

# Population and the environment: time for a rethink

Monday 10 June 2013, by [THORNETT Alan](#) (Date first published: 10 June 2013).

**The effect of population growth on the ecological crisis is a discussion rarely taken up by the left, including the Fourth International. We are inviting contributions on it, of which the first, by Alan Thornett, is “Population and the environment: time for a rethink” (see below).**

## International Viewpoint

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As the ecological crisis deepens, and global warming accelerates, many on the left, to their credit, are increasingly addressing the environmental issues. The idea of ecosocialism, which sees socialism without ecology as inadequate for the transition to a sustainable alternative to capitalism, is being increasingly adopted—although there is a long way to go.

An ecosocialist conference took place in New York recently that attracted socialists from across North America. It brought together organisations sympathetic to the FI, along with the ISO, the Green Party and a large number of individual activists. The FI declared itself ecosocialist at its last World Congress and its sections are increasingly taking the ecological struggle up.

There is, however, one important aspect of the environmental crisis that the bulk of the left remains remarkably reluctant to confront. This is the issue of the human population of the planet—which is rising at an unsustainable rate.

Yet the issue of population is increasingly reflected in the media. In Britain the issue has been taken up in TV debates recently and Al Gore takes it up in his new book *The Future*—though not from an anti-capitalist standpoint of course.

As far as the urgency of the issue is concerned the figures are clear enough. The global population has almost tripled in the last 60 years—from 2.5bn in 1950 to over 7bn today! This is an increase of between 70 and 80 million people every year—or like adding the population of the USA to the planet

every four years! And it shows no signs of slowing down. In fact the rate of increase has been remarkably stable for the past 50 years.

According to UN estimates the global population will reach somewhere between 8 and 11 billion by mid-century. Meanwhile nearly half of the current global population is under 25. This is the biggest new generation ever, and a huge potential for further growth. At the same time the per capita consumption of food, water, and manufactured goods is increasing even faster than the population itself.

Yet the left has little to say about all this! There has been a consensus since the 1970s to oppose population control and coercive methods to reduce the birth rate, which has been correct. But opposition to coercive measures is not enough. It does not address the issue of rising population itself, or develop a progressive response to it—it is just against coercion.

This has been compounded by the way the debate (such as there has been) on population has been conducted. For many years allegations of Malthusianism have been dredged up whenever it has been argued that population is a problem to be discussed and addressed by the left. This is guilt by association and it has made population into a taboo subject. Malthus, of course, was the 19<sup>th</sup> century economist and cleric who famously advocated starving the poor to keep the population down because he thought it would outstrip food supply.

As a result of this kind of demonisation the vast majority of the left have avoided the subject, finding it an uncomfortable issue to address. This has been the case despite the fact that everyone on the left (as far as I am aware) regards the ideas of Malthus as rubbish from a bygone age.

This approach was reinforced by the publication of *Too Many People?* (by Ian Angus and Simon Butler) in 2011, which I reviewed on the Socialist Resistance website in January 2012 [\[1\]](#). This book, in my view, reinforced this whole approach and left the debate stuck in the past. Ian Angus and Simon Butler have distinguished records as environmentalists and as ecosocialists, but in my view, they are wrong on this issue.

The implication seems to be that to regard rising population as a problem is to be in some way anti-people, or a part of a reactionary, right wing, agenda. This has not only distorted the debate but it has given the real reactionaries, including the neo-Malthusians, who certainly exist, and have a very reactionary, authoritarian, agenda, stretching from the Chinese one child policy to forced sterilisation, a free hand.

This approach was strongly challenged as long ago as 1983 by the Canadian Marxist Wally Secombe in his article “Marxism and Demography” —in *New Left Review* (1/137) [\[2\]](#). He argued that constant references to Malthus had “placed the debate on population beyond the pale of legitimate scrutiny and investigation”, and that in doing so Marxists abandoned the terrain to our enemies.

Wally Secombe was right. But discussion, on population, on the left, has remained sparse to non-existent. And when it is discussed it is more likely to be focussed around whether to do so creates slippery slope to Malthusianism—rather than about the substance of the issue itself or a solution to the problem.

It is an approach that usually ends up minimising the issue itself in order to sustain its own stance. It goes alongside the view that rising population is no real problem. That it is largely irrelevant to the ecology of the planet. That population levels will eventually stabilise by natural processes. That the demands on resources generated by rising population can be met by technological “advances”. That

the damage inflicted on the environment can be reversed if enough money, and resources, are thrown at it.

Such assertions are, in my view, not only wrong but they are a dangerously complacent approach to the ecological crisis facing the planet.

Many of those invoking Malthus in this debate—like the authors of *Too Many People?* for example—also insist on branding those like myself, who see rising population as a problem to be addressed but who oppose any and all forms of population control or coercion, as ‘population controllers’. They lump us together, in a completely unacceptable way, with the actual population control lobby.

All this needs to change. The issue of population, we have to insist, is a very important and wholly legitimate issue for the left to discuss. Human beings are a part of nature and have both a need and an obligation to live in harmony with it. We share with other species an extremely fragile and interrelated biosphere. As ecosocialists should look towards a society in which humankind can exist alongside other species without threatening their very existence.

Such an approach, in my view, is not anti-people but entirely pro-people. It is not a reactionary agenda but a wholly progressive one.

### **Is today's population growth sustainable?**

Great store is put on the claim (as mentioned above) that the global population might stabilise by the end of the century—i.e. in 80 or 90 years time! This, however, is far from certain. Population predictions are notoriously difficult to get right because the economic and social conditions that underlie them are themselves changing and unpredictable—particularly over such a long period of time.

It is true that today's rising population is mainly due to a big fall in the global death rate (particularly infant mortality) and an increase in life expectancy (mainly in the Global North) rather than by the birth rate, which has fallen. This does not, however, make the current rate of increase any more sustainable or the issue any less urgent. The UN itself says that: ‘despite recent declines in birth rates in many countries, further large increases in population size are inevitable.’

The problem is that the resources of the planet are finite and they are running out! The demand for water is set to increase dramatically, both from rising population and rising expectations. Yet ground water aquifers—many of which only regenerate at a rate of 0.5% per 500 years—are being depleted. This has accelerated in recent years with pressure from emergent economies such as China and India and from new drilling and pumping technology.

Over 25% of all river water is now extracted before it reaches the ocean. Many rivers dry up before they get there. One in six people on the planet get their drinking water from glaciers and snowpack, on the world's mountain ranges, which are receding. These do not regenerate and when they are gone they are gone.

Land and topsoil are finite as are the resources of the oceans—which are being depleted at an alarming rate. Stocks of every species of fully-grown wild fish have shrunk by 90% in the last 50 years. Many of the mineral resources on which industrial production, medicines, transport, and communications depend are finite and are running out.

The most important resource under threat, however, is the planet's biodiversity. In the last fifty years human beings—by far the most destructive species the planet has seen—have had a greater impact on the earth's ecosystems than in any period in history. We are now losing species a thousand times faster than the average loss during the preceding 65 million years—and once a species is gone it is gone. This is the biggest mass extinction of species since the demise of the dinosaurs.

All this is due to pollution, deforestation, the over-exploitation of natural resources, and habitat loss caused by human activity. Global warming, from fossil fuels, is destroying habitats and is altering the timing of animal migrations and plant flowerings. Many species are being pushed towards the polar regions and towards higher altitudes.

Recently in Britain 25 wildlife organisation published a major biodiversity audit entitled *The State of Nature Report*. This finds that of more than 6,000 species studied more than one in ten are thought to be under threat of extinction.

The capacity of the planet to absorb waste is also finite—something Al Gore also points out in *The Future*. He quotes the World Bank in saying that the per capita production of garbage alone from urban residents in the world is now 2.6 pounds per person per day, and is projected to increase rapidly. When you add to this is the waste produced by energy production, the making of chemicals, manufacturing, paper production and agricultural waste the volume is enormous. In fact the volume of waste created every day weighs more than the 7bn inhabitants of the planet!

I am not arguing that rising population is the root cause of the ecological crisis and global warming. That is the capitalist system of production and the commodification of the planet—although pre-capitalist systems of agriculture were already degrading the ecology and the biodiversity before capitalism arrived. What I am arguing is that rising population is a major contributory factor.

Nor am I arguing that the stabilisation of the global population, would, in itself, resolve the ecological crisis or halt global warming. It would not. Such things will need a wide range of ecological, economic and social measures if they are to be achieved—I won't list them here. The chances of success, however, in these objectives, would be better if the global population was stabilised rather than if it continued to rise. It would be easier to provide food, fresh water, energy, and waste disposal and protect the planet's bio-diversity with a population of 8 rather than 9 or 10 billion people.

## **What about food?**

It is argued that enough food is produced today to feed the 7bn inhabitants of the planet if it was efficiently and equitably distributed and not subject to the ravages of the market with its hugely wasteful distribution systems. Whilst there is some truth in this the distribution of vast quantities of food across the globe, in a sustainable way, is extremely problematic.

It is true that past predictions that population would outstrip food supply have turned out to be wide of the mark. This was not only Malthus in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century but by Paul Ehrlich (in *The Population Bomb*) in the late 1960s. It would be a big mistake, however, to conclude from this that there is therefore no problem in feeding an ever-increasing population—even if the distortions of the market were removed.

What these predictions failed to take into account was the ability of ever bigger agribusiness, and ever more chemical fertilisers, to increase the productivity of food production. It left hundreds of

millions at starvation level or worse in the process, and it produced increasing global food crises, but it did massively increase food production.

The problem, therefore, is not whether enough food can be churned out by ever-bigger agribusiness, using ever more chemical fertilisers, pesticides, and mono-cropping techniques, but whether it can be produced and distributed without destroying the ecology of the planet in the process.

What the planet needs is to move towards food sovereignty and towards smaller scale and more localised agriculture. This would be better for the soil, and better for biodiversity, and it would provide better food.

Small scale farming, however, without chemical fertilisers and pesticides requires far more land per ton of food than intensive farming. Whilst is the right way forward is not an answer to ever-rising population. The amount of land and water needed would be prohibitive and it would have a further devastating impact on biodiversity, even if it were possible.

### **A radically new approach**

The left needs a radically new approach to the whole issue of population and the environment. Such an approach, which has had support of many on the left as well as feminists and environmentalists for a long time, and which I strongly support, is based on the empowerment of women.

This sees population as first and foremost a feminist (or eco-feminist) issue. Women physically create each generation. They produce children and take the main responsibility for nurturing them. Global fertility rates are ultimately determined by the size of the families they have—which in turn is related to whether they have access to contraception and abortion, education and jobs, and whether they are exposed to conservative ideologies that oppose such access.

This approach is based on the view that most women, if they had free choice, would be unlikely have the large families that prevail in much of the Global South. Some would, most would not. It argues that if women are able control their own fertility, get access to education and jobs, and shed the influences of patriarchy and religion, fertility rates would fall further and the global population would stabilise. And it would improve the lives of millions of women in the process. It is a real win-win situation.

Interestingly Al Gore, in *The Future*, advocates this as a way of stabilising the global population—as does Natalie Bennett, the leader of the Green Party in Britain and Caroline Lucas the Green Party MP.

It means supporting women in their struggle for the contraception and abortion facilities. It means supporting their fight to lift themselves out of poverty, and ensuring that they get access to education and jobs. It means giving women real choice over contraception—by not, for example forcing them to sign up to implants or coils which can only be medically removed when they give birth.

These are, in any case, issues that have long been the demands of the feminist movement and the left. We have rightly advocated a woman's right to choose in relation to abortion - the same is true for contraception.

## **Does this target the women of the Global South?**

One of the arguments deployed against this approach is that since the highest fertility rates are in the Global South such a policy would be to 'target' the women of that region—who are not responsible for the climate crisis.

The only thing empowerment targets, however, is the appalling conditions the women of the Global South face and the unmet need for reproductive services. More than 220m in the region are denied reproductive services - which can be (and often are) the difference between life and death. There are 80m unintended pregnancies a year. 74,000 women die every year as a result of failed back-street abortions—a disproportionate number of these in the Global South. Every year, around 288,000 women die from preventable causes related to pregnancy and childbirth—and 99% of them occur in developing countries. It is a policy that helps the women of the Global South and helps the planet at the same time—it is win-win again.

According to the UN the full range of modern family-planning methods still remain unavailable to at least 350 million couples world wide, many of whom say that they want to prevent another pregnancy or create more space between them.

It should be stressed, however, that it is not just a matter of contraceptive services—important as they are. The whole empowerment package is necessary for this to be successful: contraception and abortion, lifting women out of poverty, giving them access to education and jobs and protection from patriarchal pressure. It is this combination of factors which can make a change to both the birth rate and the lives of the women involved.

## **Does the carbon footprint of the Global South matter?**

It is argued that whilst the impoverished peoples of the Global South have higher birth rates than the affluent North they have a much smaller carbon footprint—of around 1 metric ton a year. The task, therefore, is not to reduce their footprint but that of the Northern populations.

This is true. Of course the high polluting populations of the Global North are the top priority as far as reducing carbon emissions are concerned. But the idea that rising population levels in the Global South do not matter is, in my view, mistaken. We have to address both, North and South, because they are ultimately a part of the same problem.

In any case populations trapped in poverty today rightly aspire to change their situation as soon as they can. In fact some countries with the lowest carbon footprint today have the highest economic growth rates and therefore a big potential for such change. China's footprint is already approaching 7 metric tonnes, after just 2 decades of capitalist growth. There is little point in assessing the impact of carbon footprints over the next 50 years on the basis of a snapshot of the situation as it is today.

Also rising population is not just about carbon emissions but the total impact of the human population on the ecology of the planet. Whilst the carbon footprint of the South is much smaller than that of the North if we talk about the ecological footprint—i.e. the total per capita impact on the environment including soil erosion and depletion, deforestation and the impact on biodiversity the impact of the South becomes far more significant. Total numbers, therefore, matter.

It is argued that women have large families in impoverished societies because they are needed to provide labour and to help their parents in old age. Impoverished women do indeed come under great pressure to have ever-larger families for these reasons, but it does not necessarily ease the



burdens they face. In fact women's health is undermined by repeated, often annual, pregnancies and smaller families would improve both their health and their quality of life. In fact it would give them a better chance of reaching old age.

Every new pair of new hands, moreover, is also another mouth to feed. Women still perform at least 80% of domestic labour. More than a third of households in the Global South are female headed, and where they are not women remain the primary providers of support. Expanding families are forced to degrade their own environment in order to get food water and fuel to survive.

It is argued that as women are lifted out of poverty they will automatically have fewer children. It is not, however, an automatic process—crucial as it is. As women are lifted out of poverty they still face pressure from religion, patriarchy, and cultural factors, which oppose the use of reproductive services. This varies from country to country but it is a powerful factor. In Catholic Italy for example religious strictures and laws are outweighed by other factors but in Saudi Arabia they are dominant.

### **The Cairo conference**

An important opportunity to promote the empowerment of women in this regard was the International Conference on Population and Development organised by the UN September 1994. It produced a *Programme of Action* (PoA) [3] which called on governments to make reproductive services universally available, on the basis of free choice, by 2015 or sooner.

The PoA met with bitter opposition from a range of conservative forces from the pro-life/anti-abortion lobby led by the Vatican—on the basis that it supported abortion rights and the provision of contraception—and it still does. It was also denounced on the left as a transmission belt population control—at least by some on the left, most ignored it. The implementation of the PoA requirements by governments was patchy, particularly after Bush took office in the USA and strongly opposed its decisions.

Feminists were sharply divided on it both at the conference and afterwards. Many had fought for the conference to happen and had fought for the decisions it eventually took. This approach is reflected in Laurie Mazur's book *A Pivotal Moment—Population Justice, and the Environmental Challenge* published in 2010. I agree with much, although not all, of what she says.

The conference, and its outcome, was denounced, most prominently, by the Indian feminist, and environmental campaigner, Vandana Shiva.

Shiva has a long and distinguished record on ecological issues in the Global South that can only be admired. She was already, however, an opponent of an empowerment of women approach to rising population and she denounced the conference (falsely in my view) for concentrating on the provision of reproductive services to the exclusion of development issues—and for (in her view) paving the way for population control.

She was heavily critical of Western feminists, and Western women's organisations, from this standpoint, regarding them as having been duped into this process. She promoted a very unfortunate polarisation between feminists North and South at and after the conference and her views have been influential in the debate on population ever since.

She objected to the way the PoA linked together the issue of rising population and the provision of reproductive rights—which she argued should be kept strictly separate. She claimed that any programme designed to give women in the South access to reproductive services would inevitably

end up introducing coercive population control.

In her report of the Cairo conference, written immediately afterwards (in March 1995) jointly with Mira Shiva (no relation I understand), she attacks the PoA for reducing everything to reproductive rights, which she calls 'biological reductionism'. She puts it this way:

*"At Cairo, women's multiple rights as full human beings in society were reduced to 'reproductive rights' alone. The Western women's movement contributed to this biological reductionism in Cairo by failing to focus on women's productive roles and by focusing exclusively on their reproductive roles, by failing to draw attention to denial of women's economic rights through structural adjustment and GATT, and allowing 'unmet needs' to be redefined as needs for contraceptives alone, and not needs for food, water and livelihoods. Further, by reducing women to their biology alone, and divorcing them from the economy and society, the western feminists have created a discourse which strengthens the hands of patriarchy based on religious fundamentalists. Western feminists thus strengthen religious fundamentalism in the Third World."* [4]

She claimed that the Cairo conference: "was dominated by Northern women obsessed with individual sexual freedom, indifferent to society and to other freedoms."

This, however, was a caricature of the role of Northern women at the conference. It was also a caricature of the PoA. It is right, of course, to point to the inadequacies of the UN and to draw attention to role of GATT and its structural adjustment programmes—though whether Western feminists at the conference failed to do this is another matter. It is also right to point to the inability of the UN to carry out what it decides. This kind of misrepresentation, however, of what happened and Cairo does not clarify the issues involved or advance the cause of women.

The PoA, in fact, stresses throughout that it is crucial that the provision of reproductive rights do not stand alone but that they go alongside all the other stated objectives: lifting women out of poverty and giving them access to education, health care and employment.

The section on objectives in the PoA puts it this way:

*"The objective is to raise the quality of life for all people through appropriate population and development policies and programmes aimed at achieving poverty eradication, sustained economic growth in the context of sustainable development and sustainable patterns of consumption and production, human resource development and the guarantee of all human rights, including the right to development as a universal and inalienable right and an integral part of fundamental human rights. Particular attention is to be given to the socio-economic improvement of poor women in developed and developing countries. As women are generally the poorest of the poor and at the same time key actors in the development process, eliminating social, cultural, political and economic discrimination against women is a prerequisite of eradicating poverty, promoting sustained economic growth in the context of sustainable development, ensuring quality family planning and reproductive health services, and achieving balance between population and available resources and sustainable patterns of consumption and production."* (PoA para 3.16)

It goes on: "Widespread poverty remains the major challenge to development efforts. Poverty is often accompanied by unemployment, malnutrition, illiteracy, low status of women, exposure to environmental risks and limited access to social and health services, including reproductive health services which, in turn, include family planning. All these factors contribute to high levels of fertility, morbidity, and mortality, as well as to low economic productivity." (PoA para 3.13)

Of course any programme to provide reproductive services, organised by the UN, national



government's, private charities, or anyone else, can become corrupted and resort to coercive methods. If this happens they should be closed down.

The PoA also stresses the issue of free choice:

*"The principle of informed free choice is essential to the long-term success of family-planning programmes. Any form of coercion has no part to play. In every society there are many social and economic incentives and disincentives that affect individual decisions about childbearing and family size. Over the past century, many Governments have experimented with such schemes, including specific incentives and disincentives, in order to lower or raise fertility. Most such schemes have had only marginal impact on fertility and in some cases have been counterproductive. Governmental goals for family planning should be defined in terms of unmet needs for information and services. Demographic goals, while legitimately the subject of government development strategies, should not be imposed on family-planning providers in the form of targets or quotas for the recruitment of clients."* (PoA para 7.12.)

Another problem with Shiva's approach is that leads its advocates to find objections to family planning programmes, in order to make their case, and even to opposing reproductive services per se - under conditions where there is a desperate need to be met.

In fact in her article "Women's Rights & Reproduction" [5] written just before the Cairo conference she appears to be ambiguous on abortion by insisting that the prevailing "Pro-choice" language reduces the larger issue of the well-being of women to reproduction, and then it reduces reproduction to abortion." She certainly has nothing positive thing to say about reproductive rights, either contraception or abortion. She argues that the promotion of reproductive rights is being used as an alternative to development and that it should stop. That the PoA was (and is) a transmission belt to coercive methods—even if such programmes started on the basis of free choice.

To oppose all such programmes, however, because some might go off the rails makes no sense. The upshot would be to deny large numbers of impoverished women the reproductive services that they desperately need.

In my view the left should support the PoA, along with other actions and campaigns with similar objectives, in calling on governments to make reproductive services universally available, on the basis of free choice, as a matter of urgency.

Such provision is first and foremost the job of governments, rather than charitable organisations or mega-rich individuals like Malinda Gates. Such provision should be readily available, free of charge, and devoid of any form of coercion or pressure.

## **Conclusion**

The problem is that ecological crisis has become far more acute since the debates of the 60s, 70s, and 80s, when the 'traditional position' of the left on this was shaped. Also the population of the planet has doubled since these debates were first set out.

It is now clearer than ever that climate change threatens a catastrophe of unknown proportions. Carbon emissions have increased and global warming has accelerated. The seas are rising, the glaciers are retreating and the deserts are expanding. Rising population is not the main driver of climate change but it clearly compounds the problem.

The left needs to get beyond the old debates and recognise that there is a serious problem to address as far as rising population is concerned and that the way forward is through the empowerment of women to control their own lives. This would repair a gaping hole in our analysis of the climate crisis.

We have to deepen our approach as ecosocialists. In fact is that unlimited population growth cannot be sustained by the ecosystem of the planet, even if the ravages of capitalism are removed. This is why we have to make the ecological struggle an integral part of the struggle against capitalism today.

**Alan Thornett**, June 2013

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**P.S.**

\* From International Viewpoint, 10 June 2013:

<http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/>

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## **Footnotes**

[1] <http://socialistresistance.org/3013/too-many-people-a-review>

[2] <http://newleftreview.org/I/137/wally-seccombe-marxism-and-demography>

[3] <http://www.un.org/ecosocdev/geninfo/populatin/icpd.htm>

[4] Her report can be found here: <http://www.mail-archive.com/ecofem@csf.colorado.edu/msg06397.html>

[5] <http://www.iisd.ca/Cairo/twnpop.txt>