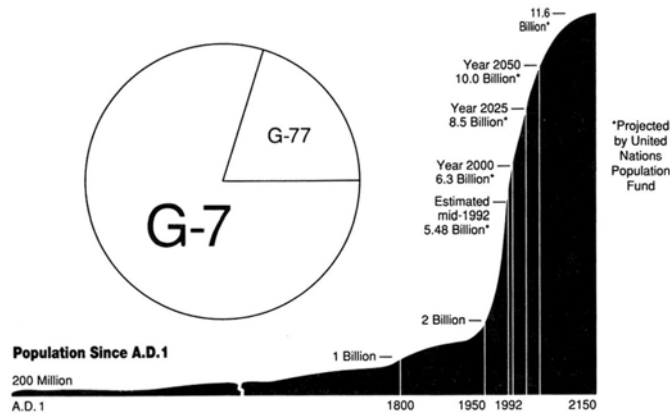


In Noel J. Brown and Pierre Quiblier, eds., *Ethics & Agenda 21: Moral Implications of a Global Consensus* (New York: United Nations Publications, United Nations Environment Programme, 1994), pages 35-38.
ISBN 92-1-100526-4.

People, Population, Prosperity, and Place

Holmes Rolston, III

Population growth, human health, and people living sustainably on their landscapes are the concerns of Chapters 5, 6, and 7 of Agenda 21 which follow the analyses of poverty and escalating consumption in Chapters 3 and 4. This leads to formulating policy in Chapter 8, concluding the social and economic section of Agenda 21. At the risk of oversimplification, we can sketch some of the interrelated ethical issues by a look at a chronological graph of world population and a pie chart of world consumption.



[The population graph is from *The New York Times*, May 5, 1992, p. B5; the distribution, production and consumption data are in the World Development Report 1991. Oxford University Press.]

There are two major blocs, the G-7 nations (the Group of 7, the large nations of North America, Europe, and Japan) and the G-77 nations (once 77 but now including some 128 lesser developed nations, often south of the industrial North). The G-7 nations hold about one-fifth of the world's five billion persons, and they produce and consume about four-fifths of all goods and services while the G-77 nations, with four-fifths of the world's people, produce and consume one-fifth. By way of comparison then, for every person added to the population of the North, twenty individuals are added in the South; for every dollar of economic growth per person in the South, twenty dollars accrue to each individual in the North.

Growth and consumption under many conditions may be desirable but taken to extremes, become problematic. Basically, there are three problems: (1) overpopulation, (2) overconsumption, and (3) under distribution. Of the 90 million new people on earth this year, 85 million will appear in the countries least able to support them. The developing nations meanwhile, the 5 million new people in the industrial countries will put as much strain on the environment as the 85 million new poor. Even if there were an equitable distribution of wealth, it would be illogical to assume the human population could continue escalating without people becoming poorer as a result. The pie would continually need to be divided into smaller pieces as the population grew. Even without future population growth, consumption patterns cannot continue escalating on a finite earth.

Many ethical systems agree in fostering the well-being of humanity. One ethical school of thought, the utilitarians, propounds the greatest good for the greatest number. Another ethical school that emphasizes the human rights position holds that all humans have a right to life, health, and the pursuit of happiness. Christians, Jews, Muslims, indeed all the classical world religions, urge justice, charity, and stewardship of possessions. The ethical dilemmas come in not knowing when and how to say, "enough!" These chapters in Agenda 21 struggle with such issues.

Put starkly, an explosion of unregulated population growth becomes cancerous. Each individual, from his or her perspective, is only doing what humans have always done, making a resourceful use of natural

resources to meet their own needs. But we face a time-bound truth, where a once positive situation (and still positive individually), becomes negative when integrated into the future picture. For a couple to have two children may be a blessing; but when the tenth child comes, one can only make the best of a bad situation, as humanely as possible. If the tenth child is reared and has ten children in turn, that will multiply the tragedy. The quality of human lives deteriorates. The poor get poorer, the environment deteriorates.

Exactly the same is true of unregulated consumption in developed countries. Growing consumption, like cancer, can be a kind of disease. Increased production is a blessing; everyone would like to double their income, but if everyone demanded a ten-fold increase, and our children, inheriting this wealth, also demanded a ten-fold Increase, the tragedy would multiply. The key to population (Chapter 5), the key to human health (Chapter 6), is a sustainable human lifestyle (Chapter 7).

Whether considering agricultural development, forest cut, rivers dammed and diverted, range fenced, minerals extracted, or highways and subdivisions built, the next hundred years cannot resemble the past hundred years. The ten-fold population increase of the last century would be tragic were it ten-fold again in the next.

The distribution problem is even more complex. One cause is that earth's natural resources are unevenly distributed by nature, and national boundaries were nearly all drawn before many of the modern essential resources — coal and iron ore — were valued as resources at all. For example, one quarter of the known petroleum reserves are in Saudi Arabia and more than half in the Middle East. The need for petroleum, however, is dispersed around the globe. The divisions between nation states, rather accidentally related to the location of this most valuable natural resource, often compound the problem of unjust distribution.

Exploitation can be a second cause of the asymmetrical distribution. Many in G-77 nations find themselves deprived rather than blessed by the capitalism that originated in Europe and spread through the G-7 nations, enabling them to take advantage not only of their own resources but also of those in other nations. The G-77 nations are, as they see it, the victims of colonialism. It is difficult to look at the distribution chart

and not be convinced of unjustness. How is the wealth on one side related to the poverty on the other? Regularly, the poor come off poorly when they bargain with the rich; and wealth that originates as impressive achievement can further accumulate through exploitation.

Those in the G-7 nations who emphasize the earnings model tend to recommend to the G-77 nations that they produce more, often offering to help them produce by investments which can also be productive for the G-7 nations. Those in the G-77 nations do indeed wish to produce, but they also perceive exploitation in the relations between countries that are politically and economically weak and those that are strong. They realize that the problem is sharing as well as producing. Meanwhile, the growth graph caution us that producing can be as much a part of the problem as part of the solution. The overriding ethical issue faced by all nations is how human well-being dovetails with growth in population and production on an earth that evolves but does not grow.