



Population and Sustainability Network

Population and Consumption: Making the Future Work

Introduction


Global population is predicted to rise to about 9.5 billion by 2050, with most of that growth in the majority world¹. But what is not adequately explored is the interaction between:

- High per capita consumption in the minority world, and its own often high population density and numbers arising from growth in previous centuries and
- Long term sustainability.

This paper complements another Network paper "Getting Population Issues back on the Policy Agenda", and examines particularly the second side of the Population Coin – see below.

For information about the Network, please see later in this paper.

The overarching concept of the Network – The Population Coin:

<p>On one side of the coin unsustainable population increase and its social, economic and environmental effects;</p>	<p>On the other side unsustainable over-consumption of resources and its effects on the development of sustainability.</p>
	

The Case

Information about the environment and its capacity for carrying given levels of population is readily available, but the explicit link between these and population growth or per capita consumption of resources is rarely made. As with linking population growth and sustainable development, the subject is taboo. Information about Sustainable Production and Consumption coming out of the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Johannesburg 2002), and from national governments' reports, does not mention 'population' as a factor to be considered.

It is those of the world's population living in the minority world who are causing the greatest damage to our fragile planet, particularly with relation to climate change and threats to biodiversity and natural resources.

There are two complementary ways forward:

1. We must reduce the impact of our per capita patterns of consumption in the minority world (including the rich minorities in majority world countries), so that we minimise pollution and remove the pressure of consumption on remaining natural habitats, and, furthermore avoid precipitating catastrophic climate change.

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¹ The terms 'majority world' and 'minority world' are used to describe what many call the developing and developed world

2. We must recognise that population is not just an 'overseas issue' since the minority world ecological footprint is so large, relative to its population size, reducing numbers in minority world countries will enhance sustainability – in a world where resource shortages are set to become ever more acute.
3. The issue of unsustainable population increase in the majority world must be addressed effectively.

Of course populations in many rich minority countries are already set to fall, having total fertility rates of about 1.7 (children per family) or less (replacement rate is 2.1 per woman). But this development concerns the economists who argue that we need more people to sustain the economies of the minority world. There is also an increasing, though misplaced, concern about the perceived threat of ageing populations – leading to the short-sighted notion that we need more new births so that the young can support the old. Another Network paper "Refuting the Dependency Claim" is available on the Network website.

The Evidence

An article in the UK weekly magazine, the New Statesman, by David Nicholson-Lord in November 2004 argues cogently that the quality of life in the UK would be much better if there were fewer of us in this crowded island (population currently 59.7, predicted to rise to 65.4 by 2050). He paints a picture of two UKs – one is competitive and dynamic with the focus on economic growth; the other is quieter, less strident, a pleasanter place to live. As he says "what we do not admit is that the difference between the two futures is largely one of human numbers. Population is a subject we don't like to mention". A 'population policy' has not been discussed since the early 1970s. He goes on to say that "environmentally, the case for population decline is unanswerable – less pollution, less strain on natural systems, greater national self-sufficiency, a reduction in fossil fuel emissions".

The WWF/UNEP-World Conservation Monitoring Centre and Global Footprint Network Living Planet Report, 2004 concludes that we no longer live within the sustainable limits of the planet. "Ecosystems are suffering, the global climate is changing, and the further we continue down this path of unsustainable consumption and exploitation, the more difficult it will become to protect and restore the biodiversity that remains".

If everyone in the world had the consumption patterns of those living in the minority world, we would need almost three planets to support the world's existing population. The report argues for "One Planet Living", two required factors (of four) are: lowering the world population and reducing per person consumption of goods and services – these are the two sides of the Network's Population Coin.

Population and Footprint by Income Group, 1961-2001 ²

High Income countries			
	Population (millions)	Total Footprint (billion global hectares)	Footprint per person (global hectares/person)
1961	670	2.576	3.8
1971	744	3.828	5.1
1981	805	4.369	5.4
1991	860	5.097	5.9
2001	920	5.893	6.4
Middle and Low Income countries			
1961	2,319	3.303	1.4
1971	3,006	4.323	1.4
1981	3,685	5.762	1.6
1991	4,463	7.099	1.6
2001	5,197	7.602	1.5

Climate Change: Unfortunately it is only too likely that the number of those losing their lives through extreme climate events – one predicted effect of climate change – will increase steadily. By the middle of this century, as many as 150 million environmental refugees (mainly from the majority world) may be seeking habitable places to live – that means located in what (at the moment) are the more temperate areas of the world.

The threat of extreme climate change is increasingly being recognised as real and imminent. But the indications that action will be taken in time are not good, as talk of changing life styles/consumption patterns remains taboo. One example is the resistance to the idea that travel by air (extremely damaging to the environment) should be reduced a) by using fiscal measures to reduce demand and b) by encouraging life style changes – such an idea is currently seen as heretical and too 'challenging' to both the economic and social ethos of our society to be seriously considered. The proliferation of budget airlines has caused an explosion in air travel, and consequential additional greenhouse gas emissions.

Poverty, population and environment are inextricably linked as issues, but those concerned with each of these often find it difficult to relate to those in the other sectors.

As David Nicholson-Lord says in his New Statesman article (ibid), "first, population growth has become synonymous in our minds with progress. Second, economic growth is how politicians and economists measure national success. And having more people is the quickest and easiest way to boost domestic product". Professor David Coleman (University of Oxford) said in an article in the Oxford

² From the WWF etc Living Planet Report, 2004 – see Reference section for full details

Times (July 16th 2004) "Orthodox thinking that population growth is necessary for economic growth came from the USA...but it is simply wrong, as is the assumption that population decline makes you poorer".

Adair Turner (formerly President of the UK confederation of British Industry) in the 2003 WWF Founder's Memorial Lecture counters the argument put forward by the Economist journal that the UK needs a permanently rising population. Turner argues that permanent population increase is ecologically unsustainable at both local and global levels – and that means that economically such growth makes no sense, since we rely on our environment for our survival. In Sir Crispin Tickell's words "unlimited growth in a finite system is the doctrine of the cancer cell".

Some Solutions: The Consumption Manifesto: the Top Ten Principles of Good Consumption drawn up by the WorldWatch Institute (2004) provide some clear and straightforward suggestions for sustainable consumption - <http://www.worldwatch.org/pubs/goodstuff/principles/> .

One crucial question is: can democracy deliver the necessary change? Does the short-termism inherent in Western democracies mean that what needs to be done will not, in fact take place? The view that 'my car is my car; everyone else's car is traffic' must change (to an understanding by each that my car contributes to environmental problems just as much as anyone else's does).

The twin subjects of population growth and per capita consumption easily provoke outrage and cries of 'intrusion' and 'don't expect me to wear a hair shirt' – this is partly why these issues have become taboo for policy makers and politicians, who shrink from challenging the dominant economic system which is built on 'growth' and consumption..

Not only do we need less fossil-fuel burning, we also need less fossil-fuel burners.....

The official Climate Change Information Kit from the United Nations Environment Programme ³ states: "Future greenhouse gas emissions will depend on global population, economic, technological and social trends. The link to population is clearest: the more people there are, the higher emissions are likely to be."

Greenhouse Gas (GHG) Emitters per capita and by percentage of world total (2000)

Top 10 GHG Emitters per capita		Top 10 GHG Emitters	
Australia	6.8 tonnes	United States	20.6% of world GHG
United States	6.6	China	14.8%
Canada	6.3	EU (25 countries)	14.0%
Saudi Arabia	4.3	Russia	5.7%
Germany	3.2	India	5.5%
United Kingdom	3.1	Germany	2.9%
Korea	3.1	Brazil	2.1%
Ukraine	2.9	Canada	2.1%
Japan	2.9	United Kingdom	2.0%

Kevin and Jonathan Pershing with contributions from Timothy Herzog and Matthew Markoff, World Resources Institute Climate Data: Insights and Observations. Pew Center on Global Climate Change, December 2004. <http://www.pewclimate.org/docUploads/Climate%20Data%20new%2Epdf>

Recommendations for action – we need as a minimum:

- To develop a new economic model which values quality rather than quantity and puts prices on crucial components of the environment that are essential for sustainability (forests, fisheries, clean air, water etc) – the New Economics Foundation has done a great deal of work already on this idea;
- Open discussion of population issues – growth and consumption: tackling the taboos which have make population 'the word that dares not speak its name';
- Reproductive health services for all in every country so that no woman anywhere is without the means to have control over her own fertility nor without the available and affordable contraceptive means to do so.
- Alliances and dialogue between development and environment groups, including government departments and NGOs on these issues;
- The promotion of One Planet Living – expansion of this idea into a blueprint for life for all;
- To develop a model of what living with 80% CO2 cuts (recommended by the Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC]) would mean;
- To identify what policies, plans and taxes need to be developed for that model to work;
- A communications strategy to explain the reasons for making changes, and an outline of the scenario if nothing is done – the likely impacts of inaction on future generations;

³ See [UNFCCC Climate Change Information Kit](#) .

- The creation of cross parliamentary party support in Western democracies so that these issues are not seen as party political – to avoid the short-termism inherent in the system.
- To adapt the concept of Contraction and Convergence (<http://www.gci.org.uk/>) to consumption.

The Population and Sustainability Network

The Network is an international advocacy group which aims to bring together development, environment and reproductive health NGOs, government departments, academics, policy makers and others, to increase leverage on population issues. It endeavours to provide a 'space' in which different constituencies can listen to and learn from each other. The intention is to inform the strategies and activities of Network members, and bring population issues higher up the policy agenda in political, policy, and academic institutions, and Non Governmental Organisations.

A central aim of the Network is also to increase public and professional understanding of the inter-relationship of the key issues and their importance in addressing sustainable development and poverty eradication both in the rich minority world and in the majority world.

In addition, the Network aims to explore the barriers that inhibit discussion about and action on these issues and, finally, to promote processes that increase participation and exchange between the various stakeholders.

The Network is predominantly UK based, but it encompasses an increasingly broad range of overseas organisations which bridge the environment, development and reproductive health sectors. It was launched as a United Nations Partnership at the Commission for Sustainable Development meeting (CSD 12) in New York in April 2004.

We are exploring ways of linking into discussions about Sustainable Consumption both nationally (in the UK) and internationally.

The Network's Key Research Project (related to the population growth side of the Population Coin – ie in the majority world)

The Population and Sustainability Network is planning a research project to investigate the economic, social and environmental effects of 'unsustainable population increase' – to assess the extent of the population factor in the poverty/sustainable development nexus.

The hypothesis is that it is unrealistic in many cases to argue for no population growth at all, certainly in the short run. However there is a rate of increase, varying with circumstance, above which key development goals of poverty alleviation, per capita productivity and investment in healthcare and education become significantly compromised. The economy at local level is unable to support such increase, with high resultant unemployment, emigration to towns, urban squalor. An equally relevant aspect of "unsustainability" in population increase relates to its impact in a finite physical environment – causing degradation of land, pollution, loss of biodiversity and pressure on natural resources.

Conclusions

In environmental terms, and in the interests of the very survival long term of the human race, we need to work actively towards a smaller world population – in all parts of the world. We need to establish whether the 'problems' of population decline are real or illusory.

Bringing about a truly 'sustainable' world is almost certainly not possible in a world driven by an economic system which depends on continued economic growth and increasing consumption: population as one of the many issues deserving attention needs to be central in order to develop a just future that works for all. When Ghandi said "the World has enough for everyone's need but not for everyone's greed" both parts of his statement were true. However we now face a reality that soon the world will not have enough for everyone's need, even for bare subsistence, because there are just too many 'eveynones' for the finite planet to sustain..

We should seek with urgency to debate and then to act appropriately on these matters which as Professor Coleman (ibid) says "many would prefer to leave well alone".

Catherine Budgett-Meakin, Co-ordinator, Population and Sustainability Network,
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