

Neo-Malthusian concerns about population-resource imbalances in developing countries are unjustified

Mohsen Gul

University of Nottingham, UK

The radical cynicism imbibed in “dire prophecies of Malthus” (Wolfgram, 2010) about threatening view of human population growth has long been the fountainhead of global policies and actions directed towards the developing countries. Neo- Malthusians as labelled by Dr. Samuel Van Houten are prolific advocates of Malthusian perspective in this ever continuing population-resource debate. The missing link has been the lack of understanding of Malthusian theory not “as an environmental treatise but rather as a socio-political product of the political economy of England in the early 19th century” (Abruzzi, 2002) and now with its amendments as a tool of higher income countries to blame the poorer developing countries for all world resource imbalances (Schuurman, 2008).

Several warnings regarding the possible consequences of increased population growth have been issued by innumerable neo-Malthusian and eco-fascist authors including Paul Ehrlich (1990), Garret Hardin (1972), Kenneth Boulding (1965), Norman Myers (1979), Holdren (1971) and Karl Sax (1955). Most of these warnings have been focussed on Global South. While the focus is directed towards controlling population primarily in Africa today, attention was given to efforts in Asia during the 1950s and 1960s (Abruzzi, 2002). Frank Furedi (1997) observes that “the specialist literature exhibits a profound tension between the intuition that population growth has negative consequences for the living standards of developing societies, and the absence of empirical evidence to substantiate this sentiment. ... When it comes to deciding on the impact of population growth, ‘feelings’ still tend to account for more than facts” (Abruzzi,

2002). This represents the interests of global powers to justify use of coercive policies against people who are considered socially inferior to them and hold responsible for current poverty and lack of development globally.

“Population control has long been promoted by neo-Malthusians as necessary to reduce poverty and increase development, prevent social instability, protect the environment and promote human rights. However, while the justification for population control has historically changed in the face of failed predictions and contradictory research, the concern with implementing population control has continued” (Abruzzi, 2002).

Critics challenge neo-Malthusian concerns at various fronts. “The *ceteris paribus*¹ assumption, the fixed assumption, the fixed capital assumption, and the assumption that population and resources are directly linked are all carried forward from the original Malthusian argument with minimal attempt to address these fundamental weaknesses” (Wolfgram, 2010). This reflects the manipulation of big numbers to produce dubious and misleading data showcasing the doomsday scenario for world population.

According to WCED, “threats to the sustainable use of resources come as much from inequalities in peoples' access to resources and from the ways in which they use them as from the sheer number of people” (WCED, 1987). “The energy consumed in U.S. alone is sufficient to maintain 4.5 billion Kenyans and nearly 8 billion Ethiopians. One could easily argue that the goals of sustainability and resource conservation would be better served if North Americans rather than

¹ The term refers to the assumption that all things in the population-resource equation remain equal

Africans were the primary target of international population control programmes” (Abruzzi, 2002). Monbiot (2009) rightly indicates that no focus is placed on the consumption transition. He agrees that people do breed less as they become richer but he rightly points out that they do not consume less but they consume more as corroborated by statistical evidence. “It is the worst kind of paternalism, blaming the poor for the excesses of the rich” (Monbiot, 2009).

Davidson (2000) expressed that “the belief in impending catastrophe has in the past led some environmentalists to report withholding food and medical aid to poor nations (Hardin, 1972), repressive measures like taxing child-bearing, mandatory birth control instruction in school and the sterilization of biologically/socially inadequate people (Ehlich, 1990). Not only are these positions repulsive from a social justice perspective, they also misdirect energy away from real solutions” (Davidson, 2000).

“Evidence shows that most underdeveloped countries that have implemented population control policies, however, have not shown definite signs of success in overcoming the problems of development, problems that are often attributed to the ‘population trap’”. Examples of population control policy failures in developing countries are numerous; some examples are Bangladesh, Zimbabwe, Mexico, Brazil, Singapore, Korea, and Taiwan before the mid-80s” (Aguirre, 2000). Such global policy pressures ironically led to “both Indira Gandhi and Qian Xinzong (China’s Family Planning Minister) receiving the U.N.’s Population Award for the most outstanding contribution to the awareness of population questions” besides all the repercussions flashed in the news (Hartmann, 1987). “The first victims of these programs seem to be innocent and helpless populations. They are systematically deceived and driven to consent to their mutilation by false argument, if not by direct extortion, which puts birth control as a condition to the access of credit and food aid. This has

been reported in the procedure used by the Grameen Bank in India and Pakistan and in certain African countries” (Aguirre, 2000).

Lester Brown has foretold increasing famines in developing countries for several years (Avery, 1997). The 1999 Human Development Report pointed out that “despite rapid population growth, food production per capita increased by nearly 25% during 1990-1997” (Aguirre, 2000). World Bank has referred to Green Revolution as a “paradigm” for development and argues that food production has outdone population growth worldwide. Nutritional standards throughout the world have improved drastically in the past 40 years (Lomborg, 2001). “While local famines have occurred, they are much less frequent than in the past and have not been caused by overpopulation. They have mostly resulted from specific local socio-political conditions as has been made evident in such diverse countries as Liberia, Sierra Leone, Ethiopia, Malawi and North Korea” (Abruzzi, 2002).

In India (Jodha 1991) Pakistan (Sarwar 1992) as cited by Garcia & Escudero, “there has been governmental support for combating droughts through food availability via Public Distribution Systems (PDS) preventing the transformation of droughts into famines” (Garcia & Escudero, 1979). Further evidence of social system impacting more than the population growth is the fact that “Cuba has a per capita availability of food similar to that of Mexico but due to an egalitarian distribution of income since the 1960s, it has drastically improved its nutrition status as compared to Mexico” (Garcia & Escudero, 1979).

“Neo-Malthusians have long predicted differences in agricultural growth between developing regions and the developed regions. Recent trends show that since 1990, agricultural output has declined in Oceania, Europe and North America (Magdoff & Tokar, 2009). On the other hand, Asian regions experienced an increase in their agricultural production, particularly because of increase in use of

fertilisers and genetically modified crops. Additionally, Latin America's agriculture production has recovered since 1990 due to recent agricultural shifts in Argentina and Brazil (Dyson, 1994)" (Maisonet, 2011). This is line with the argument of Boserup (1965) that "increasing population pressure provides the primary stimulus for innovation and intensification" (Nin-Pratt & McBride, 2014).

Attempts to link population growth and increased agricultural production with environmental deterioration especially soil erosion have also been unsuccessful. "Soil erosion in Africa is primarily a product of poor soil management practices rather than either population growth or inherent soil vulnerability has been shown by Tiffen et al. (1994) investigation of population growth and agricultural development in the semi-arid Machakos District, Kenya" (Abruzzi, 2002).

Neo-Malthusians have blamed developing countries with highest rates of population growth for worldwide deforestation and accelerated global warming. "Ironically, the neo-Malthusian solution to combating the evils of underdevelopment, such as deforestation, is to ship thousands of contraceptives and to set up government programmes for adolescent reproductive health in these countries" (Wolfgram, 2010).

Sage (1996) as cited by Nandi (1999) rightly points out that "destruction of natural resources in developing countries directly depends on the demands of developed countries to a large extent. Pressures on resources and environmental degradation not solely attributed to rapid population growth in developing countries. However there are many other variables which can influence levels of resource exploitation and these may in turn, be attributed to international financial pressures. The need to increase export revenues, encourages the expansion and intensification of production across such economic sectors as commercial agriculture, cattle ranching, mining, forest logging and so

on. National and international markets for agricultural and other products clearing influence patterns of resource use. Indeed, in the case of natural resources, national governments has often been instrumental in encouraging rapid exploitation" (Nandi, 1999).

In a nutshell, the article suggests that the real concern is with the exacerbated change that rapid population growth among developing countries portends for the global political structure and use of Malthusian contention as a magic bullet to inform broader development policies and strategies. Tone of much of the population-resource debate literature is usually tinged with hysteria. There is a need to apply a revisionist perspective towards mapping economic growth in developing countries without blaming the poor and analysing not just the population growth trends in the Global South but also the consumption trends in the Global North to achieve a geopolitically balanced population-resource equilibrium.

References

- Abruzzi, W., 2002. *Socio-political implications of the persistent western concern with global population growth*. [Online]
Available at:
http://www.drabruzzo.com/FORUM_paper_.htm
[Accessed 23 November 2015].
- Aguirre, M., 2000. *Sustainable Development: Why the focus on population?*. [Online]
Available at:
<http://integraldevelopment.cua.edu/res/docs/Aguirre/Sustainable-Development-Why-the-Focus-on-Population-March2010-USA-Harvard.pdf>
[Accessed 23 November 2015].
- Avery, A., 1997. *Lester Brown: Still Wrong After All These Years*. [Online]
Available at:

<https://www.pop.org/content/lester-brown-still-wrong-after-all-these-years>
[Accessed 2 December 2015].

Boulding, K., 1965. *Earth as spaceship*.
[Online]
Available at:
<http://www.colorado.edu/economics/more/y/4999Ethics/Boulding-EARTH%20AS%20A%20SPACE%20SHIP1965.pdf>
[Accessed 28 November 2015].

Davidson, C., 2000. Economic Growth and the Environment: Alternatives to the Limits Paradigm. *Bioscience*, Volume 50, pp. 433-440.

Dyson, T., 1994. *Population and Food: Global Trends and Future Prospects*. London: Routledge.

Ehrlich, P., 1990. *The Population Explosion*, London: Arnold.

Ehrlich, P. & Holdren, J., 1971. Impact of Population Growth. *Science*, Volume 171, pp. 1212-17.

Furedi, F., 1997. *Population and Development: A Critical Introduction*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Garcia, R. & Escudero, J., 1979. *The Constant Catastrophe: Malnutrition, Famines and Drought*. Geneva: Pergamon Press.

Hardin, G., 1972. The Survival of Nations and Civilisations. *Science*, 172(3990).

Hartmann, B., 1987. *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs: The Global Politics of Population Control and Contraceptive Choice*. New York: Harper and Row.

Lomborg, B., 2001. *The Skeptical Environmentalist*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Magdoff, F. & Tokar, B., 2009. Agriculture and Food in Crisis: An Overview. *Monthly Review*, 61(3), pp. 1-16.

Maisonet, O., 2011. *Food Security and Population growth in the 21st century*.
[Online]
Available at: <http://www.e-ir.info/2011/07/18/food-security-and-population-growth-in-the-21st-century/>
[Accessed 3 December 2015].

Monbiot, G., 2009. *The Population Myth*.
[Online]
Available at:
<http://www.monbiot.com/2009/09/29/the-population-myth/>
[Accessed 3 November 2015].

Myers, N., 1979. *The sinking ark*. New York: Pergamon Press.

Nandi, R., 1999. *Population and Environment in the Developing Countries: The Macro Scenario and Select Case Studies*, Kerala: CDS.

Nin-Pratt, A. & McBride, L., 2014. Agricultural intensification in Ghana: Evaluating the optimist's case for a

Green Revolution. *Food Policy*, Volume 48, pp. 153-167.

Sax, K., 1955. *Standing room only: the challenge of overpopulation*. New York: Beacon Press.

Schuurman, F., 2008. The Impasse in Development Studies. In: *The Companion to Development Studies*. London: Arnold, p. 1.3.

Tiffen, M., Mortimore, M. & Gichuki, F., 1994. *More People, Less Erosion*. Nairobi: ACTS Press.

WCED, 1987. *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future*, New York: UN.

Wolfgram, A., 2010. *Population, Resources & Environment*. [Online] Available at: <http://faculty.cua.edu/aguirre/population/resenv.htm#2.%20Practical%20Failure> [Accessed 01 December 2015].