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What Developing Countries Need Contribution to GTI Forum [The Population Debate Revisited](#)

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Since the publication of Thomas Malthus's *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, the work has generated significant controversy. Malthus argued that population would grow geometrically, but food production could only grow arithmetically, leading population to outstrip the capacity of the land to support it. Is the question of overpopulation then always that of human beings versus nature, with nature always winning? The fact that human beings, as part of nature, can and do control some forces of nature or try to cohabit amicably with the rest of nature is not new. Even in the time of Malthus, William Godwin had pointed out the possibility that an improvement in human institutions could lead to a balance between human beings and the rest of nature.¹ Subsequently, Karl Marx developed this view further and maintained that “social reorganization and technology were the parallel instruments by means of which the tooth and claw of primitive nature could be blunted.”² But in his characteristic pessimism, Malthus argued that even where such a “utopian balance” is attained, it will still, in the long run, be disequibrated due to the tendency of population to outpace food production.

Malthus's belief that population always increases at a geometrical ratio has been discredited by the demographic transition theory, which postulates that increasing technological development and changing patterns of behavior limit the growth of population without any need for the Malthusian checks of famine, war, or disease nor for his preventive check of abstinence. However, many countries have yet to complete the demographic transition, and many activists in industrialized countries still oppose contraception and access to abortion.

By insisting that food production increases by arithmetical ratio due to increased pressure on land, Malthus also failed to anticipate the magnitude of technological development that was to follow the industrial revolution. A case in point is the fact that the US cultivated 15% less land in 1970 than in 1940 but produced 70% greater output due to improved agricultural technologies. The UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) estimates that the use of scarce water resources is becoming more efficient and that the bulk of the increase in arable land and improved crop yield will take place in Africa and South America by 2050.³ Thus the land-to-human ratio no longer determines productivity as technology advances. However, in the less developed economies, where we still hear of drought and famine due to inadequate mastery of nature, violence, and corruption, Malthus remains relevant.

The Food and Agricultural Organization reports that the “Malthusian threat” is more relevant to the poorer countries of Asia and Africa, where food production will need to be doubled by 2050 to meet the projected population increases.⁴ All countries still face problems due to environmental pollution, global warming, deforestation, and crowding. Unlike industrialized societies which passed through the demographic transition gradually following the development of food, health, and contraceptive technologies, which gradually reduced fertility and mortality rates within a social atmosphere of changing attitudes, the developing countries had the opportunity to adopt the technologies almost spontaneously without changing their traditional pronatalist views and traditional modes of production. The result is a massive increase in population without proportionate increase in food supplies.

This has led many writers to associate the low level of economic development in some countries with a high rate of population increase. Neo-Malthusians, consequently, argue that Western nations are not morally obliged to provide aid to the poor developing countries unless those countries are prepared to intensify efforts to limit their birth rates. Like the traditional analysis of Malthus, this analysis has attracted much criticism, especially from neo-Marxists who argue that a smaller population does not guarantee a higher rate of productivity and development. As China demonstrated with the one-child policy and rapid economic growth, the policy option open to developing countries is not a choice between the neo-Malthusian and the neo-Marxian answers to the problem, but probably a synthesis of both—the realization that efforts to promote

family planning must be accompanied by efforts to develop and distribute resources equitably. However, a woman's right to choose contraception and abortion remains illegal in many developing countries today and continues to be challenged in court by anti-abortion activists in some industrialized countries.

However, developing countries need much more than family planning assistance; they also need to develop the technologies that will make increased resources more equitably available. If for nothing else, technological advancement will assure parents that when they decide to have fewer children, those children will be guaranteed better chances in life. Part of the solution in Africa may lie in the abolition of the colonial boundaries to allow the population to migrate more freely across state boundaries within the economy of scale that the African Union Commission appears to be building with a free trade agreement, though African unity involves much more than trade. In the case of Africa, with its enormous natural resources, it is scandalous that policy experts concentrate on how the population will be curbed instead of challenging the countries and companies that benefited from the centuries of the depopulation of Africa during slavery and the century of colonization to start paying reparations to Africa as a way of guaranteeing survival to the extent that the need for survival will no longer pressure the poor into having larger families as an insurance against an uncertain future.⁵

Endnotes

1. Joseph Spengler, "Malthus on Godwin's of Population," *Demography* 8, no. 1 (1971).
2. N. W. Chamberlain, *Beyond Malthus: Population and Power* (New York, Basic Books, 1970), 6-9.
3. Sidney Weintrauts, *Modern Economic Thought* (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1977), 489; Food and Agricultural Organization of the UN "How to Feed the World 2050: High-Level Expert Forum," Rome, 2009, https://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/wsfs/docs/Issues_papers/HLEF2050_Global_Agriculture.pdf.
4. Food and Agricultural Organization of the UN, *The Future of Food Production: Trends and Challenges* (Rome: FAO, 2017), <https://www.fao.org/3/i6583e/i6583e.pdf>.
5. Biko Agozino, "Reparative Justice: The Final Stage of Decolonization," *Punishment & Society*, Special Issue on Legacies of Empire (2021): 1-18.

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