Commentary

Too much life on earth?

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Introduction

The world population problem has evoked more passion and polemic than most fields of human enquiry. Our planet’s population will probably exceed 8 billion by the year 2025, with 90% of the growth in poor countries. Energy consumption is increasing rapidly, and the affluent and overcrowded societies of the world are changing the composition of our atmosphere. Cropland per head is falling in real terms, so that we can no longer guarantee each human the 25 tonnes of grain required for life. With such contrasted prescriptions for rich and poor, it is evident that we are being dragged on to a hyper-Malthusian slippery slope. It may be easy to assume that the panacea involves decreasing human numbers and consumption and increasing natural resources.

Birth control

Even the poorest fifth of humanity, which exists on a meagre 1.4% of global income appears to be able to supply its people with some measure of death control. Indeed, there are few cultural traditions in favour of unrestricted death. Birth control is a more complex issue altogether, and involves co-operation and to some extent voluntary restraint. It requires an expenditure many times more than the unfortunately illiterate millions of the world can afford. Religious and social doctrines promoting unrestricted reproduction are widespread. Ironically, were it not for the more spiritual dimensions of our existence, the subject of ethics and morality would be obsolete.

We are a viviparous species, seemingly breeding at random. A right to reproduction can be justified by its sensible use without resort to draconian measures demanding that individuals not be fruitful and multiply. In the discussion on a ‘low number of children world’, we are on the horns of an ethical dilemma, and to find the safe middle ground will require all our efforts, intelligence and goodwill.

Distributing contraceptives to hundreds of millions of potential mothers (or if developed for the male, potential fathers) is a priority. Given existing social customs and the prevailing forces of cultural, psychological and religious inertia, how can the unwilling be persuaded to use these methods? The focus must be on empowering women, who for the greater part control fertility, provide food for their children, and who die in childbirth and during abortions. They must play a greater role in health care and income generation.

The antidote for this repression is education. Education will undoubtedly enhance women’s dignity and help combat AIDS. There is an onus on our pharmacological companies to develop forms of contraception that are easier to use and require less medical supervision. The worst form of contraception is abortion. At the moment, it is difficult to foresee any decline in birth rate or maternal mortality without access to safe abortion.

Increasing literacy, especially in women, will result in a decrease in infant mortality and fecundity.

In a helpful comparison, the Philippines had 4000 family planning clinics in the 1960s, and was twice as rich as South Korea. Local religious leaders ensured the demise of these clinics, whereas in South Korea, early abortion was made legal and contraception was offered. Currently, South Korea has half the family size and twelve times the per capita income of the Philippines.

Food production

Our sigmoid climb in numbers is occurring on a planet where the productive areas are becoming ever...
more densely populated and people in those areas are ever more poorly fed. As increasing numbers press more heavily upon available resources, the economic as well as the environmental position becomes precarious, and long-term unexciting truths are eclipsed by quick-fix falsehoods. In the decade from 1984, grain production fell by 12%. The production of not only food but also of manufactured articles and houses is insufficient to provide adequately for the increasing numbers of people who live in developing countries. At the end of each year in Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Central and South America, the primary needs of the population remain unsatisfied. Thus, there is no capital remaining to create the agricultural and industrial plants which would improve the lives of their inhabitants.

Passing from the problems of birth control to increasing available food supplies, we are confronted by difficulties not perhaps quite so great but still enormous. How soon can the farmers who are responsible for raising most of the world’s food supply be educated into improving their methods? Once educated and their primary needs satisfied, when and where will they find the capital to provide the machinery, power, fertilizers and production methods without which the best agricultural education is irrelevant? If developing countries succeed in industrializing and nursing the land back to health and fertility, there must be incentives not to squander the planet’s finite resources as recklessly as their forerunners did. Complacency and arrogance by those living in the urban ghettos of the unmeritocracy are a great danger. We are part of an interdependent whole.

**Energy production**

In our era of technological wizardry, a single person living in Europe or the USA may place a greater planetary strain on the environment than fifty people living in sub-Saharan Africa. In the developing world, people consume 0.28 kW/year. Those in the developed world use 3.2 kW/year while the figure for the USA is 9 kW/year. Europe and America are charged with curbing over-consumption and increasing the natural resources available for others.

At the same time, we must, with utmost haste, increase food production and distribution and implement a world-wide policy for conserving our soils and our forests. We must develop practical substitutes for our fuels, preferably less dangerous and easier to implement than nuclear power. Enlightening visions such as colonizing Mars and farming the sea bed are remote. For now we must husband our declining resources of easily obtainable minerals, and develop new and inexpensive methods for extracting these minerals from poorer and poorer ores, the poorest of all being seawater and air.

**Conclusions**

Practical answers to all these questions may exist, but in any race between resources and human numbers, time is against us. Thus far, any gains we have made have been nullified by the relentless pressure of population growth. We need to rethink how we transport ourselves, what we eat and how many children we have. It is necessary to define what is meant by a population and to identify those particular areas responsible for ecosystemic strain. Apocalyptic assumptions should be replaced by critical analysis of scientific and social data to produce an accurate picture as possible. From this a business-like plan with realistic budgets for each nation and region should be used to fund non-government organizations, which tend to be less influenced by dogma and political problems. The organizations must involve themselves with grassroots workers and education. This must form the basis of future work. Empowerment of women does not mean informing them that they are not to have children, but there should be no procrastination on family planning issues.

Sadly we are now seeing the emergence of demographically-entrapped communities which exceed the production, carrying and migratory capacity of their own ecosystem. It is debatable whether the war in Rwanda was due to this. Indeed we are confronted by a dichotomy between famine, poverty and war on the one hand and birth control on the other. It is clear that the real reason for doing something is not simply because of economics but because it is right.

Doctors, medical students and health care workers are ideally placed to help realise the prospects of our world. We must keep the issues on the agenda or our ‘free as a bird’ lifestyle may start to resemble a dodo. We need to understand the value of halting and possibly reversing the current trend towards overpopulation: poverty is ultimately more expensive than poverty prevention. The goal should be a world where every pregnancy is planned and every child conceived is nurtured, supported, fed and educated.

On an individual level, this goal surely transcends the entrenched boundaries of all ideologies and customs. In addition, based upon those aspects of human diversity and genetic uniqueness, is the realization that love is necessary, as well as food and shelter.

**References**


