



“Summary of article by Atiq Rahman: Lifestyle is the Problem” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 6: A Survey of Sustainable Development. Island Press: Washington DC, 2001. pp. 104-107

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Since the publication of Paul Ehrlich’s *The Population Bomb* in 1968, great attention has been paid to the social, economic and environmental problems associated with world population growth. The environmental impact of population growth was later summarized in the equation $I=PAT$, representing the theory that the negative impact on the environment (I) was the product of population growth (P), affluence or per-capita consumption (A) and the technology used to produce what is consumed (T). When it comes to international discussions of the environment, Northern researchers often place the emphasis on population growth, arguing that in the developing world it outweighs other factors. In this chapter, the author argues that on the issue of climate change such logic is flawed.

Taking a Comprehensive Approach

“Simple formulae produce simple answers. The $I=PAT$ equation and its many variants hide as much as they reveal about the causes of environmental decline. ...There is an urgent need to broaden the base of analysis and try to address the more complex range of factors that bear down on the Earth. The challenge is twofold: first, to focus on the qualitative or systemic forces (poverty, gender, market mechanisms) that drive the quantitative factors involved in climate change (population, consumption and technology); and second, to address the impact of population growth not only on the generation of greenhouse gases, but also on the ability of countries to adapt to the climate change made inevitable by past pollution.” (103)

Population, like technology and consumption, is only an approximate cause of environmental change, and in many situations it is not the most important cause. The impact of population on the environment will depend on many variables: the number of people using a particular resource, the overall level of consumption, the manner in which a resource is extracted or protected, as well as social, institutional and political factors. Where there has been a demographic transition to lower birth rates in developing countries, it has been achieved where social, cultural and economic conditions favored the use of contraception.

There have been attempts to capture the wider complexities involved in environmental change. One World Bank analytical framework, for example, suggests that levels of indebtedness and ill-conceived economic policies are the real keys to understanding environmental degradation.¹ For example, it is often not population pressure but mismanagement of public lands that causes major environmental problems in developing countries. With such strong linkages between population, poverty and environmental issues, the policies that make the most sense are ones that

address unsustainable pressures simultaneously. Efforts to improve the rights and welfare of women are an example of such a win-win policy.

The other area in which we need to take a more comprehensive approach is in assessing the impact of population growth, consumption and technology on the ability of countries to adapt to the climate change that is already inevitable, with global warming and the resulting rise in sea levels. In many countries with fragile coastal ecosystems, adaptation to climate change is more of a priority than reducing their own emissions. If population growth is slower, for example, some countries will find it much easier to respond to climatic changes. Early estimates suggest that the impact of climate change will be to make it much more difficult to assure food, clothing and shelter for some ten billion people.²

“Policy makers thus have a double reason to implement community-based development strategies, which are responsive to the ecological and human needs of each locality. Only by addressing the structural social, economic and institutional problems that generate so much of today’s impoverishment and environmental degradation can tomorrow’s challenge of adaptation be met.” (106)

Conclusions

The relationships between population growth and consumption are still poorly understood. This report has attempted to assess the arguments for enhanced population control as a means to halt climate change. We have found “a combination of muddled thinking and special pleading, which amount to the construction of a ‘population myth.’” (106) Based on this assessment, we can draw the following six conclusions:

1. “Action to achieve a sustainable climate should be based on principles of equity (so that the polluter pays) and effectiveness (so that issues of least inertia are given priority). A clear distinction also needs to be drawn between the North’s past and present unsustainable exploitation of shared global resources, such as the climate, and the South’s potential for unsustainability (at much lower per capita intensity).” (106) Population growth is not the primary factor in climate change and is more difficult to change than consumption levels in the North.
2. It is important to control population growth in developing countries, and many are pursuing policies that are curtailing growth rates. But each nation and community needs to decide for itself how to best manage its demographic policies, recognizing that these are linked to a complex set of socio-economic issues – poverty, social security, women’s education and status, debt, unequal trade, unproductive structural adjustment.
3. “The attempt by Ehrlich and others to assess the role of population growth in climate change has been used to obscure crucial qualitative elements that ultimately shape factors such as population and consumption growth. Furthermore, the assumption prevails that causality determines policy response: because of the complexity of the causes described above, even if population growth was the primary cause of climate change, increases in family planning programs first would not be the solution.” (107)

4. We need to tackle the root causes of unsustainable trends in all areas. In the case of population growth in developing countries, this means addressing underlying socio-economic issues. In the area of unsustainable consumption in the North, this “is rooted in a combination of market failures and a cultural premium placed on unsustainable growth.” (107)

5. “Although developing countries bear little responsibility for climate change, some could be among the most affected by the impacts of global warming. The need to design effective strategies to respond and adapt to global warming should be used to reinforce the existing imperative to achieve community-based management of local resources, and stimulate the search for more subtle paths to fertility reduction, based on improving the status of women.” (107)

6. “A new global commitment towards a convergence of equitable life style is urgently required. Wide support should be given to the initiative for a Global Poverty Convention, which should include measures to reduce over-consumption in the North as well as eliminate under-consumption in the South and in marginal sub-populations in the North.” (107)

Notes

1. Shaw, R. Paul (1992).
2. Norse, David (1990).