

Pay as You Go Population Control 10/2003

by John J. Donovan,

Almost any problem facing the world today can be traced to a single root cause- too darn many people. I don't care if it's freeway congestion in L.A., dry aquifers in the mid-west, Ebola epidemics in Africa or species extinction in South America. We can try our best to alleviate some of these problems due to population growth, some of the time, in some places. Water and energy conservation, technology, famine relief, wilderness protection and pollution control all help to some degree; but ultimately these efforts will only postpone the day of reckoning for us all, on a planet that we have already outgrown. I applaud the efforts of those that refuse to be cowed by the relentlessly increasing march of human misery and make some attempt to help those in need. But let's face it, in simple raw numbers there are many, many more humans today living on the edge of starvation and disease than ever before in the history of mankind and it's only getting worse. And every time we bring a family in the Sudan back from the edge of starvation, we are only allowing the problem to become more acute the next time it doesn't rain for a few months and the village has grown even larger.

Now some will say that the problem is social or political and there is much truth in that. We could feed more if there were a more equitable distribution of wealth and resources and political barriers to the distribution of that wealth were removed. But is that really going to happen? Besides Mother Theresa, how many of us are willing to give up what we have struggled for and share it with strangers halfway around the world? Not enough to make a difference unfortunately.

What to do? There are many answers offered but the only one that really offers a long term sustainable hope is a reduction in human population to levels that the Earth's resources and environment can actually provide for. Edward O. Wilson has pointed out that if we simply tried to bring the current world population to European standards of living (never mind Americans who consume resources at a far higher rate), we would require seven planet Earths just to feed, cloth and shelter them all. Using this calculation as a rough guide, we would need to bring world population levels down to under a billion in order to have any chance of truly allowing all people on the planet to live decent and comfortable lives. There simply isn't enough to go around otherwise.

Reducing the numbers of consumers might not please advertisers or designers of pyramid investment schemes, but it would automatically increase the standard of living for all without requiring any additional farmland or economic resources. A historical case in point: after the last Black Plague swept through Europe roughly 400 years ago and killed 1/3 of the population, the survivors immediately experienced an increase in personal wealth for reasons that should be obvious. In addition, they found themselves more valued as workers since there was now a significant shortage in the labor force. Human life became more valuable simply because there was less of it. This decrease in population is often credited with the onset of the Renaissance and the resulting explosion in skills and knowledge. If you have ever heard the story of the guy in Africa whose job it is to hold a stop sign at an intersection all day long, because it's cheaper than putting in a wooden post, you will appreciate the point.

Some governments like China have mandated restrictions in population growth, but it has at best only slowed the rate of increase and probably contributed to increased abortion rates of female pregnancies as well as other undesirable social effects. Besides which, solutions like these are hardly likely to succeed in many less authoritarian countries experiencing surging population growth like India, which is poised to be the most populated country in the world based on current growth rates.

Other alternatives are complicated by religious convictions, some of which do have a grain of truth. For example, most religions oppose birth control simply because most children adopt the religion of their parents. Therefore the spread of a particular faith is primarily driven by the ability to breed faster than the members of competing faiths. Viewed in that light, the Pope's (and some other religions) opposition to birth control has a logical, though somewhat primal basis in maintaining large numbers of uneducated, poor and/or starving believers. Contraception can reduce the number of these perpetual unfortunates and is helping in some places, but mainly in countries with high rates of education where births rates have been

declining for some time anyway. But in other many areas, religious objections (including controversy in the U.S. over support of international birth control programs) makes availability difficult, and therefore will fail to reverse the rising tide of humanity where it is generally needed the most.

Ideally we should educate everyone on the planet and eventually we might see the problem solve itself. There is a strong correlation between education levels and declining family size. Europe is largely experiencing negative population growth and so would the United States if it weren't for immigration and immigrant births. But it is hard to educate someone with an empty belly, we need to feed them first. And then we are back to the endless cycle of feeding people, who are having babies, just enough to keep them on the edge of famine.

There is one other method that has been suggested but it isn't often discussed. Instead of countries and individuals donating vast sums of money that are used simply to plug holes in the flooding dike of human starvation and poverty, why not just pay people to have fewer children? Note that I am not saying no children at all. If every couple on the planet limited themselves to having just two children, they would have replaced themselves and provided for their support in old age, but the general population would decrease slowly over time, simply because not everyone ends up having children- by choice or infertility.

Therefore consider the idea that we (rich countries and individuals) could pay young couples some relatively small "subsidy" every year that they continue to have two or fewer children. Much as we already pay some farmers not to grow certain crops. This subsidy could be increased slowly as the couple ages and the chances of them having extra children by "accident" naturally decreases. This money would provide direct aid to the two children they already have, thus helping to ensure that they are well nourished and therefore have an increased opportunity to become educated and skilled producers for themselves. The extra money can also help provide for the elderly couple in their old age regardless of whether they have children or not. Work the math yourself and you can see it is cheaper to support 2 parents and 2 children, than it is to support 2 parents and 10 children. Especially when some of those 10 young ones will die, taking whatever meager investment of health and food resources, that had been made, with them to a shallow grave.

The effect of this implementing this policy is not going to bear fruit (so to speak) overnight, but if it can be implemented on a global scale, it will have far reaching beneficial effects besides merely reducing population and poverty. It will increase the value of human life because we will each become more rare and therefore more precious.

The choice is ours, here and now. We can ignore the increasingly miserable existence of billions of people around the world, or we can take small and slow steps in the right direction. If we don't, through the tried and true mechanisms of pestilence and famine, Mother Nature will make the choice for us.

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