \$10 billion

Ratio of spending on debt repayments to health services in Africa as a whole: 4:1

Between 1983-1989, net transfer of capital from poor to rich countries: \$US 242 billion

•

In 1988-1989, percentage of total Canadian international aid devoted to meeting basic human development needs such as health and education: 10.9

Ratio of U.S. arms exports to the Third World to U.S. international aid for social investment from 1988-1989: 13 to 1

•

Percentage of Brazil's population controlling 53 per cent of the country's income: 10

Percentage of Brazil's population controlling the remaining 47 per cent: 90

•

Increase in life expectancy in Africa and Asia respectively during the last four decades:

15 years and 30 years

Third World infant mortality rates per 1000 births in 1960: 125; In 1986: 70

Percentage of the global population which could read in 1950: 56; In 1993: 74

## Now let's reassess

**W**hat does it mean to say the world is overpopulated? Too many people in a limited space? Too few resources to go around? How many is too many? How few is too few? Just what is the relationship between population growth on the one hand, and poverty, environmental crisis and conflict on the other?

It is significant that even as the absolute number of people has grown in the last 40-50 years, the quality of life for the majority of human beings has improved. Global statistics<sup>2</sup> on basic indicators of poverty demonstrate that life expectancy, maternal and child mortality, access to health care and clean water have all improved significantly since 1970. All this in the decades that have seen the most rapid increase in population growth. Still, while greater numbers of people have improved access to essential goods and services, income disparities between rich and poor have grown rapidly over the decades and poverty, in all its tragic manifestations, persists. But population growth has not worsened the situation; nor, as the facts above indicate, is it at its root.

Since economic growth occurs and poverty exists, at varying levels, in both densely and sparsely populated nations, the number of people a country hosts cannot be the critical variable in determining levels of poverty or wealth. Similarly, countries with low rates of population growth can have greater maternal and child mortality rates than those with relatively higher population growth rates. If India and the Indonesian-annexed state of East Timor have identical fertility rates but infant mortality rates which differ by more than 50 per cent, surely a different set of causal factors (including military brutality, war, and political tyranny) must be considered. Deforestation has been devastating in industrialized and Third World nations alike. Conflict has ripped apart both Rwanda and Yugoslavia — refugees flee from both highly and relatively sparsely-populated nations.

No consistent or direct links can be observed between growth rates, population density and absolute numbers on the one hand, and indicators of poverty such as illiteracy, lack of access to health care, and mortality rates on the other. Explanations for, and solutions to, underdevelopment must lie elsewhere.

Still, since the time of economist Thomas Malthus in the early 1800s, assertions that population growth constitutes the gravest threat to the planet and to our collective ability to survive have gained currency. Most activists and concerned citizens will agree that vast inequities in land and income, government mismanagement of economies and resources, and armed conflicts which erupt over wealth and resources have helped to create and perpetuate poverty, forced migration and environmental destruction.



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2. UNDP Human Development Report, 1994.

Increasingly, the consumptive and wasteful lifestyles of First World citizens have also come under attack for their complicity in these processes. Yet the enormous sums of money devoted to population control programmes speak volumes about assumptions of the roots of underdevelopment, and about where priorities and solutions lie.

To argue that there is no causal connection between population growth and poverty is not to suggest that real demographic challenges do not exist. The fact that millions of landless and jobless peasants are moving from the countryside to the cities presents difficult challenges, both to peasants and urban planners. Chronic scarcities of electricity, water, housing, and social services characterize virtually every major city in the Third World today. Sewage systems and treatment plants are working far beyond capacity, if they are in place at all. City streets are clogged with growing numbers of cars and motorbikes. The air and water around cities are choked with industrial effluent, while health services cannot cope with the demands of increasing numbers of sick. And in rural areas, landlessness, joblessness, and hunger are extreme as small landholdings are subsumed by large, and often foreign-owned, agribusiness. Access to health care and education remains tenuous as money is invested instead in supporting export-oriented agricultural development.

Will quickening the pace at which fertility rates are declining help address these realities? Will supply and access to food increase with fewer people to feed? Will the landlessness that has propelled Third World citizens from their homes and communities diminish as population rates decline? And will delicate ecosystems be better protected through efforts to control women's fertility?

The facts cited above suggest they will not. When time, money and energy disappear into weapons development, debt-repayment, consumerism, and mega-development projects, what are the real sources of, and solutions to, underdevelopment? When population control has become a development strategy, while wealth and land redistribution and fair trade practices have been virtually ignored — are we closer to, or further from, social justice and progress?

There is a world of difference between family planning and population control. Genuine family planning implies real choices and personal control — not only over a wide range of safe and accessible contraceptives, but also over whether to have children, how many, and when. Population control, on the other hand, undermines these choices because its aim is to lower fertility rates. By equating population control with development as well as with women's empowerment, population control programmes manipulate women's reproductive freedom.

By diverting resources from real solutions to global inequities and poverty, population control does not end human suffering — it adds to it. If development can be viewed as the movement towards justice and a world based on equality, freedom and democratic participation, efforts to control women's fertility and choice are antithetical.

Declines in fertility rates are not necessarily a reflection of social progress. In fact, the decline in fertility rates is seen by some planners as cause for alarm. Few have considered the implications globally when the absolute number of people actually begins to decrease, as it will within 50 to 100 years. Canada and Singapore are only two countries in which women are already having fewer children than are needed to maintain the population at current levels. In the absence of increases in immigration levels, the populations in these countries will decline dramatically. What spectre is raised by this reality? Will women increasingly become the target of pro-natalist policies as has already happened in the Province of Québec, and in Israel?

The questions raised here have no easy answers. It is precisely the complexity of the relationships between population growth, poverty and underdevelopment that this introduction has intended to underscore. But where does that leave those concerned with bringing about social justice and with ensuring the survival and integrity of humans and the environment? This booklet builds on, and deepens, many of the questions presented above. We hope that the reflection and discussion they spark will help to move us all forward toward understanding how best to promote change and to realize our visions.

# Food for Thought: Food Security and Population Growth

## If you believe that



**P**opulation growth is outpacing global food production . . .

People are hungry because there isn't enough food to go around . . .

Global food production has declined over the last two decades . . .

The fewer people there are to feed, the better fed people will be . . .

The food needs of increasing numbers of people have led to a scarcity of arable land . . .

Continued population growth demands that larger areas of forested land be turned over for the cultivation of food . . .

## Let's look at the facts

**A**ccording to average caloric intake needs, the percentage of the world's inhabitants that could be fed by the food now being produced: **100**

•

Percentage increase in per capita food production between the three-year averages of 1979-1981 and 1991-1993 in Asia: **22**; In India: **23**; In China: **39**

Percentage increase in per capita food production during this same period in Europe and North America: **2 and -5**

•

Global average of area of land per capita devoted to food grains in 1950: **.23 hectares**; In 1992: **.13 hectares**

World grain output in kilograms per capita in 1950: **247**; In 1992: **318**

•

Percentage of the world's population represented by citizens of industrialized nations: **22**

Percentage of the world's food consumed by citizens of industrialized nations: **60**

•

Number of Third World children each year who suffer malnutrition-related deaths: **14 million**

The amount North Americans spend each year on special diets to lower their caloric intake: **\$5 billion**

•

The year in which famine claimed the lives of up to 100,000 Bangladeshis: 1974  
Between 1967-1976, the year in which Bangladesh had the highest per capita food grain stocks: 1974

•

Percentage of 1992 world grain output devoted to feeding cattle: 35  
Percentage of the planet's land mass occupied by cattle: 24  
Chances that a family in rural Central America is landless or owns too little land to support the family's food needs: 1 in 2  
By the late 1970's, proportion of agricultural land in Central America occupied by livestock destined for overseas markets: 2/3  
Percentage change in child malnutrition levels between 1965 and 1975 in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua respectively: +46; +18; +29; +51  
During the 1960s and 1970s, proportion of agricultural and rural development loans made by the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank to the Central America region which went to promote beef production for export: 1/2  
Percentage of Kenya's arable land controlled by foreign and domestic companies for the cultivation of coffee, tea and sisal for export: 40

•

Percentage of Brazilian estates consisting of rural properties under 10 hectares: 53  
Percentage of total arable land occupied by these estates: 3  
Percentage of Brazilian estates larger than 1000 hectares: 1  
Percentage of arable land occupied by these estates: 44

•

Until 1991, the biggest single occupier of arable land in the Philippines: the United States military

## Now let's reassess

**T**here is no denying that famine and malnutrition steal the lives of millions of Third World citizens each year. And that millions more live in a state of chronic malnourishment, their productive and creative capacities effectively undermined. The extent to which these realities are experienced varies from nation to nation. But these variations are not, as conventional wisdom would have us believe, consistent with particular rates of population growth, size, or density. If two of the world's wealthiest nations, Canada and the United States, can have millions living in hunger and malnourishment, is the issue one of population, or of access, distribution and power?

We need to understand the roots of hunger. The facts point to the extensive transformation of rural economies and to the collapse of rural communities, particularly in the Third World. The roots of this transformation extend as far back as colonialism, to the absorption of small plots of communally or individually-farmed peasant lands by largely foreign-owned, export-oriented plantations. The continued incorporation of these properties into the global economy has left increasing numbers of rural people landless and indebted.

Labour-saving technological innovation has accompanied this transformation and left millions of traditional farmers “surplus” or jobless. With these developments, together with miserable wages, rapid inflation, and relentless increases in food prices, it is little wonder that for many Third World people, putting food on the table is a wearying, daily struggle. In a world in which millions have been driven from the land, and in which still more have seen their purchasing power progressively erode, attributing food scarcity to population growth is both unjust and unsound.

It makes more sense to explore relations between food scarcity and lack of access to land, resources, income and decision-making power. Food scarcity is the product of skewed political and economic priorities. Among the most obvious of these has been the massive shift in food production patterns — the move away from subsistence farming and cultivation for local markets, towards cash-cropping and agribusiness aimed at external markets. There are two major implications of this reality.

First, land which could be used to meet the food needs of domestic populations is being cultivated to meet the demands of wealthy industrialized populations, despite the fact that people in wealthier nations eat well in excess of their dietary needs. This trend becomes particularly perverse when one recognizes that a large percentage of harvested Third World crops goes to feed cattle (primarily for First World consumption) and not the many malnourished citizens of the Third World itself.

Secondly, in the context of growing internationalization of markets and economies, food production is increasingly determined by the vagaries of global markets. The sharp decline in cereal production in Latin America and Africa in the 1980s, for example, can be traced to plummeting cereal prices on the world market during that time. The European Community’s forceful expansion into the global market and its subsequent dumping of subsidized and surplus cereals, coupled with lowered cereal production costs in the United States, drove cereal prices down to a point where African farmers could not compete. In the absence of financial incentives to cultivate these grains, farmers chose either to leave their fields fallow, or to cultivate other crops for the export market. Famines in Africa at this time were marked more by the unavailability of grain than by any sudden jump in size of local populations.<sup>5</sup>

Trade relations in the 1990s are most certainly deepening these realities. The North American Free Trade Agreement between Canada, the United States and Mexico threatens the livelihood of close to 11 million Mexican peasants who grow maize for local consumption on traditional communal lands. It should come



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3. Dyson, Tim, 1994. Sen, Amartya, 1991.

as little surprise that production levels plunge as Mexican farmers are unable to compete with cheap imports from the United States<sup>4</sup>.

It is the absence of political will to meet the food needs of human beings, and not a lack of arable land, that lies at the heart of food scarcity and hunger. For Third World people, then, food scarcity is not about the number of people sitting around the table; it is about having the table itself kicked out from under them. The problem is not that the poor do not produce enough to sustain themselves, but that they are not allowed to consume what they so laboriously produce. Famines in Ethiopia in 1973 and 1974 corresponded with an increase, not a decline, in food production. Even when hunger can be linked to lowered food production levels, the issue is clearly not that production can't keep up with local demands, but rather that large farmers subordinate those needs to the dictates of export markets and politics. Food scarcity and its resolution must be viewed within this political context.

The skewed priorities of governments, and their tendency to place profit ahead of people, is also reflected in the role of militaries and war in the creation of famine. When enormous tracts of fertile land have been devoted to military use, and when armed conflict has laid waste vast expanses of arable land, solutions to world hunger must surely be rooted equally in the search for world peace.

If famine can occur even when food production outpaces population growth, and if millions in industrialized nations are malnourished despite negative fertility rates, will population control help to alleviate hunger? Is the issue one of numbers or of justice, resource management and distribution? In a world in which millions have been pushed off the land and in which falling wages and rising food prices have destroyed the purchasing power of the poorest, do solutions to hunger lie in the promotion of population control? Or do they lie in support of the peasantry in their efforts to reclaim their land, or to engage in alternative forms of productive, sustainable activity? Do they not lie also in movements for fairer trade, and for changing inequitable production and consumption patterns around the world?

Ending hunger will never be as simple as reducing, or sharing, the food on one's dinner plate. But it can begin by tracing the origins of that food. It can start with the connections we make between the burgers, the pineapples, the bananas we consume, and foreign-owned plantations in distant Brazil. And with the angry, landless peasants protesting the theft of their land.

Above all, ending hunger can begin with the recognition that food scarcity and famine are largely politically-determined. Hunger and famine arise out of the assault on rural economies and out of the incorporation of the Third World into volatile global markets. They are tragic evidence of our failure to find humane solutions to the inhumanity of economic expansionism and war.

Of course, hunger and famine are also linked to crop devastation through drought, flash flooding, pest infestation, and other "natural" phenomena. Yet the connections among over-cropping, deforestation, fertilizer use and other damaging human interventions and each of these natural disasters have been persuasively demonstrated in the development and environmental literature. Regardless of whether population growth is rapid in the affected area, solutions to famine lie not in reducing the number of people concerned, but rather, in pursuing environmentally-sustainable development strategies and in mobilizing resources in times of emergency.

Clearly, world hunger is not a result of population growth. Were more agricultural land liberated for the cultivation of food staples, millions of displaced people might be able to reclaim their land and provide daily sustenance for themselves and their kin.

Only when issues of access, distribution, trade and conflict — each ultimately tied to issues of power and equality — are addressed, will millions of people finally be able to devote their energy and creative power away from the struggles of daily survival, toward fuller, more productive, and ultimately healthier lives.

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4. Colchester, M. & Lohmann, L., 1993.

# Exploring Environmental Questions: Sustaining People, Sustaining Earth

## If you believe that



The Third World poor are the primary agents of global deforestation, desertification, and the destruction of the environment . . .

There is a causal link between population growth and environmental destruction . . .

Third World people don't know how to live in an environmentally sustainable way . . .

The earth's resources cannot sustain even the current number of people on the planet, let alone future generations . . .

Population control will help protect fragile ecosystems and the environment in general . . .

## Let's look at the facts

Percentage of the world's food needs able to be met by current arable land: **greater than 100**

•

Annual decrease in 1992 in Vietnam's, Peru's and Papua New Guinea's forest area:  
**3500 square kilometres each**

Annual increase in their respective populations in 1992: **1,400,000, 400,000 and 90,000 people**

•

Increase in Europe's population from 1970 to 1990: **40 million**

Percentage change in Europe's forest cover from 1970 to 1990: **+25**

•

Population density per 1000 hectares in Japan: **3,280**; In Cuba: **931**

Percentage of original forest cover remaining in Japan: **63**; In Cuba: **less than 2**

•

Hectares of tropical forest logged globally each year to supply European, American and Japanese consumer markets: **4.4 million**

Since 1960, percentage of forests in Central America cleared to create pasture for cattle: **25**

Number of square yards of jungle that must be cleared for each imported hamburger: **6**

•

Percentage of the world's rangelands that has been damaged by overgrazing in the last 50 years: **60**

Percentage of the earth's land mass that suffers from slight, moderate, or severe desertification: **29**

Number of people who live on land threatened by desertification: **850,000,000**

•

Hectares of forest which were cleared in Brazil between 1966 and 1975: **11.5 million**

Percentage cleared by highway developers creating roads for loggers and cattle rangers: **60**

Percentage cleared by peasants who followed along these roads: **17.6**

Percentage of slash and burn activities by migrant or landless farmers that occurs in areas opened up by commercial loggers: **90**

•

Ratio of an American's lifetime consumption of energy to that of someone in Japan: **3:1**; in Bangladesh: **168:1**; in Ethiopia: **531:1**

Size to which India, with a 1990 population of 853 million, would have to expand to match current levels of paper consumption in the United States (if current consumption levels remained fixed): **34 billion**

Percentage of global energy and resources consumed by citizens of industrialized nations: **75**

Percentage of global carbon-dioxide emissions generated by citizens of industrialized nations: **75**

•

Projected ratio of growth in the global fleet of cars and trucks to the growth of the human population: **2:1**

Amount of hazardous waste a conventional car creates for every ton the vehicle weighs: **26 tons**

•

Toxic waste the U.S. Pentagon generates per minute through the production of weapons: **1 ton**

## Now let's reassess

The belief that the earth can sustain a specific limited number of people is not new. This notion of “carrying capacity” has been traditionally applied to populations of animals, insects and rodents in an effort to understand their evolutionary patterns. By observing competition for resources, researchers have developed an analysis of how species have become extinct or evolved over millions of years. Today, some biologists and environmentalists attach great value to carrying capacity, using changing resource and population levels to calculate and predict when plant and animal life is threatened and when intervention is necessary.

Carrying capacity posits a direct relationship between resource availability, population levels and corresponding demand for, or destruction of, resources — the greater the population, human or otherwise, the greater the pressure on resources, and the more rapid their depletion. It follows that those who are dependent for their survival upon non-renewable resources will perish as those resources become depleted or destroyed. The concept appears intuitive and logical. But do greater numbers of people necessarily mean fewer resources to go around? Does population growth automatically spell more rapid destruction of the environment? What is the relationship between resource use and numbers? Is it as direct as many environmentalists claim?

When applied to human beings, and to the varied social complexities that structure our interactions with the environment, the notion of carrying capacity loses much of its validity and relevance.

The terms and variables used to assess carrying capacity are vague and undefined. What level of resource use, for example, is factored into the equation? Are we talking about resource scarcity in our own communities, or more globally across borders? Do we take North American consumption levels as the standard, or those of the majority of the world's citizens? What if these resources were better allocated? What if alternative resources were developed? In a context of continual technological change and advancement, of constant environmental transformation and evolution, and of increasingly heightened awareness of the ecological consequences of human actions, predicting the apocalypse demands more than arithmetic.



At an abstract level, perhaps, the notion of carrying capacity may have validity; we may reach a point at which resource use exceeds technological and human innovation, at which our continued mismanagement and abuse of resources will be completely unsustainable. But is that point fixed and inevitable? Does it have to be?

To challenge the notion of carrying capacity is not to dismiss the realities of deforestation, desertification, nutrient-depleted soils, and pollution, nor the loss of biodiversity, as well as the persistence of floods, droughts and famine. These environmental catastrophes are real, immediate and tragic. But what role does population growth play in these environmental problems?

As the facts listed demonstrate, there is no direct causal relationship between absolute numbers, population density and rates of growth on the one hand, and environmental degradation on the other. The real threat to the environment lies not in the

number of people who interact with it, but in the nature of the interactions themselves. We cannot ignore, for instance, that environmental damage has deepened in a period when rural people have been forced off their land into increasingly crowded urban areas, when disposable containers have replaced reusable ones, synthetic fertilizer and pesticide use has increased, and when rapid industrialization has intensified the production of toxic chemicals and effluent.<sup>5</sup> The production of nuclear weapons and other war arsenal over the latter half of the Century continues to undermine the integrity of eco-systems, and has prompted one researcher with the Washington-based Worldwatch Institute to state that “the world’s armed forces are quite likely the single largest polluter on earth”<sup>6</sup>. Environmental destruction and resource scarcity must be understood within this context.

The facts also indicate, however, that in our consumptive, wasteful, materialistic lifestyles, citizens of industrialized nations continue to pose the gravest threat to the environment — our own and that of the planet as a whole.

Understanding this dynamic demands that a connection be made between these consumption patterns and Third World actions. The denuded forests across Brazil cannot be explained, for example, without reference to the onslaught of cattle ranchers producing beef for foreign markets, or to Northern passions for tropical fruit and coffee. Nor can the deforestation-induced soil erosion and mudslides that have destroyed farming communities across Asia be understood without linking the rosewood in our living rooms to the government-sanctioned “harvest” of tropical forests abroad. Similarly, the fertilizers and pesticides that have poisoned once-fertile land in the Third World can be traced directly to the chemical industries owned and controlled by Northern interests.

In each of these cases, it is not the reproductive behaviour of Third World people that determines the extent of environmental destruction. Rather, it is the development priorities and strategies we have established, and the pursuit of profits along the way, that govern how and where and the extent to which environmental destruction occurs. It is in the management of these latter activities, and not in the control of women’s fertility, that real possibilities for saving the planet lie.

As with poverty and food scarcity, environmental destruction is very much politically-determined. Deforestation in the Philippines, for example, peaked in the 1970s and 1980s under dictator Ferdinand Marcos, who offered massive logging concessions to political allies with the support of the U.S. government

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5. Hynes, Patricia, 1994, pp. 4-5.

6. Renner, Michael, pp 132, 1991.

and World Bank. The Indonesian government's programme to relocate landless peasants also fits with this dynamic.<sup>7</sup> Tens of thousands of families have been moved from regions where labour has been made surplus into formerly inaccessible forests where they now eke out a living. Understanding the complexities of environmental destruction demands that we take a wide perspective.

Still, it would be misleading to argue that poor Third World people are not engaged in the destruction of local environments and habitats. They chop trees for precious fuelwood and clear forests in search of land. They occupy delicate, marginal territories and till land that would be better off fallow. They douse their fields with toxic chemicals in an effort to boost crop yields and allow run-offs to mix with spring water, contaminating streams and sensitive aquaculture. But they are not alone in these actions and the underlying reasons for this damaging use of environmental resources lie not in the numbers or rate of people being born, but rather in the processes that have led to the poor's progressive impoverishment, which have drastically reduced the land available for their productive use and driven them from once environmentally-sustainable lifestyles. It is these processes that are unsustainable and that must be addressed.

Who is at fault for the disturbance of fragile ecosystems and the damage to delicate soils when Third World governments welcome foreign agribusinesses that edge the peasants off their land? Is it really so surprising that when commercial loggers cut new roads into previously inaccessible regions, the poor will follow in large numbers, clearing bush and forest as they go? Who is responsible for deforestation when Third World governments overtly encourage the movement of people into forested areas in an effort to quell agrarian unrest by the landless and unemployed?<sup>8</sup>

As one activist has noted, "to blame poor migrants for destroying the forest is like blaming poor conscripts for the ravages of war"<sup>9</sup>. Yet environmental policy continues to victimize those who lack the political power, the resources, and ultimately, the option, to live in their communities in a sustainable way. Clearly, it is the immediate imperative of survival, and not environmental ignorance, which determines people's interaction with, and destruction of, their local habitats.

Moreover, it is ludicrous to equate the impact of poor people on their surroundings with the impact of the wealthy on lands across the globe. As Patricia Hynes puts it, "It strains credulity to equate the poorest, least politically powerful human beings on earth with the most potent industrial expressions of corporate capitalism".<sup>10</sup>

If population levels and growth are not directly responsible for environmental degradation, solutions will not come from population control. Instead, environmental protection will come only with genuine efforts to build sustainable livelihoods. And sustainability itself is premised upon land and income redistribution, as well as upon the guaranteed access of the poor and other marginalized groups to decision-making power. Sustainability also requires the abolition of economic and trade practices that undermine the ability of Third World citizens to freely determine the course of their development.

Environmental policy that focuses on helping individuals to create healthful environments by restricting logging concessions, creating job security, and offering agricultural technologies which are appropriate, are also important steps along the road toward sustainability. Advocating changes to production and consumption patterns are equally critical imperatives. Finally, halting the assault on fragile eco-systems demands also that activists lobby for more stringent controls and penalties on polluters, and for research into the development of alternative forms of energy and means of disposal.

Environmental degradation is a political issue — one that demands political solutions. Awareness of this fact can be the first step in our efforts to seek out and implement these solutions.

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7. Colchester, M. & Lohmann, L., 1993, p. 6.

8. Hartmann, B., 1994 (a).

9. Barraclough and Ghimire, 1990, p. 13.

10. Hynes, Patricia, 1994, p. 9.

# The Numbers Game: Economic Development and Population Growth

## If you believe that



There is a direct correlation between population growth and levels of a country's economic growth . . .

Population growth is responsible for unemployment, underemployment and poverty . . .

Population growth undermines and hampers economic development efforts . . .

Fewer people will mean more wealth and jobs for others . . .

## Let's look at the facts

People per square kilometre in South Korea, Bolivia and Ethiopia (1989): 410, 6 and 35 respectively  
Per capita gross national product of these countries (in US \$ billions): \$4,400, \$620 and \$120 respectively

From 1980-1992, average annual percentage growth in per capita GNP in low-income, middle-income and high-income countries respectively: 3.9, 0, 2.4

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1990 unemployment levels in Canada, France, and Japan: 8.1, 9.0 and 2.1

1990 population growth rates for these same countries: 1.3, 0.7 and 0.4

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External debt of all developing countries in 1980:  
\$U.S. 639,000,000,000; In 1992: \$U.S. 1,428,000,000,000

UNICEF's estimate of the number of children whose lives might have been saved in 1989 had it not been for the debt crisis: 650,000

Percentage of Philippine budget devoted to debt servicing: 40-50

Percentage of that country's population living below the poverty line: 41

•  
Percentage decline in health and education spending during the 1980s in the world's 37 poorest countries: 50 and 25 respectively

Percentage of global income controlled by the richest 20 per cent of the world's population: in 1960: 70.2; In 1989: 82.7

Percentage of global income controlled by the poorest 20 percent: in 1960: 2.3; In 1989: 1.4

•

Combined net worth of the world's 358 billionaires: U.S. \$760 billion

Combined net worth of the bottom 45 per cent of the world's population: U.S. \$760 billion

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Percentage of the world's income controlled by women: 1

Percentage of the world's land owned by women: 1

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Proportion of the global flow of major weapons that was purchased by the Third World: 2/3

Ratio of worldwide military spending, per soldier, to educational spending, per school-aged child: 25:1

Between 1988-1990, military expenditures as per cent of health and education expenditure in Pakistan, Ethiopia and Indonesia: 239, 239, 143; Average in all least-developed countries: 146

## Now let's reassess

**W**hen economic growth occurs in both sparsely and densely populated nations — in fact, when the most rapid rates of economic growth are occurring in the most heavily populated Third World countries — and when population growth rates and density cannot be used as predictors of unemployment and poverty, what role does population growth play in economic development?

Since the time of economist Thomas Malthus in the early 1800s, the debate about the relationship between population growth and economic development has been vigorous and contentious. Until the 1970s, rapid population growth was generally viewed as a major constraint on economic development. But new research, along with changes in research methodologies, have given way to an analysis that substantially revises and downgrades the role of population growth in economic development. This approach is now widely embraced among economic demographers around the world.<sup>11</sup>



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11. See, for example, Kelley, A., 1993.

In the past, orthodox economists insisted that the economic output of a nation must decrease as the number of people increases. Because levels of capital and stock (including land) rise at a slower pace than the “stock” of labour, they argued, population growth produces a surplus of workers who become a drain on services and the economy as a whole. Household savings diminish as parents spend increasing amounts on meeting the basic needs of their children. And governments divert money that could be spent on industrial or agricultural development into “non-productive” investments in health and education.

During the 1970s, however, these traditional assumptions were challenged. As research evidence accumulated, it became clear that there was no direct correlation between economic output and population size, growth, or density. While population growth may have short-run negative effects because of the youthful age of the population, in the longer-term these negative effects largely disappear. Revisionist economists argue that additional children positively induce people to work longer hours, and to invest or save more money in an effort to guarantee their children’s future. Some economic demographers even argue that population growth can have strong positive effects on economic output by creating larger markets, and so expanding the demand for goods, services and infrastructure. This provides incentive for greater investment and leads to higher levels of production and employment generally.

The traditional view of the economic impact of population growth has largely given way to an analysis that makes central what some economic demographers suggest is at the core of economic development: the relationship between demographic realities and the policies, priorities and decisions of governments. Countries that encourage production patterns that fail to capitalize on a nation’s obvious comparative advantage — for example, surplus labour — will experience greater costs and fewer benefits from population growth.

The traditionalist and revisionist economic theories clearly offer contradictory views of the dynamics of economic development. Yet even the “revisionist” view does not fully address poverty, social injustice or environmental degradation. If population growth does lead to increased demand and industrial output, as revisionists argue, it also leads to heightened resource consumption and production of pollution and effluent. Given the miserable working conditions, low wages, and repression of labour movements and rights that characterize industrial and agricultural jobs across the Third World, will the creation of more jobs as predicted by the revisionist economists spell further exploitation for Third World women, men and children? How do we weigh these realities when, for the majority of Third World poor, gainful employment is paramount and critical to their efforts to sustain their families? If the creation of more jobs does accompany population growth, how do we ensure that these jobs are not predicated on miserable working conditions and further exploitation of women and children?

In the final analysis, ending Third World poverty demands that we move beyond the cold rationale of supply and demand-led economics to the human dynamics that drive and determine economic development and its effects.

The fact that millions of Third World rural people are displaced, poor and landless has more to do with policies that have encouraged the transformation of their traditional societies, and the incorporation of agrarian economies into the global economic system, than with fertility rates and population levels prevalent there. These policies have further marginalized women within the global economy and must also be considered when exploring the roots of poverty and unemployment. Food shortages, urban squalor, unemployment and underemployment all reflect inappropriate economic policies, skewed priorities and patriarchal power structures. Economic underdevelopment is largely caused by political decisions.

What needs to be addressed are the human forces and decisions behind global economic dynamics. Economies are human inventions and should be created and sustained on the basis of people’s needs. The fact that millions of people are incapable of meeting their basic needs speaks to how we have constructed our economic systems, and to the priorities and assumptions upon which those systems have been built. It is not only human numbers that determine whether people are capable of living sustainably. Rather, it is human decisions that determine the social and economic contexts in which people are born, are nourished, and become productive members of their communities.

Recognition of this reality is ultimately liberating because it allows us to see alternatives to current economic practice. Consider, for example, the wearying reality of Third World debt. How strong might growth be in the absence of indebtedness, if precious resources were not diverted from human development and local economies into the accounts of international money lenders? What might occur if Third World governments refused to devalue currencies, hike food prices, and slash wages and social services in their efforts to attract investors and foreign currency to repay the debt?

Surely, we can imagine the sustainable and healthy environments that people might build if their productive and creative energies were unleashed. What might come if Third World governments ignored the powerful lure of agribusiness, if they refused to sell out the peasantry to foreign and national commercial investors? And what if they bowed instead to the demands of people to realize their own development visions? What if citizens of industrialized nations put our considerable consumer power behind growing movements for fair and ethical trade?

Imagine governments responding to urban and rural labour surpluses by promoting labour-intensive technology in agriculture and industry. Picture them choosing to divert spending from armies and weapons to health, education, or other forms of human development. Or imagine governments implementing agrarian reform by reclaiming land from foreign agribusiness and promoting a vision of development defined by terms other than capital, investment and production. In its place could be put a development model premised on the equitable distribution of wealth and resources, and on the pursuit of just, secure and sustainable environments.

The fact that joblessness, landlessness, and poverty persist is evidence not of overpopulation, but of the choices which have been made by those with political and economic power. Ending Third World underdevelopment and economic stagnation will never be possible through population control. It will be possible only when a human-centred development vision is embraced.

Such a vision demands that we meet the needs of all, including the poor and marginalized. It is premised upon social, economic and physical security, upon the ability of people to envision and plan a real future. It is based equally upon the transformation of inherently unjust economic and political processes — those that diminish rather than increase people's access to land, income, security and power.

Investment in human development — that is, in the efforts of individuals and organizations to participate more openly and fully in expressing and creating social change — is critical to this strategy for development. Such an emphasis demands support for community organizing and democratization processes, for the efforts of marginalized groups, especially women, to empower themselves and to challenge local and global power imbalances.

Ultimately, it is not the number of people in the world that will determine the quality of development. Rather, it is people themselves who can be the true agents of sustainable development.

# People on the Move: Migration and Population Growth

## If you believe that



Migration is a relatively new phenomenon . . .

Population growth is the main source of increased migration . . .

Most migration is from the South to the North, and it is out of control . . .

Most people would rather live in the Northern industrialized nations than in the South . . .

Migration causes ethnic conflict, racism, and economic stress in receiving countries . . .

Population control can help stem the movement of peoples and reduce the level of conflict, racism and economic stress in host countries . . .

## Let's look at the facts

Percentage of world's population involved in international migration: **1**

Total number of refugees in the world in 1992: **18 million**

Percentage of these refugees who will never leave the Third World: **87**

Number of Somalis, Sudanese and Ethiopians sheltered in refugee camps in northern Kenya: **600,000**

Globally, ratio of people who are "internally displaced" to those who leave their country, as a result of war and conflict: **2:1**

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Principal causes of population displacement: **war and food scarcity**

Estimated number of Rwandans displaced by civil war: **1.7 million**

Global number of people who are displaced each year by development projects such as large dams: **10 million**

•

Average fertility rate of Canadian women: **1.7**

Fertility rate needed to replace one generation by the next: **2.1**

Number of years before the absolute number of people in Canada will begin to decline in the absence of increased immigration or a sudden increase in fertility rates: **50**

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Between 1840 and 1930, the number of Europeans who voluntarily migrated to the Americas, Australia or New Zealand: **52 million**

Estimated population of Europe in 1970 had this migration not occurred: **1.8 billion**

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New immigrants as a percentage of the Canadian population:  
in 1901 - 1911: 28.9; In 1961 - 1966: 3.0; In 1981 - 1986: 2.1

Percentage of Canadians who were foreign-born in 1986: 16

Percentage of Canada's population that will be represented by Third World immigrants by the year 2001  
if such immigrants continue to comprise 70 per cent of current migration streams: less than 10

Percentage of immigrants to Canada who employed other Canadians in 1986: 6

The percentage of Canadian-born citizens who did so: 4

Percentage of all immigrants in Canada who were unemployed in 1986: 8.2

Percentage of Canadian-born citizens who were: 10.2

By 1987, estimated per cent of highly-trained and skilled African workers who had migrated to Europe: 33

Percentage of all physicians trained in the early 1980s in Ghana who have emigrated abroad : 60

Estimated number of highly-paid foreign experts from the First World working in Africa: 30,000

In 1985, percentage of assistant professors teaching in U.S. engineering institutions  
who were foreign-born and trained: 50

## Now let's reassess

The history of the world is the history of the movement of peoples — in search of land, wealth and resources, security and opportunity. For centuries, those movements were dominated by Europe's underclass who were seeking brighter futures in the "New World" or in countries that now comprise the Third World. In the last two decades, these patterns have changed substantially. Europeans continue to migrate in large numbers — the exodus of Soviet Jews to Israel, or of citizens of the former Eastern bloc to their Western neighbours are examples. But it is the people of the Third World who have come to dominate migration streams. At the same time, the vast majority of these migrants will never leave the continent on which they were born. It is this fact that most distinguishes these migrants from those of earlier centuries.

It is Zaire and Kenya, for example, that respond to the needs of the millions of Africans fleeing tyranny and famine in their own countries. It is the people of Thailand who shelter and feed the thousands of Burmese and Cambodians who have streamed across their borders in search of security and peace. Third World refugees comprise only a small percentage of the total number of migrants crossing Northern borders each year, and the North absorbs only a small proportion compared to Southern neighbours.

If patterns of movement have changed over the past century, the sources of migration have, sadly, remained constant. Famine, war, tyranny, and poverty — and the promise of something better on the other side — are the most common. The fact that the global number of people is rising does not change these fundamental



realities. Famine and war, for example, continue to drive millions from countries like Ethiopia and the Sudan in search of relief and physical safety. The commercialization of agriculture, the increasing dependence on world markets, along with the globalization of production, changing patterns of land ownership and crop cultivation, as well as environmental devastation wrought by technological change and war, have all had a hand in the creation of this phenomenon.

Similarly, at the root of the massive movement of peasants to the cities or abroad is the expansion of global markets into the furthest reaches of agrarian society, that is, into what once were sustainable rural economies. The political nature of migration is made even more obvious by the fact that governments in the Philippines, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka, among others, have established programmes encouraging the overseas migration of their most skilled (and not coincidentally, potentially the most politically volatile) workers. These national economies have become increasingly dependent on the foreign currencies migrant workers send home.

These political processes have had a different impact on women than on men, reflected by the sharply increased presence of women in domestic and international migration streams today. With the introduction of agricultural technologies geared toward men rather than women, with plantations reluctant to hire women or to pay them equitable wages, and with few well-paying jobs available in the cities, women are increasingly being forced to go abroad in search of work.

War, tyranny and political conflict also propel migrants reluctantly from their homes. Secessionist wars after independence from colonial powers — in India and Pakistan, for example — led to enormous refugee movements and massive internal displacements. Years of militarization in the Philippines in the attempt by successive governments to suppress resistance, forced thousands to flee their homes on the island of Negros and to move north in search of safety and economic security. Fear of persecution has been an equally powerful motivator for hundreds of thousands of dissenters in countries like Chile, China and Guatemala.

Migration, whether internally to the cities, or to neighbouring countries and overseas, has its roots in political decisions and not in the reproductive behaviour of Third World citizens. Migration is increasingly the last option for millions of Third World poor. It is a direct response to the decimation of once sustainable agrarian economies, and to the hopelessness presented by Third World urban economies. It is equally a response to the failure of development strategies to address the needs of the poorest and the world's most marginalized. Regardless of whether fertility rates continue to decline, such movements will persist as they have through history unless their real causes are addressed.

Significantly, the issue of Third World migration is rapidly becoming a volatile international issue not only because of the urgent political challenges presented by these movements, but also because of the ignorance that characterizes our understanding of migration and the increasing backlash against migrants.

Resistance to immigrants from within host countries is not a new phenomenon. Encountering xenophobia is, perhaps, the common experience of all migrants throughout history. Today, violence and intimidation regularly greet new citizens in Northern nations. Under pressure from an increasingly hostile public, as well as from conservative political elements, Northern governments are erecting barriers to immigrants



and refugees. They are coming together to create multilateral agreements that seek to severely restrict migration. Forcible detention, encampment, relocation and repatriation, as well as heightened emphasis on population control programmes, are becoming universal strategies for containing migration or, more accurately, for preventing Third World migrants from reaching Northern borders.

All this despite studies that prove that countries like Canada benefit economically and socially through immigration. Spending on social services and public facilities, including schools and housing, is more than offset through immigrants' tax payments, and through the jobs they create. Immigrants rely less on unemployment insurance, retirement superannuation, and other government transfers than do native-born citizens. Immigrants strengthen exports through their cultural, political and economic connections abroad, and through their awareness of the cultural realities that often influence success or failure. Finally, cultural diversity can beget tolerance and, when supported by anti-racist policy and education, works to alleviate ethnic tension.<sup>12</sup>

At the same time, Northern governments carefully control who can and cannot gain citizenship. Canada is one country that has received the Third World's most educated and gifted scholars, and welcomes the independently-wealthy while erecting barriers to the poor. Yet little mention is made of this economic and intellectual benefit to receiving countries, and of the costs incurred by Third World nations that raised and educated these migrants.

More open borders is only one response to the challenges presented by migration. Determining the appropriate responsibilities and obligations of the international community towards South-South migrants and towards Southern governments attempting to cope with these movements is another. But these are no more than that — just responses. The realities of Southern peoples displaced by war and economic “development” demand deeper analyses, solutions, and broad-based strategies for change.

While people will always migrate, most migrants do not want to leave their homes and land. Instead, they are prevented from staying at home for some of the reasons suggested above. Supporting population control efforts to bring down the numbers of Third World peoples, or throwing up fences and obstacles to restrict their movement abroad, will not serve potential migrants in their efforts to remain where they want to be. To end forced migration, we must turn our attention to underlying issues of sovereignty, war, environmental degradation, and underdevelopment.

The new Third World migrants are a growing global force. Far from passive victims, they are powerful agents of change. The challenge is to seek ways to work with the poor and marginalized to create secure and stable environments in which they can live in peace. The challenge of migration, then, is one of global transformation, and of realizing a socially-just vision of development.

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12. *Simon, Julian, 1989.*

# Creating Choices: Women's Health and Empowerment

## If you believe that



Continued population growth is evidence that family planning is not being practised . . .

There is an enormous unmet need or demand for birth control in the Third World . . .

Lowering fertility rates will result in improvements in women's health and well-being . . .

Reproductive choice implies only the freedom to choose a safe method of birth control . . .

The provision and use of modern contraceptives liberate and empower women, and reflect women's enhanced reproductive freedom . . .

Birth control cannot be practised effectively in the absence of modern contraceptives . . .

Population control programmes are practised only in the Third World . . .

Population programmes meet the reproductive needs of women . . .

## Let's look at the facts

Percentage of couples in Third World countries who used modern methods of birth control in 1960: 11; In 1994: 55

Percentage difference in the number of unwanted births in countries with high fertility rates such as Uganda, and in countries with low ones such as France: 0

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Between 1985-89, the percentage of couples using modern contraceptives in Colombia, Japan and Zimbabwe: 65, 64 and 43

Fertility rates in these countries in 1990: 3.0, 1.7 and 5.6

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Number of children born to the typical American woman in the 1830s, before the advent of modern contraceptives: 6; To a typical French woman in the same period: 4

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Increase in contraceptive use in Bangladesh between 1985-1991: 14.7

Percentage decline in maternal mortality rates during that period: 0.3

•

Fertility rate in China in 1979 when its one-child policy was introduced: 2.8. In 1991: 2.0

Fertility rate in the Indian state of Kerala when its programme of massive investment in basic human needs was introduced in 1979: 3.0. In 1991: 1.8

Percentage of women who are literate in China and Kerala: 68 and 86 respectively

Male and female life expectancies at birth in China: 67 and 71 respectively

Male and female life expectancies at birth in Kerala: 71 and 74 respectively

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Proportion of contraceptive researchers who focus their research on methods of male fertility control: less than 10 percent

Ratio of birth control methods directed at women to those directed at men: 7:1

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Number of times Health Canada has rejected the injectable Depo Provera specifically for contraceptive use in Canada, based on health safety issues: 3

Number of years Depo Provera has been used on women in the Third World: 25

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Between 1928 and 1972, estimated number of women with physical and mental disabilities in Alberta who were sterilized under the Alberta Sexual Sterilization Act: 2,500

Between 1907 and 1964, the number of poor and mentally-challenged American women who were compulsorily sterilized: 63,678

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Number of American state legislatures that are considering proposals to make welfare payments to poor women conditional on their agreement to have the five-year contraceptive implant Norplant surgically inserted: 13

Percentage of women using Norplant who experience irregular menstrual cycles: 70

Percentage of women who keep Norplant in for the full five years: 30

Most common reason for having Norplant removed: heavy bleeding

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Number of women in the world who seek illegal abortions each year: 10-25 million

Estimated number of women worldwide who die every day from unsafe abortions: 500

Number of women who die worldwide every day as a result of complications of pregnancy and childbirth: 1,370

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Percentage reduction in spending on health in the world's 37 poorest countries since the mid-1980's: 50

Between 1969-1991, percentage of United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) assistance allocated to the area of women in development: 1.6

Percentage of UNFPA assistance allocated to population/family planning programmes: 45

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Amount of money a woman in Quebec receives after the birth of her first, second and third child: \$500, \$1,000 and \$8,000.

## Now let's reassess

**W**hy are Third World women continuing to have families that are considerably larger than those in the First World? Are they unable to gain access to modern methods of birth control? Are they less aware of their fertility than were their 18th century French counterparts? Or are we to assume, as one demographer sarcastically remarked, that “two billion people in the past 50 years were added to the world’s population because their parents were too stupid to figure out what to do”?<sup>13</sup>

Assumptions about the lack of access to birth control, and about women’s lack of knowledge about their fertility and bodies, are implicit in the notion of the “unmet need”. It is a notion, at least when quantified, that is highly questionable. Unmet need surveys, for example, usually count every married woman who says she doesn’t want to have another child and appears not to be using contraceptives. This despite the fact that many married women are not having sex, are relying on breast feeding in an effort to space their babies, are culturally prohibited from having sex because they have either recently had a child or are breast feeding, or both, or are choosing not to use modern methods because they are wary of the side effects. In fact, many women are not practising birth control because they have been rendered infertile as a result of dangerous contraceptive technologies. Statistics that support the concept of unmet need have been challenged from both scientific and sociological perspectives, and have been found to be seriously inaccurate.<sup>14</sup>

Yet advocates of current population control programmes administered in the Third World justify the massive expenditures allocated to these programmes, and the diversion of funds from other development initiatives, by arguing that high fertility rates are evidence of an unsatisfied demand for contraceptives and that the provision of contraceptives serves as a liberating force for women.

Do population control programmes respond to the unmet needs of women? Does the provision of contraceptives enhance reproductive choice? Does a drop in fertility rates represent heightened freedom and control? Answering these questions demands that we take a closer look at the context in which women are having children.

Historically, across all societies and cultures, women and men have successfully managed their fertility. Using methods based on knowledge of plants and herbs, relying on traditional and cultural practices including the rhythm method, abstinence, breastfeeding (a form of birth control), as well as withdrawal and abortion, women have exerted control over their fertility. The fact that women in France were having two fewer children than American women in the early 1800s, a time when both groups of women had a similar narrow range of contraceptive options available to them, offers evidence that women were consciously and deliberately controlling their family size.<sup>15</sup> The relatively low rate of growth within hunter and gatherer societies similarly attests to that reality.

The advent of modern contraceptives has, for the most part, eased women’s efforts to control their fertility by offering them a wider range of fairly reliable, although not necessarily safer, options. Yet even after the introduction of methods like the Pill and the IUD, and in countries where these have been used to a similar extent, women have been having children at differing rates. The evidence suggests that it is a combination of psychological, sociological, political, cultural and material variables — including social norms, status of women, lifestyle, economics, patriarchy and coercion — and not simply access to modern methods of birth control, that figure into decisions around having children.

What are the factors determining family size? Women have children for myriad, interrelated reasons. Children can be a source of love and joy and can offer women and men a sense of purpose and worth. At the same time, social norms and pressures dictate that having children is a normal part of the cycle

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13. Paul Demeny as quoted in *The Economist*, May 28-June 5, 1994, p. 83.

14. See Pritchett, L., 1994.

15. *The Economist*. “Population Misconceptions”. May 28-June 5, 1994, p. 83.

of life. Women also have children because of patriarchal and religious pressures arising from beliefs that few or no children reflect low male virility or a failure to fulfil women's God-given role. Contraceptive failure, rape, and the lack of access to safe birth control and abortion are also among the many reasons that women have children. It is clear that while many have children because they desire them, women also have children because they lack control over their lives and fertility. At the same time, the tendency of couples to prefer boys over girls, a phenomenon common throughout the world and rooted in patriarchal biases, creates added incentive for women to expand their families.

One of the most compelling reasons for having children, shared by many Third World people, is that children represent a source of economic security against an ever precarious and uncertain future. This is especially true in countries where social security systems — unemployment insurance, health care, or pensions for seniors — are not formalized or universal, or are completely absent. High infant mortality throughout Third World countries, coupled with the fact that millions of children have little hope of surviving beyond the age of five, are also factored into decisions around fertility. In short, Third World women often have children because they can't afford not to. This imperative of survival stands as the single most important determinant of family size in the Third World.

Demanding that women lower their fertility — for it is primarily women who are the targets of population control programmes — will never make sense to the woman who sees little hope for change in the patriarchal socio-economic context that demands that she have children in the first place.

As a corollary, women have relatively smaller families for equally varied reasons. Their desire for freedom and independence, prohibitive expenses, or infertility, are among these. Yet, just as millions of women are forced to have children because poverty and social pressures leave them little alternative, millions more are not having children because the state and population controllers have, through various means, taken away their freedom to do so.

Population control is not aimed at enhancing the reproductive choice and health of women, but rather at limiting the freedom of particular groups of very vulnerable, disempowered, and impoverished people. Third World women, along with the poorest and most marginalized women in the North — women of colour, women with disabilities, as well as immigrant and aboriginal women — are being targeted with long-acting, highly invasive, often inadequately-tested technologies about which they have little knowledge and over which they have little control. Technologies like Norplant and Depo Provera are more widely used by, and tested on, these women than on any other women in the world. The fact that these technologies must be administered by doctors or health providers, that women cannot remove them or stop their effects once they have been given, and that women are seldom well-informed about the potential side effects, are all evidence of the way in which population control diminishes women's control over their fertility. Such technologies invariably serve the interests of population controllers, including the pharmaceutical industry, and are based on the assumption that women cannot or will not exercise freedom and choice in their own interest.

Few of the technologies pushed on Third World women have undergone testing for their long-term health effects on women or on the children eventually born to them. Similarly, few studies have investigated the effects on children who breastfeed while their mothers are using these contraceptives. Current practices also structure and therefore diminish women's reproductive choices by reinforcing the male bias in contraceptive research and administration. By directing their programmes primarily at women, and by ignoring research into safer, male-oriented methods, population control practices reinforce expectations that birth control should be a woman's responsibility.

At the same time, population control, both in the South and North, relies heavily on overt and subtle means of coercion to convince certain women to limit their fertility. In an environment where impoverished women are offered clothing, food and money in exchange for their agreement to use a particular contraceptive or to accept sterilization, what is the nature of the choice being extended? When governments, media, local health and education systems all signal to poor women that their fertility is the root of their poverty, and not the varied social, political and economic processes that have transformed their communities, what kind of freedom do women have to exercise reproductive choice? Women's reproductive behaviour must be understood within this context.

It is clear that women want access to safe contraception. Yet what about the other needs of poor and marginalized women? Women are responsible for most of the Third World's food production, are the primary caregivers and educators of children, are the main supporters of the elderly and principal agents in community development. Their need for contraception is only one among hundreds of other needs. Yet there is a continued diversion of money and attention away from issues of land and wealth redistribution, and away from meeting the human development needs for education, health care, physical and economic security, and for an improvement in women's economic status and socio-political power. When malnutrition, child and infant mortality, tuberculosis and other life-threatening diseases pose the gravest threat to quality of life among Third World peoples, when basic infrastructure for primary health care is being denied, where is the justification for spending billions of dollars on population control programmes? These deficiencies undermine the legitimacy of the notion of unmet need and weaken the justification for emphasis on population control programmes.



Population control programmes, and the fixation upon them, neither meet women's needs nor enhance reproductive freedom. To the contrary, they undermine women and their reproductive freedom. It is time to turn to more liberating models.

Reproductive freedom involves the right to choose whether to have children, when, and how many, as well as the freedom of access to a range of safe and affordable contraceptives and abortion services. Freedom from unsafe population control technologies that threaten women's health and women's lives is a critical element. Freedom from the tyranny of programmes that attempt, either through incentives or disincentives, or through population propaganda, to manipulate women's reproductive behaviour is also fundamental. Reproductive freedom implies the eradication of patriarchal and religious pressures that have circumscribed women's rights historically and globally. In brief, it implies the right to live in an environment where choices can be made freely and openly. Such choice can be guaranteed only when ill-health, hunger, environmental degradation and poverty are not the determinant variables in decision-making processes.

Reproductive freedom implies the right to plan a family in the broadest sense of the term. It involves the right to be assured that one's children will not know poverty, that their lives will not be taken by malnourishment or epidemic. It involves the right to move freely in search of economic opportunity and adequate sustenance, and to provide one's children with a stable and secure environment. And it implies the right to expect that children will be adequately taken care of and provided for, and will have the opportunity to develop to their full, creative potential.

With their obsession with numbers and the promotion of invasive technologies, and their recourse to coercion, both subtle and direct, population control advocates fail in their promise to meet the "unmet" needs of women and to enhance reproductive freedom. Population control reduces women to objectified, faceless, and powerless numbers, obscuring their agency and subjectivity in shaping their lives and their communities.

Yet reproductive freedom can be achieved — by eliminating demographic targets, by banning the distribution of unsafe, provider-controlled contraceptives, by challenging male bias in contraceptive research and practice, and by redirecting research towards safe methods, including barrier methods, for men and women.<sup>16</sup> Most importantly, reproductive freedom can be attained by moving beyond the fix on numbers towards efforts at human development — towards the creation of healthful and secure environments in which women exercise real choice and power.

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**In the Name of Development**  
**Exploring Population, Poverty and Development**

This booklet provides a critical overview of the relationship of population growth to economic development, food security, environment, migration and women's health. The booklet challenges the idea that population control is a development or anti-poverty strategy, and places the debate about population in the context of social justice and women's reproductive rights.

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