

C6 | CHALLENGING THE POPULATION: CLIMATE CONNECTION

Overpopulation alarmism is back again and gaining momentum, tied this time to climate change. Spearheaded by advocates in the United States and the United Kingdom, a well-funded campaign is spreading the basic message that reducing rapid population growth in the global South is one of the main solutions to the climate crisis, and thus massive investments in family planning will help save the planet.

The comeback of the contraceptive fix

When feminists won passage of reforms of population policy at the 1994 UN population conference in Cairo, many thought family planning had finally been freed from the shackles of population control – that is, the drive to reduce birth rates as fast and as cheaply as possible through top-down, often coercive means that violate health and human rights. However, population control never went away. Today, the population lobby in the US views the urgency associated with the climate crisis as a way to convince legislators and policy-makers to press for more US population assistance.

Driven by foundation funding, Population Action International (PAI), the Sierra Club, and the Worldwatch Institute have taken the lead in pushing what I call the population/climate connection. In the UK, their counterpart is the Optimum Population Trust (OPT).

Instrumentalising family planning to achieve population reduction has a number of negative effects. First, in many countries, health and family planning programmes are already biased against poor women, who receive disrespectful, bad-quality services.¹ When the message filters down to prejudiced providers that controlling fertility is not only a demographic but also an environmental mandate, it will add insult to injury, or injury to insult, depending on the extent of ill-treatment.

Secondly, the renewed focus on contraceptives as the magic bullet undercuts years of feminist activism to pressure the population field to adopt a holistic approach towards reproductive and sexual health and to offer a full range of safe, voluntary contraceptive choices, with proper screening for contraindications and side effects.

Thirdly, the population/climate connection gives countries that grossly violate reproductive rights such as China false moral authority. At the 2009 Copenhagen climate conference, for example, Chinese officials trumpeted

their success in reducing population growth, claiming that the one-child policy decreased emissions of carbon dioxide by approximately 18 million tons a year.²

Last, but not least, the negative view of children implicit in the population/climate connection – babies as future polluters and carbon emitters – plays into the hands of the anti-abortion activists, who are always looking for ways to portray themselves as pro-life and the abortion rights and environmental movements as anti-child. This is the message of a recent opinion piece by Steven Mosher, president of the anti-abortion Population Research Institute.³

Thus, the population/climate connection threatens to derail whatever progress has been made since Cairo in making reproductive and sexual rights and health both the ends and the means of policy.

Subverting climate solutions

The impact of the population/climate connection on the environmental movement is equally problematic – and potentially disastrous. Today, the biggest barrier to an effective international climate policy is the failure of the global North, in particular the United States, to agree to a massive reduction in carbon emissions. By pinning the blame on overpopulation in the global South, the population/climate connection essentially lets the global North off the hook, playing into the politics of denial. At a time when people in the North desperately need to take responsibility for their historical and present contributions to climate change, the population lobby is offering them both a scapegoat (poor pregnant women) and an easy option (support international family planning). In the UK, OPT's Population Offset project even encourages wealthy consumers to offset their luxury carbon emissions by investing in a family planning programme in Madagascar!⁴

The reasoning behind these views is fundamentally flawed. Industrialised countries, with only 20 per cent of the world's population, are responsible for 80 per cent of the accumulated carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Luxury consumption by the rich has far more to do with global warming than the population growth of the poor. The few countries in the world where population growth rates remain high, such as those in sub-Saharan Africa, have among the lowest carbon emissions per capita on the planet. From 1950 to 2000, the entire continent of Africa was responsible for only 2.5 per cent of the world's carbon emissions.⁵

Rapidly industrialising countries such as China and India will account for a higher percentage of emissions in the future. Indeed, China has recently surpassed the United States as the biggest carbon emitter, although on a per capita basis its emissions are far lower. Instead of population control, effective climate change policies in China, India, and other industrialising countries should emphasise conservation and a rapid transition to green technologies and renewable energies, funded in part through transfers of resources from the global North.

By focusing on the impact of human *numbers* rather than inequitable and unsustainable human *systems* of production, distribution, and consumption, the population/climate connection deflects attention from the role of powerful economic and political interests – fossil fuel corporations, the financial industry, government officials, and militaries – that are actively blocking progressive solutions to climate change in both the North and the South.

The way in which the population/climate connection deploys demographic data is also misleading. Reports often cite unrealistically high projections of future population growth to produce fears of a population explosion. A recent Worldwatch Institute report on population and climate change seeks to drum up alarm about a population of 11 billion people by 2050, as opposed to the more widely accepted projection of 9.15–9.51 billion.⁶ In the last few decades, population growth rates have come down all over the world more rapidly than anticipated; the average number of children per woman in the global South is about 2.5 and predicted to drop to around 2 by 2050. The demographic momentum built into our present numbers, declining death rates, and the youthful age structure of many developing nations are the reasons that world population will reach around 9 billion in 2050, but after that it is expected to stabilise. The real challenge is to plan for the addition of 2 billion people by 2050 in ways that minimise negative environmental impacts.

Serious environmental scholars are questioning and critiquing the population/climate connection. A study by David Satterthwaite, reviewing national emissions and demographic data from 1950–2005, concludes that it is misleading to see population growth as a driver of climate change. Satterthwaite notes that the contribution of greenhouse gas emissions of one individual added to the world's population varies by a factor of 1,000, and that it is mostly nations with very low or slow-growing emissions that have high population growth rates. Meanwhile, in North America emissions have outpaced population growth. While North America contributed about 4 per cent of world population growth between 1950 and 2005, it was responsible for 20 per cent of the growth in global carbon dioxide emissions from 1950 to 1980, and 14 per cent from 1980 to 2005.⁷

Linking emissions to population growth makes for poor science and poor policy, yet the population/climate connection continues to push this research agenda. OPT hired a graduate student at the London School of Economics (LSE) to undertake a simplistic cost/benefit analysis that purports to show that it is cheaper to reduce carbon emissions by investing in family planning than in alternative technologies. Although the student's summer project was not supervised by an official faculty member, the press billed it as a study by the prestigious LSE, lending it false legitimacy. Writing on the reproductive health blog RHRealityCheck, Karen Hardee and Kathleen Mogelgaard of PAI endorsed the report's findings without even a blink of a critical eye.⁸ In a bow to patriarchy and its privileges, pregnant women are portrayed as

the destructive face of climate change rather than the CEO of Exxon-Mobil. The population/climate connection thus directly undermines both reproductive health and climate policies. More indirectly, it interacts with and helps to legitimise other strategic population narratives that focus on climate change, migration, and security.

The greening of hate: targeting immigrants

For several decades now, the anti-immigrant movement in the United States has used population as a wedge issue to win over environmentalists to its cause. Under the leadership of white supremacist John Tanton, a wealthy ophthalmologist, it has twice attempted to take over the nation's largest environmental organisation, the Sierra Club. While it failed in these efforts, it is once again making a major push to recruit environmentalists with the claim that immigration drives greenhouse gas emissions and environmental degradation. When immigrants come to the United States, the reasoning goes, they adopt American lifestyles and consumption patterns, so they should stay home in poor countries where they have a lighter carbon footprint. Meanwhile, 'real' Americans should go on consuming as they always have.⁹

While mainstream groups like PAI, Worldwatch Institute, and Population Justice distance themselves from this greening of hate, their population control rhetoric helps make such beliefs more acceptable. There are also direct links between the anti-immigrant movement and the population lobby. Well-known environmentalist and population control advocate Lester Brown, founder of Worldwatch Institute and now president of the Earth Policy Institute, is a member of the Apply the Brakes Network, which seeks to limit immigration to the United States.¹⁰

That these ideas continue to have such force is testament to the enduring influence of Malthusian thinking in the United States, where the myth of overpopulation is a veritable article of faith taught in schools and colleges across the country.¹¹ This belief system provides fertile ground for the greening of hate, especially in an era when immigrants are also being scapegoated for the economic recession.

The militarisation of climate change

In the national security arena, alarms over potential 'climate conflict' and 'climate refugees' draw on similar racialised fears of overpopulation and migration. In particular, they draw on neo-Malthusian models of environmental conflict developed in the 1980s and 1990s. According to these models, population-pressure-induced poverty makes Third World peasants degrade their environments by over-farming or overgrazing marginal lands. The ensuing soil depletion and desertification then lead them to migrate elsewhere as 'environmental refugees', either to other ecologically vulnerable rural areas where the vicious cycle is once again set in motion or to cities where they

strain scarce resources. In both instances, they become a primary source of political instability. Such models were used to explain away the genocide in Rwanda as the ‘natural’ result of population pressure on the environment and were applied to many other violent conflicts as well.¹²

Even the conflict in Darfur has been blamed on overpopulation of people and livestock, combined with environmental stresses due to climate change.¹³ This is not to deny that environmental changes due to climate change could, in some instances, exacerbate already existing economic and political divisions. However, whether or not violent conflict and mass migration result depends on so many other factors that it is far too simplistic to see either population or climate change as a major cause or trigger.

Moreover, such threat scenarios ignore the way in which many poorly resourced communities manage their affairs without recourse to violence. A substantial body of research also indicates that violent conflict in Africa, for example, is much more connected to resource *abundance* (rich oil and mineral reserves, valuable timber, diamonds, etc.) than resource *scarcity*.¹⁴ Above all, it is institutions and power structures at the local, regional, national, and international levels that determine whether conflict over resources turns violent or not.

In the US, proponents of national security interests are also drumming up fears of potential instability caused by ‘climate refugees’. A 2003 Pentagon-sponsored study of the potential impacts of abrupt climate change painted a grim scenario of poor, starving, overpopulated communities overshooting the reduced carrying capacity of their land and storming en masse towards Western borders. Similar assumptions frame a number of climate and security scenarios.¹⁵

This dire picture of dangerous ‘climate refugees’ is problematic on a number of counts. First, while climate change is likely to cause displacement, its extent will depend not only on how much the temperature rises and affects sea levels, rainfall patterns, and the severity of storms, but also on the existence and effectiveness of adaptation measures that help individuals and communities cope with environmental stresses. Whether or not such measures are in place in turn depends on political economies at the local, regional, national, and international levels that are often conveniently left out of the discussion of so-called climate refugees. And as one report points out, larger climate-related humanitarian emergencies may take place in places ‘where people *cannot* afford to move, rather than the places to which they do move’.¹⁶

Secondly, the label ‘climate refugee’, like ‘environmental refugee’ before it, could further undermine the rights and protections of traditional refugees as defined by the 1951 UN Refugee Convention. Both the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) caution against using either the term environmental refugee or climate refugee since they have no basis in international refugee law and

could undermine the international legal regime for the protection of refugees. UNHCR further emphasises that much displacement due to climate-related factors is likely to be internal in nature, without the crossing of international borders.¹⁷

From 2007 on, Africa has been the primary focus of climate-conflict discourse. Accidental or not, this development has coincided with the establishment of the US military command for Africa, AFRICOM. By its very institutional structure, AFRICOM represents the blurring of military and civilian boundaries. Among its staff are senior US development officials. In general, AFRICOM seeks to integrate US military objectives more firmly with economic, political, and humanitarian goals.

Constructing climate conflict as a particularly African security threat meshes well with these objectives. While it is highly unlikely that the United States would send in the troops or base strategic development and humanitarian assistance solely on a perceived risk of climate conflict, the promotion of that risk helps to make such interventions more palatable, especially in liberal foreign policy circles. Blaming the poor of Africa for overpopulation and climate change is also a convenient way of obscuring the main mission of AFRICOM: to secure access to African oil and other natural resources for American corporations in the face of stiff Chinese competition.

Conclusion

Clearly, we must keep our critical eyes wide open to the ways in which the population/climate connection functions in these important arenas. We must simultaneously resist them and move forward, finding creative solutions to the urgent issues at hand. There are many progressive synergies between movements for reproductive justice, climate justice, immigrant rights, and peace.¹⁸ Identifying those synergies and working together, across movements, provides the best hope for the future.

Notes

1 For example, see Maternowska, M. C. (2006). *Reproducing inequities: poverty and the politics of population in Haiti*. New Brunswick, NJ, Rutgers University Press; Richey, L. A. (2008). *Population politics and development: from the policies to the clinics*. New York, Palgrave Macmillan; Rao, M. (2004). *From population control to reproductive health: Malthusian arithmetic*. New Delhi, Sage.

2 Revkin, A. C. (2009). 'The missing "p" word in climate talks'. *New York Times*, 16 December. dotearth.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/12/16/the-missing-p-word-in-climate-talks/.

3 Mosher, S. W. (2010). 'President's page:

if it weren't for you meddling kids: greens propose global one-child policy'. Population Research Institute. *PRI Review*, 20(1), January/February. pop.org/content/presidents-page-if-it-weren-t-for-you-1968.

4 www.popoffsets.com/news.php?id=25.

5 Figures on national per capita carbon emissions from Dow, K. and T. E. Downing (2007). *The atlas of climate change: mapping the world's greatest challenge*. Berkeley, University of California Press.

6 Engelman, R. (2010). *Population, climate change and women's lives*. Worldwatch Institute Report. www.worldwatch.org/Population-ClimateWomen. On population projections

and figures, see Population Reference Bureau (2010). *World population highlights: key findings from PRB's world populations data sheet*, 65(2), July. www.prb.org/pdf10/65.2highlights.pdf.

7 Satterthwaite, D. (2009). 'The implications of population growth and urbanization for climate change'. *Environment and Urbanization*, 21(2): 545–67. popdev.hampshire.edu/sites/popdev/files/uploads/Satterthwaite%20pages%20545-567.pdf.

8 www.optimumpopulation.org/reducingemissions.pdf; also see www.rhrealitycheck.org/blog/2009/09/22/climate-change-population-growth-and-reproductive-health-is-about-more-than-reducing-emissions.

9 Southern Poverty Law Center (2010). *Greenwash: nativists, environmentalism and the hypocrisy of hate*. July. www.splcenter.org/sites/default/files/downloads/publication/Greenwash.pdf; similar arguments are used by the anti-immigrant movement in the UK. See Hughes, B. (2010). *Too many of whom, and too much of what? What the new population hysteria tells us about the global economic aid and environmental crisis, and its causes. A No One is Illegal discussion paper*. NOII pamphlet on population politics, 10/07/2009, January. www.dustormagic.net/NOII/TooManyOfWhom-Jan10.pdf.

10 Center for New Community (2010). *Apply the brakes: anti-immigrant co-optation of the environmental movement*. www.newcomm.org/images/stories/ATB/atb_shortreport.pdf.

11 See www.populationinperspective.org for an alternative curriculum on population issues.

12 See Hartmann, B. in Rao, M. and S. Sexton (eds) (2010), *Markets and Malthus: Population, Gender and Health in Neo-liberal*

Times. New Delhi. And Hartmann, B. (2010). 'Rethinking climate refugees and climate conflict: rhetoric, reality and the politics of policy discourse'. *Journal of International Development*, 22(2): 233–346.

13 See, for example, Faris, S. (2007). 'The real roots of Darfur'. *Atlantic Monthly*, April, p. 67.

14 Fairhead, J. (2003). 'International dimensions of conflict over natural and environmental resources'. In Peluso, N. L. and M. Watts (eds), *Violent environments*. Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press.

15 See Hartmann (2010). *Op. cit.*

16 GECHS (Global Environmental Change and Human Security) (2008). *Disaster risk reduction, climate change adaptation and human security*. Commissioned report for the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. GECHS International Project Office, University of Oslo, Norway, 30 September.

17 IOM (International Organization for Migration) (2009). *Migration, climate change and the environment*. Policy brief, May. www.iom.int/jahia/webdav/shared/shared/mainsite/policy_and_research/policy_documents/policy_brief.pdf; and UNHCR (2008). *Climate change, natural disasters and human displacement: a UNHCR perspective*. 23 October. www.unhcr.org/refworld/pdfid/492bb6b92.pdf.

18 See, for example, Silliman, J. (ed.) (2009). 'In search of climate justice: refuting dubious linkages, affirming rights'. *ARROWS for Change*, 15(1). For a list of resources, see Hartmann, B. and E. Barajas-Román (2009). 'The population bomb is back – with a global warming twist, and other articles in "Women in a weary world"'. *Women in Action*, 2. www.isiswomen.org.