

POPULATION GROWTH: MULTIPLIER OF IMPACTS, DIVIDER OF RESOURCES

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POPULATION MATTERS.

“If only Malthus, rather than Ricardo, had been the parent stem from which 19th century economics sprang, what a richer and more pleasant world we would enjoy today”: John Maynard Keynes.

“Population stabilization should be a priority for sustainable development”: Kofi Annan, former UN Secretary-General. (Key Recommendation, GHF 2009).

“Either we reduce our numbers voluntarily, or nature will do it for us brutally”: Maurice Strong, Secretary-General first Earth Summit, Rio, 1992.

“It’s no use reducing your footprint if you keep increasing the number of feet”: popular saying.

1. Population Growth as a Multiplier of all Environmental Impacts

Impact (on the environment) = Population x Affluence (resource consumption) x Technology – the ‘IPAT function. Thus long-term biophysical sustainability requires: stable or reducing populations; and reduced resource-consumption by the rich; and more resource-efficient technology. Each additional person produces more waste, CO₂ and pollution, the rich more than the poor. Rising populations increase soil exhaustion, erosion, desertification, habitat destruction, deforestation, river and aquifer depletion, CO₂ emissions, sea level rise, climate change and chemical pollution. “All environmental problems become harder, and ultimately impossible, to solve with ever more people” (Sir David Attenborough). Population stabilisation is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for biophysical sustainability.

2. Population Growth as a Divider of all Natural Resources

Each additional person: consumes more food, water, energy, land, timber and minerals, the rich more than the poor; and reduces the finite and dwindling natural resources available per person, increasing long term poverty. All long-term economic problems become harder, and ultimately impossible, to solve with ever more people. Smaller populations can sustainably consume more resources per person than larger ones, while remaining within the biophysical limits of a finite planet – resource shortages are also population ‘longages’. While populations keep rising, all other ecological/economic programmes are simply ‘running up a down escalator’.

3. Population Growth as a Variable, not a ‘Given’:

Global population passed 7 billion in 2011. Its growth (80 million per year, 10,000 per hour) is clearly a driver of all the ‘new and emerging challenges’ to be discussed at ‘Rio+20’. The UN project the population for 2050 between 8.1 and 10.6 billion – a range of 2.5 billion, (the Earth’s entire population in 1950). Since the Earth is only (just) supporting, but not ‘sustaining’ current numbers, given accelerating rates of ecological degradation and resource depletion, such figures must be doubted – demographers, like conventional economists, work in a virtual ‘bubble’, assuming that

their numbers will have no effect on the physical world, or vice versa. If, however, sustainable prosperity for all is achievable, it will clearly be far easier to achieve, the nearer to 8.1 billion the population stabilizes. In any case, indefinite growth being physically impossible, population growth will certainly end at some point. This can only happen: either (preferably) sooner by fewer births; or later by more deaths. The latter – mass mortality through famine, disease and war – means the overwhelming of any attempt at a ‘Green Economy’, and indeed of civilization.

4. The Solution to Population Growth: Family Planning

“Family planning could do more good for more people at less cost than any other known technology” (UNICEF). Populations can be stabilized. All it takes is clear, non-coercive policy in all countries, with sufficient priority and resources: in developing countries for family planning and women’s education and empowerment programmes; in developed countries for public information programmes/incentives, aiming to balance reproductive rights with social and environmental responsibilities to current and future generations. Yet current aid for family planning, at 10% of the Goldman Sachs bonus pot, is derisory. Why?

5. First Priority: End the Population Taboo

The paper will review the Conference themes and sub-themes, showing how population growth is relevant to them all; and consider why it does not appear on the agenda, any more than on those of Rio+20, the UNFCCC, the Biodiversity Convention, the IMF or almost any other major meetings. It will analyse the reasons why something so clearly germane is almost never mentioned; summarise the author’s efforts to change this; and propose a draft text to be promoted for tabling at the Rio+20 UNCSD.