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Ecology and Empowerment

Contribution to GTI Forum The Population Debate Revisited

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Ian Lowe gave us an objective and rational overview of the population debate, addressing the role that human population size and growth play in environmental degradation, the reasons population issues are a taboo topic, and the importance of overcoming the difficulty addressing them.

Reading this essay, it appears obvious that population size and growth must be integrated in our responses to environmental degradation and climate change, as well as in the overall planning of our societal pursuits.

However, this is not the case. Despite the clear scientific evidence that population is one of the key variables to take into account to ensure the well-being of future generations, the implications of population size and growth are systematically avoided in key international policy instruments.

Why then, despite the obvious importance of this issue, has population not been brought, like other key human development issues, into the global limelight? Other movements, such as gender equity, share with population stabilization the difficulty of touching on normative values. This hasn't prevented international consensus to emerge on the importance of gender equity. Why did the need to slow or stabilize global human population not elicit a rights-based movement comparable to the gender equity movement?

The answer to this question might be, at least in part, that it is not sufficiently known and understood that population growth can be effectively addressed by expanding the autonomy

and the exercise of reproductive rights for women and by removing their barriers to safe and effective family planning.

Reproductive rights rest on the right of each person to choose the number, timing, and spacing of their children, and to have the means and information to do so. This category of rights, reproductive rights, is broadly underacknowledged, underfunded, and under threat. Yet the scale of progress necessary for reproductive autonomy is enormous: nearly half of pregnancies around the world are unintended. Despite this, constant setbacks occur against reproductive rights, such as the recent decision by the United States Supreme Court to overturn the country's constitutional right to abortion.

When reproductive rights are fulfilled, it is well-documented that fertility levels tend to decrease. For this reason, empowering all to decide the number, spacing, and timing of their children would thus not only fulfill an internationally recognized reproductive right, but would also help human beings achieve a better balance with the environment.

Addressing the problem of population growth can be a catalyst for implementing interventions that promote justice and equity. All interventions likely to have lasting positive effects on population trends are based on steps taken for other good reasons: education for women and girls, comprehensive sexuality education, expansion of women's rights, and unfettered access to effective family planning services and commodities. If the public better understood this key fact, addressing population would gain attention and acceptability as an important public topic and a noble cause deserving global effort.

Articulating, communicating, and mobilizing a message on the need to slow, stabilize, or decrease human population size is long overdue. It is overdue for the sustainability of the planet, for the plants, animals, ecosystems, and climate that we inhabit; it is overdue for the general public, who deserves to know that their reproductive choices, in terms of sustainability, likely matter much more than their lifestyle choices; but it is also overdue, perhaps more surprisingly, to advance reproductive rights, whose significance reaches far beyond individuals, couples, and families.

About the Author

Céline Delacroix is a professor at the University of Ottawa's School of Health Sciences and director of the FP/Earth project with the Population Institute. Her interdisciplinary research focuses on analyzing how family planning, population size, and environmental sustainability intersect and how to harness these linkages. She has served as executive director of several human rights and environmental civil society organizations, including the Conservation Council of New Brunswick and Ethiopiaid Canada. She holds a PhD from the University of Ottawa.

About the Publication

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