

DO THE MATHS

Contributed by Erika Yarrow
Thursday, 02 April 2009

Jonathon Porritt* on why environmentalists need to face up to the issue of population.

Which element in the following quotation (taken from a report about climate change issued by the Ministry of Defence's internal think-tank) grabs your attention most powerfully?

'The Earth's population has grown exponentially in the last century, and rapid climate change . . . would have more dramatic human consequences, resulting in societal collapse, mega-migration, intensifying competition for much-diminished resources, and widespread conflict.'

Unless you are part of that very small minority of environmentalists who put population right at the top of any league table of current crises, that reference to exponential population growth will have gone straight in one ear and out the other.

There are all sorts of reasons for this: fear of controversy (particularly linked to population's evil policy twin, immigration); religious sensitivities, in as much as some of the fiercest and most bigoted opponents of proper fertility management are Catholics or Muslims; inexcusable ignorance; an obstinate refusal to think beyond the historical abuses of human rights carried out in the name of 'population control' in India or China in the past; economic anxieties that without constant population growth there will not be enough young people paying taxes in the future to keep us in the style to which we have become accustomed; and umpteen different shades of political correctness all the way through from 'who are we to tell people in the Third World how to live their lives?' to 'it is over-consumption in the rich world that is the problem, not over-population in the poor world.'

Each of those requires proper refutation, but for the purposes of this article, I would like to focus on the over-consumption versus over-population debate. This is the argument most favoured by environmentalists who have never really looked into the issue, but are so incensed by the uncaring profligacy of the world's richest one billion citizens that any other explanation of today's converging crises seems like an irresponsible distraction.

So, let's get one thing absolutely clear: I have spent my entire life campaigning against that kind of uncaring profligacy, and no doubt will spend the rest of it doing exactly the same. There may have been some excuse for the damage we did to the physical environment back in the 1960s and 70s (in that the evidence was often flimsy, and it somehow all seemed to be quite manageable), but today there is no excuse. The evidence is now in – on every count – and what we do today we do with full and shameful knowledge. There is no excuse, and this generation of politicians – in all the major parties – already stand accused of the most heinous cowardice imaginable.

So, I do not need lecturing about the perils of excessive consumption, or the idiocy of relying on exponential economic growth – fuelled by increased per capita income – to secure a better world. But I have never been persuaded that is all we have to worry about.

The mega-reality is carrying capacity: how many people can the Earth's resources and life-support services sustain on an indefinite basis? The answer to that is obviously determined in part by the level of consumption of each individual human being. But even if, by some currently unimaginable miracle, the richest people in the world today learn to lead what WWF calls 'one planet lifestyles', does anyone seriously suppose that this would work for the next three billion people aspiring to live in the same way – and the next three billion who will be staking a claim on those self-same resources and services before 2050?

This is not just a question of more and more people at risk because of declining water resources. A recent report from WWF highlighted the invisible nature of the problem here in the UK. We ourselves are not running out of water, so there is no direct threat to our current average water consumption of 150 litres per day. But each of us consumes on average 30 times as much 'virtual water', which has been used in the production of food and textiles imported into the UK. Big exporting countries like Spain, Egypt, Morocco, Kenya, Israel, Pakistan, South Africa and Uzbekistan are all facing acute water stress – and it is quite sobering to be reminded that just one green bean from Kenya takes four litres of water to produce. As we work our way through more than 4,500 litres of virtual water per person per day, because of these imports, are we, in effect, simply exporting drought?

There are, of course, all sorts of ways in which we can fix some of these problems. Hyper-efficient irrigation systems could reduce water consumption for agriculture by up to 50 percent. The next generation of solar-powered, desalination technologies will bring some comfort to many coastal communities in water-stressed areas. If we had to, albeit at a massive cost, we could totally re-engineer our water and sewerage systems throughout the rich world to deliver exactly the same services for a fraction of current water consumption levels.

Given all that, one has to point out that it would be a great deal easier to do it for three billion people than for six billion, let alone nine billion. That was exactly the sort of thinking China's leaders went through 30 years ago; that it might just be possible to sustain a population of around one billion on China's limited land and natural resources, but impossible to do the same for 1.5 billion. The one child family policy introduced at that time has pegged China's population at around 1.3 billion; according to the figures the Chinese Government uses, it would otherwise have been 1.7 billion.

This is where you have to start doing the sums. Per capita emissions of carbon dioxide in China today are around 3.8 tonnes per person. An extra 400 million Chinese citizens legitimately going about their business of improving their economic standard of living, in exactly the same way that citizens of every single one of our rich nations have done over many decades, would today be emitting an additional 1.5 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide. When asked which country I believe is doing most to address the challenge of climate change, I am being only partly mischievous when I tell my questioner that it is China.

But logic does not come easily to the hundreds of millions of people who are only just waking up to the threat of accelerating climate change. To be told that the best thing you can do by way of a personal contribution to the problem is to have fewer children (or enable the millions of women all around the world who would just love to have fewer children, to do exactly that) comes as a bit of a shock. If, instead of 70 million additional people arriving every year, we had 70 million fewer, then we might still have a chance of arriving at a sustainable future for the whole of humankind. Without that, we are looking at very long odds indeed.

There's a double irony here. Every single one of the multiple socio-economic issues that preoccupy campaigns today would be eased by full-on, government-led interventions to help reduce average fertility – especially in the world's poorest countries. And we know exactly how to generate that double dividend; increase massively funding for education for girls, for improved reproductive and other health interventions for women, and for ensuring access for women to a choice of reliable and cheap (preferably free) contraceptives.

Yet, to listen to critics of family planning, you would still think it is all about coercion and control. Whilst only too happy to regale you with the shocking statistics about compulsory abortions and sterilisations (let alone very high levels of female infanticide) in China, they know nothing of the success stories in places like Kerala, Thailand, Korea and Iran. With the full support of Islamic leaders in Iran, total fertility fell from six children per woman in 1974 to two children per woman by 2000. And a brilliant education campaign was at the heart of this success story.

The governments of many of the poorest countries are crying out for financial support for family planning, but are not getting it. The lives of countless millions of women are devastated by their inability to manage their own fertility, and hundreds of thousands die every year because of illegal abortions or complications from unwanted pregnancies. But their voices go unheard. On top of all that, every single one of the environmental problems we face today is exacerbated by population growth, and the already massive challenge of achieving an 80 percent cut in greenhouse gases by 2050 is rendered fantastical by the prospective arrival of another 2.5 billion people over the next 40 years.

Yet most environmentalists will still find this article offensive. They will go on banging their utterly inadequate 'over-consumption drum', and somehow sleep easy in their beds that they are doing 'a good job'. I think not.

*Jonathon Porritt is Programme Director of Forum for the Future.