

DIFFERENT TAKES



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10 Reasons Why Population Control is not the Solution to Global Warming

by Betsy Hartmann

Climate change is clearly one of the most urgent problems of our time. It is also a highly contested policy arena with different actors from all sides of the political spectrum struggling to get a piece of the action. The population control lobby is no exception. Today, a number of mainstream population and environment groups are claiming that population growth is a major cause of climate change and that lower birth rates are the solution.¹ This view threatens to undermine a progressive climate justice agenda that seeks both to curtail greenhouse gas emissions and to reduce economic, social, gender and racial inequalities. It also poses a danger to reproductive rights. Here are ten reasons why population control is not the solution to global warming.

1 The numbers don't add up.

The industrialized countries, with only 20 percent of the world's population, are responsible for 80 percent of the accumulated carbon dioxide build-up in the atmosphere. The U.S. is the worst offender. In 2002 the U.S. was responsible for 20 tons of carbon dioxide emissions per person, compared to only 0.2 tons in Bangladesh, 0.3 in Kenya and 3.9 in Mexico.

Rapidly industrializing countries such as China (with one of the lowest birthrates in the world) and India will account for a higher percentage of emissions in the future, but it will be a long time before their cumulative emissions reach the level of today's already industrialized nations. Rather than population control, sensible climate change and industrialization policies in China, India and other

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developing countries should emphasize investments in green technology, renewable energy and conservation. Worldwide, reducing the population of automobiles would do more to curtail climate change than imposing limits on family size.

It is also important to note that most countries in the world are already moving to a smaller family size. While world population is projected to increase from 6.7 billion today to 9.2 billion in 2050, the rate of growth has slowed considerably. The average number of children per woman in the Global South is now 2.75, and the UN predicts this figure will drop to 2.05 by 2050. Moreover, the countries that still have relatively high birth rates, such as those in sub-Saharan Africa, have the lowest carbon emissions. From 1950-2000, the entire continent of Africa was responsible for only 2.5 percent of the world's carbon dioxide emissions.²

2 Blame games target the wrong people.

Wealthy countries, corporations and consumers are getting off the hook. The challenge of climate change presents an opportunity for affluent Americans to rethink their wasteful lifestyles and get on board with a transition to a just and green economy. The problem is not 'those people over there' — it is us, right here.

This blame game is part of a long tradition of eugenic environmentalism in which environmental and economic resource scarcities are attributed to "too many people" — usually meaning too many people of color — and not to highly inequitable and environmentally damaging processes of production, distribution and consumption.³ Focusing on population growth as a major cause of climate change places the blame on the world's poorest people who are the least responsible for global warming.

3 Population control programs erode reproductive rights.

Viewing family planning as a means to solve the climate crisis will set back progress on the delivery of safe, voluntary and ethical reproductive health services. That's because there's a big difference between family planning programs designed primarily to reduce birth rates and those premised

on reproductive rights as an end that is worthy in itself. Population control pushes quality of care and freedom of contraceptive choice to the back seat. Its long and sordid history provides ample evidence of these risks.⁴

Most population and environment groups insist that they are against coercion, and maintain that linking family planning and climate change is a win-win solution for women and the planet. The reality is closer to lose-lose.

4 Population control is no substitute for gender justice.

Today, all over the world feminist environment and development activists are working to ensure that women's concerns are adequately represented in the climate change policy arena. They are bringing gender issues into the design of early warning systems as well as efforts to strengthen food and livelihood security. They look critically at how corporate-driven climate change policies, such as carbon offset projects, often harm poor women and their communities. They advocate for safe reproductive health services as a vital part of disaster response, not as a tool of population control. To ensure women have a real voice in climate change policy, we need to address these gender issues rather than seeing women primarily as wombs.⁵

5 Linking population and the environment bolsters anti-immigrant agendas.

By attributing environmental degradation to population growth, population and environment groups play into the hands of conservative anti-immigrant forces. In the greening of hate, anti-immigrant groups strategically deploy population arguments to gain support among environmentalists. They claim that immigrants are overpopulating the U.S., causing everything from urban sprawl to traffic jams to water scarcity. Now climate change is being added to the mix. The right-wing Center for Immigration Studies argues that immigrants should remain in their home countries where they consume less energy. Many of these anti-immigrant groups are tied to white supremacist funders and organizations.⁶

6 Fear-based stereotypes of overpopulation contribute to the militarization of climate change.

In the national security arena, current narratives about 'climate conflict' and 'climate refugees' draw on racialized fears of overpopulation in the Global South. A 2003 Pentagon-sponsored study of the potential impacts of abrupt climate change paints a grim scenario of poor, starving, overpopulated communities overshooting the reduced carrying capacity of their lands, engaging in violent conflict over scarce resources, and storming en masse towards Western borders. Such narratives serve as a rationale for further militarization of immigration enforcement and the expansion of U.S. military intervention, especially into Africa. This kind of reasoning is not limited to national security and intelligence reports. A recent article in *Onearth* magazine on global warming and sea-level rise raises the specter of millions of destitute Bangladeshi environmental refugees as potential Islamic terrorists.⁷

7 Population stereotypes victimize the displaced.

Portraying climate-displaced people as a dark and dangerous horde of violent migrants rather than human beings with human rights has profoundly negative consequences. During Hurricane Katrina, the U.S. news media whipped up similar fears about African Americans in New Orleans, with terrible effects on rescue, relief and recovery efforts. It is a tragic irony that poor people, who are likely to be the main victims of climate change, are doubly victimized by these vicious stereotypes.

By propagating the notion that population growth is a major cause of global warming, mainstream population and environment groups make such stereotypes more palatable to the general public, contributing to a climate of fear that can only impede effective disaster planning and response.

8 Population alarmism encourages apocalyptic thinking and distracts us from the search for practical solutions to the climate crisis.

Historically, the U.S. environmental movement often has succumbed to apocalyptic thinking. Doomsday scenarios of population outstripping resources exemplify this philosophy. One drawback of apocalyptic thinking is that it makes people feel they are powerless to do anything about the problem. The U.S. today lags far behind countries like Germany and Denmark that have taken concrete steps to reduce their dependence on fossil fuels and build a green economy. It's high time to turn our attention to practical climate policy in the U.S.

The flip side of apocalyptic thinking is the longing for magic-bullet solutions. This allows corporations in the nuclear industry to promote themselves as potential saviors. Don't worry, the message goes, nuclear power can light every house, no matter how big the population.⁸

9 Shifting the blame for the climate crisis to the Global South prevents international solidarity.

It is factually wrong, morally bankrupt, and patently absurd for affluent Americans to blame the climate crisis on population growth in the Global South. It is also politically disastrous. If the U.S. is to enter serious climate negotiations on the international stage, it must do so from a position of taking full responsibility for our own greenhouse gas emissions, past and present, and for the culture of greed and waste that has become the hallmark of American consumer capitalism.

10 Inserting population into the climate change debate divides the environmental movement at a time when we should be coming together.

The implicit and explicit race, class and gender biases of population control are detrimental to building an inclusive movement for climate justice. This narrow worldview also blocks a deeper understanding of the economic and political forces that both drive climate change and prevent effective solutions. Going down the population road is a diversion the environmental movement can ill afford. It will weaken our base, not strengthen it.⁹

Conclusion

Climate justice, not population control, is the starting point from which we can begin to build the kind of national and international solidarity that is needed to address climate change. The world is waiting. We are way behind, and there is no time to lose.

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Notes

- 1 See, for example, Population-Health-Environment-Policy and Practice Group, *Human Population Growth and Greenhouse Gas Emissions*, January 2008. The members of this coalition are Conservation International, National Audubon Society, Population Action International, Population Reference Bureau, Sierra Club, US Agency for International Development, Woodrow Wilson Center, World Wildlife Fund, and Worldwatch Institute.
- 2 For population figures, see UN Population Division, *World Population Prospects: The 2006 Revision (Highlights)*, accessed at http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/wpp2006/WPP2006_Highlights_rev.pdf on 5 January 2009; and *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* online roundtable debate on population and climate change, accessed 14 January 2009 at <http://www.thebulletin.org/web-edition/roundtables/population-and-climate-change?order=asc>. For figures on national per capita carbon emissions, see Kirsten Dow and Thomas E. Downing, *The Atlas of Climate Change* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007): 40-41, 96, 100.
- 3 For a history of population control, see Matthew Connelly, *Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008). On the link between eugenics and environmentalism, see Alexandra Minna Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).
- 4 See Connelly, op. cit.; Betsy Hartmann, *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs: The Global Politics of Population Control* (Boston: South End Press, 1995); Lisa Ann Richey, *Population Politics and Development: From the Policies to the Clinics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); and M. Catherine Maternowska, *Reproducing Inequities: Poverty and the Politics of Population in Haiti* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006).
- 5 For more on gender and climate change, see Irene Dankelman, *Gender, Climate Change and Human Security*, Women's Environment and Development Organization (May 2008), accessed on 7 January 2009 at <http://www.wedo.org/files/HSN%20Study%20Final%20May%2020,%202008.pdf>. Also see WEDO's gender action link, accessed on 7 January 2009 at <http://www.genderaction.org/images/Gender%20Action%20Link%20-%20Climate%20Change.pdf>. On carbon offsets, see the excellent resource, *Carbon Trading: A Critical Conversation on Climate Change, Privatization, and Power*, special issue of *Development Dialogue* 48 (September 2006), accessed on 7 January 2009 at http://www.dhf.uu.se/pdf/2006_48_carbon_trading/carbon_trading_web.pdf.
- 6 See Southern Poverty Law Center, "The Puppeteer," *Intelligence Report* 106 (Summer 2002) 44-51. These groups have periodically organized campaigns to take over the Sierra Club using population as a wedge. Former Sierra Club director Adam Wehrbach has written a strong critique of population control and the anti-immigrant movement, "End of the Population Movement," *The American Prospect*, 5 October 2005. See also Jessica Leann Urban, *Nation, Immigration, and Environmental Security* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2008). On CIS, see Leon Kolankiewicz and Stephen A. Camarota, *Immigration to the United States and Worldwide Greenhouse Gas Emissions* (Center for Immigration Studies, 2008), accessed on 2 January 2009 at <http://www.cis.org/GreenhouseGasEmissions>. For a critique, see Angela Kelley, "Voodoo Science Blames Climate Change on Immigrants," 18 August 2008, accessed on 30 December 2008 at <http://www.alternet.org/story/95493/>.
- 7 For the Pentagon report, see Peter Schwartz and Doug Randall, *An Abrupt Climate Change Scenario and its Implications for United States National Security*, 2003, accessed on 5 January 2009 at <http://www.gbn.com/GBNDocumentDisplayServlet.srv?aid=26231&url=/UploadDocumentDisplayServlet.srv?id=28566>. For more on the militarization of climate change, see Betsy Hartmann, "Climate Refugees and Climate Conflict: Who's Taking the Heat for Global Warming?" paper presented at the panel on climate change, 45 Annual Conference, Montreal, Canada, October 2007, available online at <http://www.radixonline.org/ccm2.html>. Also see Betsy Hartmann, "War Talk and Climate Change," *Truthout*, 26 November 2007, available at <http://www.truthout.org/article/betsy-hartmann-war-talk-and-climate-change>. George Black, "The Gathering Storm: What Happens When Global Warming Turns Millions of Destitute Muslims into Environmental Refugees?" *Oearth*, Summer 2008: 22-37.
- 8 Apocalyptic thinking also encourages dangerous moral relativism. See Population and Development Program, "Ten Reasons to Rethink 'Overpopulation,'" *DifferenTakes* 40 (Fall 2006), available online at <http://popdev.hampshire.edu/projects/dt/40>. Also see John Dryzek, "Looming Tragedy: Survivalism," in *The Politics of the Earth: Environmental Discourses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 23-44. For a critique of the nuclear industry, see Meredith Crafton, "Why a Nuclear Renaissance Threatens Our Bodies, the Environment and Our Future," *DifferenTakes* 56 (Winter 2009), available online at <http://popdev.hampshire.edu/projects/dt/56>.
- 9 For more on these issues, see Betsy Hartmann and Elizabeth Barajas-Roman, "Reproductive Justice, Not Population Control: Breaking the Wrong Links and Making the Right Ones in the Movement for Climate Justice," paper prepared for the WE ACT for Environmental Justice-sponsored conference, *Advancing Climate Justice: Transforming the Economy, Public Health and Our Environment*, January 29-30, 2009, New York, NY.