Commentary

Population health: where demography, environment and equity converge

Colin D. Butler, A.J. McMichael

National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia

Address correspondence to Colin D. Butler, E-mail: colin.butler@anu.edu.au

The crucial issue of population growth and its environmental and social consequences, globally and regionally, has been consigned to the periphery of the international policy arena for several decades. This political and ‘moral’ marginalization of ‘population’ has jeopardized the enhancement of human wellbeing and health, and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. That situation is beginning to change, albeit at an uncomfortably delayed stage in relation to today’s pressing, large-scale, environmental and social challenges.

The paper by Stephenson et al.1 in this issue adds support to the growing recognition that population dynamics affect both climate change and societal development, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. It highlights the increased vulnerability to climate change of impoverished populations in the least developed countries with their rapidly growing populations—a finding that echoes an earlier analysis, exploring population growth considerations of 40 National [climate change] Adaptation Plans of Action.2 Building on that earlier paper, they also discuss the resultant strains on infrastructure, governance and health from rapid urbanization, and by suggesting specific research priorities.

Stephenson et al.1 note the sensitivity of the ‘population’ topic, and lament the associated decline in global investment in family planning in recent times. Their paper, nevertheless, underscores the complexity of the population topic, which contrasts with the simplistic analyses of population size and growth that are used by some advocates who argue that consumption patterns are the only important parameter.3,4 In contrast Stephenson et al.1 state that ‘population is arguably the most neglected dimension of climate change’. Indeed, at the December 2009 Copenhagen conference on climate change the issue of population was (again) scarcely mentioned. However, rather like the bulk of an iceberg, the unseen issue of population had a weighty presence. Who could doubt that the influence of China, and to a lesser extent India, at Copenhagen in part flows from the enormous size of their populations?

There is urgent need, now, for the interaction between global environmental overload (including its manifestation of human-caused climate change) and human population size to (again) be clearly acknowledged. It is almost 40 years since Ehrlich and Holdren5 (the latter is current Science Advisor to US President Obama) published their simple \( I = PAT \) equation, linking population, ‘affluence’ and technology to environmental impact. Published at the dawn of the Green revolution, when there was heightened concern about both global population growth and food security,6 it was probably difficult for contemporaries to imagine how controversial this algebraic relationship would soon become. Yet, only 13 years later President Reagan opined that the issue of population had been ‘vastly exaggerated’.7

Some have downplayed the role of population in environmental impact for ideological reasons. Indeed, over the past two to three decades, a de facto coalition between analysts and think tanks from both right and left coalesced with the Catholic Church to help suppress discussion of the role of population in global environmental change. Many on the left, together with many environmental advocates from low-income countries, still consider consumption (a proxy for ‘affluence’) far more important than either population or technology. Meanwhile, the right largely denies the importance of either overpopulation or overconsumption. This group was influenced by Julian Simon’s argument that every new person had a brain and two hands, and thus were part of an ‘ultimate resource’,8 a claim echoed in the Brundtland Report.9 Few supporters of this view may have realized that

Colin D. Butler, Associate Professor of Public Health
A.J. McMichael, Professor of Epidemiology
Mao Tse Tung once held similar views, or that the Chinese pictographic character for population links people with their need to be fed.

It is salutary to recall that evidence that a slowed population growth enhanced economic development was bitterly contested for several decades, from around the end of President Reagan’s first administration. This sidelining of population strategy significantly delayed the global demographic transition, thereby inflating further the global footprint and complicating the great task of reducing poverty. Unfortunately, at that time many ‘population control’ strategies were heavy handed and counter productive, generating hostility, which persists to this day.

A rights-based approach to global family planning would see a massive transfer of wealth and goodwill from middle and wealthy populations to the poor, accelerating female literacy and empowerment. While such an approach may appear utopian, one item of ‘low hanging fruit’ would be to make contraceptive methods more available and affordable to the 200 million women said to want lower fertility. However, much more international redistributive sharing is needed—along with deeper attentive listening (free of views that disdain demographic and carrying-capacity arguments) by groups and individuals who claim to advocate ‘Third World’ development.

The Stephenson paper joins a now accruing literature, which seeks to restore the issue of population and its relationship to environment, sustainability and population health to prominence. For that the authors are to be commended.

References