

The Ethical Implications of Population Growth

Population Matters opposes coercive population restraint policies on ethical grounds, in defence of individual human rights, especially women's rights. At the same time, population growth raises important ethical issues around the balance between reproductive rights and social and environmental responsibilities.

1. Inter-generational ethics: It is a fact that current growth (10.000 more per hour) will stop one day, simply because a finite planet cannot sustain an infinite number of people. But it can only stop in one of two ways: either sooner, the humane way, by fewer births - family planning backed by policy to make it available and encourage people to use it; or later, the 'natural' way, by more deaths - famine, disease and predation/war. Campaigners against the former are in practice campaigning for the latter. We owe it to our children to prevent this.

2. International ethics: This is not just an issue for poor countries. The UK population is projected to grow by 10 million in the next 22 years - that's '10 more Birminghams'. England is already the most overcrowded country in Europe, taking far more than our share of our planet's natural resources. Each of us does far more damage to the planet than any poor African; every extra Briton, for instance, has the carbon footprint of twenty-two more Malawians – and the poor will suffer first and worst from climate change. We owe it to others to stabilise our numbers too (and our resource-consumption), and then reduce them to a sustainable level.

3. Reproductive ethics: It is also a fact that if two people with two living children have a third child, they will ratchet up the population of the planet, and thus: ratchet up damage to the environment; bring nearer the day of serious ecological failure; and ratchet down everyone else's share of dwindling natural resources to cope with this. So individual decisions to create a whole extra lifetime of impacts affect everyone else (including their own children) – far more than any other environmentally damaging decision they make. We need to be aware of the ethical implications of having large families; and sex education in schools should include it.

4. Humanitarian ethics: Some 220 million women world-wide lack access to family planning, and 40% of pregnancies are unintended. There are some 50,000 deaths from unsafe abortions each year; while the women dying from pregnancy-related causes is equivalent to 4 full jet liners crashing every day. The close correlation of high fertility rates with high maternal and child mortality is well established - every mother on \$1 per day knows that the family will be better fed if there are three children round the table rather than ten. Universal access to family planning is Millennium Development Goal 5b; and coercive pregnancy through lack of it is an abuse of women's rights too. As UNICEF said: "Family planning could bring more benefits to more people at less cost than any other known technology". It should be a very high priority.

5. Inter-species ethics: The very recent population explosion since the industrial revolution is causing the current '6th major global extinction', as humans occupy, degrade, pollute and destroy wildlife habitats. Other creatures have as much right to occupy the planet as we do.

6. Political ethics: For all the above reasons, the government should state a national goal of stabilising and then reducing UK numbers to a sustainable level, by non-coercive means, as soon as possible; and give top priority to family planning and women's education and empowerment programmes in the development aid budget.