

Too Much Eating or Too Many Mouths?

It's an old debate: Is the world's growing population a real threat to the global environment or is it just a demographic reality that's being unnecessarily manipulated into a menace? Here you'll find two views, first by British environmental writer Fred Pearce, who says population growth is unconnected to the environment, and a rebuttal from the Population Institute, which couldn't disagree more.

Is Population the Real Problem?

by Fred Pearce

Is population growth the cause of our troubles? A green myth is on the march. It wants to blame the world's over-breeding poor people for the planet's peril. It stinks. And on World Population Day, I encourage fellow environmentalists not to be seduced.

Some greens think all efforts to save the world are doomed unless we "do something" about continuing population growth. But this is nonsense. Worse, it is dangerous nonsense.

For a start, the population bomb that I remember being scared by 40 years ago as a school kid is being defused fast. Back then, most women round the world had five or six children. Today's women have just half as many as their mothers — an average of 2.6. Not just in the rich world, but almost everywhere.

This is getting close to the long-term replacement level, which, allowing for girls who don't make it to adulthood, is around 2.3. Women are cutting their family sizes not because governments tell them to, but for their own good and the good of their families — and if it helps the planet too, then so much the better.

This is a stunning change in just one generation. Why don't we hear more about it? Because it doesn't fit the doomsday agenda.

Half the world now has fewer than the "replacement level" of children. That includes Europe, North America, and the Caribbean, most of the Far East from Japan to Thailand, and much of the Middle East from Algeria to Iran.

Yes, Iran. Women in Tehran today have fewer children than their sisters in New York — and a quarter as many as their mothers had. The mullahs may not like it, but those guys don't count for much in the bedroom.

And China. There, the communist government decides how many children couples can have. The one-child policy is brutal and repulsive. But the odd thing is that it may not make much difference any more. Chinese women round the world have gone the same way without compulsion. When Britain finally handed Hong



Research suggests that half of the Philippine population sees itself as poor, notwithstanding major economic growth. In the photo, Manila slums.

Kong back to China in 1997, it had the lowest fertility in the world - below one child per woman. Britain wasn't running a covert one-child policy. That was as many children as the women in Hong Kong wanted.

What is going on? Family-planning experts used to say that women only started having fewer children when they got educated or escaped poverty - like us. But tell that to the women of Bangladesh.

Recently I met Aisha, Miriam, and Akhi — three women from three families working in a backstreet

sweatshop in the capital Dhaka. Together, they had 22 brothers and sisters. But they told me they planned to have only six children between them. That was the global reproductive revolution summed up in one shack. Bangladesh is one of the world's poorest nations. Its girls are among the least educated in the world, and mostly marry in their mid-teens. Yet they have on average just three children now.

India is even lower at 2.8. In Brazil, hotbed of Catholicism, most women have two children. And nothing the priests say can stop millions of them getting sterilized. The local joke is that they prefer being sterilized to other methods of contraception because you only have to confess once. It may not be a joke.

Women are having smaller families because, for the first time in history, they can. Because we have largely

eradicated the diseases that used to mean most children died before growing up. Mothers no longer need to have five or six children to ensure the next generation, so they don't.

There are holdouts, of course. In parts of rural Africa, women still have five or more children. But even here they are being rational — they need the kids to mind the animals and work in the fields. But most of the world now lives in cities. And in cities, children are an economic burden. You have to get them educated before they can get a job. And by then they are ready to leave home.

The big story is that rich or poor, socialist or capitalist, Muslim or Catholic, secular or devout, with tough government birth-control policies or none, most countries tell the same story: Small families are the new norm.

That doesn't mean women don't still need help to achieve their ambitions of small families. They need gov-

ernments or charities to distribute modern contraception. But this is now about rights for women, not "population control."

It is also true that population growth has not ceased yet. We have 6.8 billion people today, and may end up with another 2 billion before the population bomb is finally defused. But this is mainly because of a time lag while the huge numbers of young women born during the baby boom years of the 20th century remain fertile.

With half the world already at below-replacement birthrates, and with those rates still falling fast, the world's population will probably be shrinking within a generation. This is good news for the environment, for sure. But don't put out the flags. Another myth put out

Pedestrians in Dacca, the capital of Bangladesh, struggle to remain dry in a city that's constantly bathed in torrential rains.



Afp / Getty Images / M. Uz Zaman

by the population doom-mongers is that it's all those extra people that are wrecking the planet. But that's no longer the case.

Rising consumption today is a far bigger threat to the environment than a rising head count. And most of that extra consumption is still happening in rich countries that have long since given up growing their populations.

Virtually all of the remaining population growth is in the poor world, and the poor half of the planet is only responsible for seven percent of carbon emissions.

The carbon emissions of one American today are equivalent to those of around four Chinese, 20 Indians, 40 Nigerians, or 250 Ethiopians. How dare rich-world greens blame the poor world for the planet's perils?

Some greens need to take a long, hard look at themselves. They should remember where some of their ideas came from.

The granddaddy of demographic doomsters was Bob Malthus, an English clergyman who got famous by warning 200 years ago about population growth. He believed that the world's population would keep increasing till it was cut down by disease or famine. Back in the ferment of the Industrial Revolution, he was a favorite of the evil mill owners and a scourge on anyone with a social conscience.

Malthus hated Victorian charities because he said they were keeping poor people alive to breed. Better that they die, he said. He believed the workhouses, where the destitute ended up, were too lenient, and he successfully campaigned for a get-tough law known at the time as Malthus's Law.

The novelist Charles Dickens, a social reformer, attacked Malthus in several of his books. When Oliver Twist asked for more gruel in the workhouse, that was a satire on Malthus's Law. In "A Christmas Carol," Ebenezer Scrooge was a caricature of Malthus. In "Hard Times," Thomas Gradgrind, the unfeeling headmaster of Coketown, had a son called Malthus.

I think Karl Marx, another contemporary, was spot on when he called Malthusian ideas "a libel on the human race." And we are seeing the truth of that today as, round the world, women are voluntarily cutting their family sizes. No compulsion needed.

The population bomb is being defused right now — by

the world's poor women. Sadly, the consumption bomb is still primed and ever more dangerous. Now *that* would be a proper target for environmentalists.

The Population Institute Responds

by Robert J. Walker

Fred Pearce keeps on saying that population growth is no longer a problem. He said it again yesterday on his "Grist" blog as part of his World Population Day message. In Fred's view it's very simple. Fertility rates have come down sharply over the past half-century. Problem solved.

Sorry, Fred, saying that population growth is no longer a problem doesn't make it so no matter how many times you say it. Neither does wishful thinking.

While admitting that world population may increase by another two billion or so by mid-century, he dismisses this increment as a "time-lag" problem.

Earth to Fred: two billion more people is a lot of people to a world that is already struggling to feed 6.8 billion people. It's a lot of people to a biosphere that is threatened with what leading biologists refer to as the Sixth Mass Extinction. And it's a lot of people to a planet that is already threatened with the effects of climate change. And while "population momentum" (i.e. large numbers of people entering their reproductive years) may account for some of the projected increase in human numbers, much of it is being driven by the fact that fertility rates in many developing countries around the world are still well above the "replacement rate."

Yes, Fred, we must do something about consumption. Unless we in the developed world do more to curb our consumption of fossil fuels and scarce minerals, the world is headed for an ecological and humanitarian disaster. We need to lower our *per capita* consumption of fossil fuels and other scarce resources.

A lot.

But I don't see the G8 or the G20 putting their heads together right now in an effort to lower consumer spending. Really, I don't. Neither do I see anything happening with respect to climate change.



Epa / Corbis / FR. Malaisig

And that's why it's especially important to prevent unwanted pregnancies in the U.S. and other developed nations. [Sorry, Fred, it doesn't matter that America's fertility rate is right around the "replacement rate" or that Europe's is well below it. A baby born here or elsewhere in the developed world will still consume a disproportionate share of the world's resources and contribute disproportionately to the world's environmental problems].

It's also important to prevent unwanted pregnancies in the developing world. The reasons, however, are different. It really doesn't matter whether global fertility rates have dropped sharply; they remain unsustainably high in many of the least developed areas of the world. Yes, Fred, fertility rates have come down sharply in Iran and Bangladesh, but women in Afghanistan and Somalia and other desperately poor countries are still having four, five or six children on average. Some poor countries, like Uganda and Niger, are on track to triple their population over the next forty years. Africa's population will likely double by mid-century.

Looking ahead, Fred, will these countries be able to

feed themselves? Will they have enough safe drinking water? Will their lands be deforested or their rivers polluted? Will their maternal and infant mortality rates remain unacceptably high? Will they be caught in a demographic poverty-trap? Will they become failed states? If you have good answers to these questions, please let me know. Because if you don't, then we need to ensure that women in these developing countries are given the information and the access to contraceptives that they need to prevent unwanted and unintended pregnancies.

Someday we will be able to declare victory. Someday every woman will have access to family planning services and reproductive health care. Someday world population will be in decline. Someday world population levels will pose no danger to the health of the planet. But that day has not arrived. Not yet. In the meantime, your breezy dismissal of the "population problem," does an enormous disservice to the planet and every living creature that calls it home.

Robert J. Walker is Executive Vice President of the Population Institute



Afghan refugees left to their own devices in the Azakhal Camp, near Nowshera, which was overrun by flooding.

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