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# Population and environment: A critical assessment - I

Kalim Siddiqui

ON THE world stage, the International Conference on Population and Development was held in Cairo in September 1994. One very positive sign in the lead-up to that conference are calls to move beyond the differences expressed so passionately at the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992. However, among the international policy makers and academics there exist important differences in thinking on economic development, environmental and population issues. Some emphasise that the current growth of world population is the main problem, which prevents any problem being solved. From this point of view, programmes to reduce the birth rates are the first solution needed in any country where it is above replacement level. Those who hold this view stress the need to increase the number of users of family planning.

While other groups agree that high fertility is a serious problem, but they argue that core problem is poverty and that elimination of poverty would not only make numbers irrelevant, but would in itself lead to a reduction in population growth. They often assume that existing resources are sufficient and can be increased for some time to come. The food experts recently from Resources for Future based in Washington DC argue that "world food production could grow significantly more slowly than current rate, and there would still be enough food for 10 billion people, if properly distributed." They emphasise that more efforts are needed to develop new technologies which would minimise the environmental costs of agricultural expansion.

Anne and Paul Ehrlich book *The Population Explosion* in 1990 warned about the demographic catastrophe. Such approach can be termed as neo-Malthusian. They emphasise that planet's resources are running down very rapidly and this threatens human survival. Chief among the forces behind the growing environmental crisis is the unprecedented growth in human population in the last two centuries. Hence it is advocated that population control as the necessary first step in rescuing the world from the brink of environmental catastrophe. It is true that world population has grown dramatically over the last 200 years. However, what is overlooked here that it is not just that population has been growing rapidly during this period, but total output and human productive skills as well. For example, if we take 1900 as a base year of comparison, while population has grown three times, the world economy has grown 20 times, consumption of fossil fuels 30 times and industrial production 50 times. The growth of population appears modest in this comparison.

Neo-Malthusian advocate that population control in the third world as the only solution to the global environmental crisis. For instance, Ehrlich's note, "Chief among the causes of our planet's uneasiness is the over-growth of human population and its impacts on both ecosystems and human communities. These impacts are the thread linking all the seemingly unrelated problems of global warming, famine and food shortages, mounting garbage dumps and polluted air, water and soil." They further argue that if population is not reduced in time, no amount of change in the system of production or technology would yield positive ecological results.

In fact, the environmental cri-

sis we face today is a complex consequence of forces connected with technology, the economic system and demography, that were released in the wake of the industrial revolution. While population growth might have exacerbated the crisis but it is certainly not the source of it. It seems to me that the neo-Malthusian arguments ignore the real reasons for the environmental disorder.

Ehrlich's argue that only a drastic reduction in population would enable the alleviation of poverty in the third world countries. All programmes to remove poverty will fail as a result of high rates of fertility. Ehrlich's view population growth more as a cause of poverty than a result of it. The question is that the growth of population outstrips food production. Figures for world population and food production reveal that it is not the case. World's food production has continued to grow faster than population growth. For example, the last quarter century, food production has outpaced world population growth by 16% (Collins and Lappe, 1988). Despite the bad harvests of 1986-87, food production grew faster than population in Asia, where nearly 70% of the third world's population lives. On the basis of such evidence, Sen and Dreze (1989) conclude that, "it seems unlikely that the real dangers in near future can lie in the prospect of food output falling short of growth of population."

However, Africa's problems of hunger are rooted solely in food shortages. Not only food production has declined in most of the African countries in recent years but such tendencies were noted in Israel, Portugal, Hong Kong etc., who experienced sharply declining food output per head in 1980s in comparison of 1970s. The difference between them and African countries was that they were able to make up for shortages by importing food. Africa was not able to do that because industrial sectors were undeveloped and non-agriculture sectors were not able to contribute to export earnings with which deficit food could be imported. Moreover in most African countries, the government agricultural price policies favour urban areas, not giving enough incentive to farmers in rural areas. Farmers have inadequate access to credits and markets. Government policies also favour the cultivation of cash crops for exports rather than food for domestic markets. Foreign aid to agriculture sector in the Africa often follow the same course.

EHRLICH'S FOCUS to the connection between population growth and global ecological change. They consider such issues of significance as global warming, acid rain, depletion of ozone layer and desertification. They consider the growth of population is a major factor in ecological deterioration. Ehrlich's do not discuss the point that the largest source of present pollution is generated by systems of industrial and agricultural production and transportation and mega dam systems. It is well known that the rich countries with less than a quarter of world's population, are responsible for roughly 80% of the carbon dioxide released by burning fossil fuels. Poor nations are minor contributors to the carbon dioxide generated by burning fossil fuels. In fact the unprecedented economic growth in the rich countries, driven by the burning fossil fuels is primarily responsible for global warming and acid rains. It is also known how cattle ranching by MNCs and financed by international financial agencies has destroyed

rain forests in Latin America. And more recently, the phenomenon of foreign debt-servicing has led to the expansion of exports i.e. which often consists of raw materials and forest products, which leads to cutting of forests for timber and agro-business. In 1992, the rich countries with less than 25% of the world's population consumed more than 55% of the world forest products.

To blame everything on population is nothing new. Earlier Malthus in his book *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, which was first published in 1798, showed concern over population growth. He sets forward two propositions: first that food is necessary to the existence of man, secondly that the passion between sexes is necessary and will remain nearly in its present state. He notes, "Population, when unchecked, increases only in a geometric ratio. Subsistence increases only in the arithmetic ratio." He emphasised that populations would increase as long as there was availability of food. When number grow beyond that point, the growth of population is halted namely by what he called the positive checks like hunger and famine and the other preventive check i.e. family find it difficult in rearing many children acts as a preventive check. Therefore, an attempt to raise the standard of living of the poor by increasing wages would, through the operation of the laws of nature, be rendered ineffectual. Their population would then only increase further, till checked by subsistence. Thus he supports 'iron law of wages', where the subsistence of wages cover basic necessities and any increase in wages, according to him, would lead to population growth till checked by poverty. Poverty was considered natural and not a product of human institutions. The rich are not responsible for it.

The time pastor Malthus lived in England, there was a debate going on about the reforms of Poor Law. Customarily, those days in England, the maintenance of the poor and disabled was the responsibility of the local community and the church. However, the commercialisation of agriculture and the consequent take-over of the land and forests by the landlords known as Enclosure movements between 16th and 18th century forced out the tenants and rural poor from agriculture. These laws greatly benefited the rural rich, while at the same time pauperised the poor. The poor were earlier tied to feudal lords, but now not only were these bonds not in existence, they were forced to find work in newly-opened industries in the towns (Hobsbawm, 1977).

Moreover, Malthus was extending support to those political forces who were against the hopes for social progress, aroused by the French Revolution of 1789. Among the poor all-over Europe, the French Revolution, with its rallying cry of 'liberty, egalitarianism and fraternity' aroused great hopes for advancement of mankind among the lower classes. But at the same time the Revolution also aroused great fears in the minds of the rich. "The awakening of the labouring classes after the first shocks of the French Revolution made the upper classes tremble" (Thompson, 1982). Fears of the mobs taking over were rampant. The poor were distrustful and hostile to the emergence of market economy and were inspired by long tradition of popular dissent. And a price rise or any move to impose standard measures resulted in riots. Bread riots marked the landscape of 18th century England with a series of outbreaks in 1764, 1766, 1783 and

1788 (Thompson, 1988).

The major propositions that population when unchecked grows in a geometric ratio while food can grow only in the arithmetic ratio, the foundation of Malthus model, are in fact entirely arbitrary. It is on this arbitrary propositions that the complex issues of the relationship between resources and population is examined.

THE FLAWS in Malthus' method becomes more explicit if his model is examined in the context of the debate on Corn Laws. The debate on Corn Laws was related to the debate on free trade policies. It was related also to a vision of society, which attempts to identify which class in the country was the more dynamic in the contribution to the accumulation of wealth. The rising class of manufacturers were opposed to laws restricting import of wheat — the price of which had increased during the Napoleonic wars. The landlords were, however, benefited by the high price and were therefore opposed to free trade. The import of free wheat which would, in landlords views, lower prices. The supporter of free trade, the manufacturers, argued that these laws increased the price of food and therefore the wages. An increase in wage had adversely affected the profits and investments. The manufacturers were seen as dynamic and modern, while the landlords were characterised as parasitic and rent-seeking and unproductive. The landlords sought protection from imports, while the manufacturers sought free trade. Those days the famous political economists took sides on this crucial issue. Malthus extended his support to landlords interest, while Ricardo to manufacturing class.

Malthus recognised the problems of 'effective demand' i.e. the producer needs buyers for the products. The demand of the products, Malthus was convinced, could not be met by lower classes, as their purchasing power were limited. The problem of effective demands was, he argued, could only be met by who had enough to spend i.e. landlords and church functionaries. Malthus does not explain why effective demand cannot be generated by increasing the purchasing power of the lower classes. However, in England during the 19th century rapid rise in population was accompanied by rising per capita income, discredited the ideas of Malthus. A rise in income levels also witnessed a revolution in health and medicine and birth rates subsequently commenced a secular decline. However, Malthusian idea was not put to rest. It continued to be used regarding the prevalence of poverty in the former colonial country. India experienced widespread famine in 1870 and later in early 20th century, in which many millions died. Even at that time India supported only one-fourth, the population it supports today.

Later on, the supporters of Malthus ignore any responsibility on rulers for famine and hunger and the blame rests on the victims. Backwardness is seen primarily due to the old traditions and customs. Such ideas suited the colonial rulers well. Thus an image was constructed about the colonial people as poor and overpopulated surrounded by unchanging customs, and habits notes Said in his book *Orientalism* (1991). Colonial policy is exonerated the responsibility of creating a relative surplus population, for example, in India. In addition to the destruction of her cottage industry, agriculture poli-

cy of forced commercialisation and revenue extraction impoverished vast sections of Indian peasantry. This pauperised peasantry did not have any option that their Britain counterparts did, of turning into proletarians and working in the industries or simply migrating to other new colonies. In fact, British free trade policies in 19th century undermined the industrialisation in India and it was integrated into the world economy as an exporter of raw material and primary commodities, with a constant decline in consumption levels of the rural population. Malthus theory proves to be bankrupt, when seen in the light of Indian experience repeated famine occurred although the population was little and the existence of huge resources proved to be unhelpful as they were diverted to serve the British interests.

In the West, the fertility declined when the motivation to have children changed and was not related to strict government device to control fertility as today we see in Third World. Motivation in the West changed in response to structural changes in the social system. In other words, population was determined by socio-economic conditions.

In India population growth is a recent phenomenon. The stagnation in the economy, i.e. between 1860 and 1910 the per capita income saw zero growth, was accompanied by almost zero growth in population. Therefore, blaming population growth as explanation for India's poverty is incorrect. It was nevertheless used by colonial officials and Indian elites.

ONE IMPORTANT point is that population growth consumes into resources which are limited. It is true that natural resources are limited. But such a statement overlooks the actual picture on who is actually consuming the resources. Social problems — of poverty and hunger — are then attributed to that sections of the population which is said to grow fastest. But the truth is that it is this section of population which consumes the least, totally as well as per capita. This holds true within a country and among countries. Neo-Malthusian often claim that reduced population in the Third World will lead to reduced energy consumption, less resource use and less pollution. This argument at first glance look correct. But in reality, according to UN statistics, consumption of energy in coal equivalents in 1991 amounted to 11,199 kg. per capita per annum in the US, and to 225 kg in India per capita per annum. One American is using more than what 50 Indians in terms of energy use. Yet the policy makers worry about Indian population. The rich nations constitute 18% of the world's population but consume 66% of the world resources, whereas the poorest nations with 50% of the world's population consume only 14% of the world resources. But still the Neo-Malthusian focus on the poor countries. By doing that they divert the attention from the fact that greater part of the global resources are being exploited by a handful of rich countries and that there is a net transfer of resources from the poor to the rich countries, which is estimated about 50 billion dollar each year (UNICEF, 1992). This transfer does not occur naturally, but it is product of social, political and economic institutions based both in the poor and rich countries. I mean ruling classes in the Third World are part of this global transfer and arrangements.

To be continued

# Population and environment: A critical assessment — II

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The Nation

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**F**URTHER, within the Third World countries wide differences are found in consumptions. For example, in India, the figures on consumption disparity are startling. The bottom 20% of the population has a share of about 8% in total consumption, while top 20% has a share of about 41%. It is simply not true that the poor are consuming resources disproportionately. The conclusion is that simply population control is not efficient way to save resources.

Further, within the Third World countries wide differences are found in consumptions. For example, in India, the figures on consumption disparity are startling. The bottom 20% of the population has a share of about 8% in total consumption, while top 20% has a share of about 41%. It is simply not true that the poor are consuming resources disproportionately. The conclusion is that simply population control is not efficient way to save resources. The empirical weaknesses of neo-Malthusian observed by Bauer (1984), who notes, "Both economic history and the contemporary scene make clear that the conventional reasoning fails the principal factor behind economic achievement. Rapid population growth has not inhibited economic progress whether in the west or in the third world. The population of the western world has more than quadrupled since middle of the 18th century. Real income per head is estimated to have increased by the factor of five.

Neo-Malthusian failed to recognise that motivation to have small family depends on socio-economic situation of parents, which in turns alters the determinants of family size. The people are not poor because they have large families but on the contrary they require large families because they are poor. The poor people's decision not to have small families is a rational one for that would mean 'courting economic disaster'. It also fails to recognise that these determinants vary among different sections of the population, depending on socio-economic factors. Neo-Malthusian model offer a simplistic answer to a complex relationship of resources and population. Despite the fact that these theories are based on weak methodological and unfounded empirical foundations, they have won widespread acceptance in both academic and policy makers circles in the West.

However, it matters, whether poverty causes population growth or the other way round. 1) If poverty is the cause, then the elimination of poverty should be the focus to reduce overpopulation. The remedy would be economic development to reduce overpopulation. 2) If, on the other hand, overpopulation is the cause of poverty, then population control becomes important. Here the Neo-Malthusian show more concern on population control, while

ignoring the importance of any political and institutional reforms to achieve removal of poverty.

Here if we take the example of Zaire and Japan. Few people will doubt the Zaire possesses more natural resources than Japan. Zaire has land area about six times that of Japan, and is well-endowed with natural resources. Yet Japan, with a population of 125 million, has a per capita GNP 70 times greater than Zaire, which has a population of only 33 million (World Bank, 1993).

**I**N THE poor countries, children serve as the chief source of insurance against uncertain future, especially for women without husbands. Under the situation of acute poverty and socio-economic injustice, women desire to get more children. On the other hand, women with access to better income, health, education and employment tend to have fewer children simply because they have a more secure future. The poor would reduce the number of desired children if and when they find adequate socio-economic opportunities. Measures that would enable this to happen include educational opportunities for women, employment opportunities for all, and better health facilities. To achieve a lower fertility a very high per capita income and consumption is not needed. Take for example the Indian state of Kerala with an annual per capita income of less than 100 dollar has a birth rate of about 20 per 1000. This is much lower to average of about 31 for India as a whole. Kerala owes its success to higher literacy rates including for women.

Environmental solutions are inconsistent with the short-term interests of private profit maximisation. In the absence of any social co-ordination of technological choices it is more profitable for private investors to carry on with old production methods. How the large MNCs make investment decisions in the poor countries is well known from Bhopal, in India, disaster of 1984. In the world's worst chemical industry disaster, more than 2500 people lost lives and several thousands were maimed for life. Most of the victims were poor slumdwellers. The death resulted from the leak of a poisonous gas from an MNCs namely Union Carbide plant manufacturing pesticides.

In the third world countries, the blind adaptation of models of development drawn from the historical experience of industrialised countries have resulted in environmental problems from two related sources. Firstly, projects and technologies developed under capitalist conditions in the West have frequently proven ecologically disastrous in the Third World, for reasons similar to those in the industrialised countries and also because environmental laws which are more lax in poor countries, as their governments are busy in attracting foreign investments. Secondly, the growth of modern industrial sector in the Third World has come along with ecological deterioration like

deforestation, flood, famine, and created ecological refugees driven to the cities in search of new livelihoods. In India, recently the scientists at the Delhi based Centre for Science and Environment stated that 85% of the timber felled in 1991 in the state of Himachal Pradesh in India was used for commercial purposes and only 15% of the forests was used for local purposes. Environmental degradation in the poor countries carries with it the impoverishment of local communities who subsist on the ecosystems and the in fact, environmental degradation and social injustice are the two sides of the same coin.

The global structure of economic and political inequalities that is responsible for the environmental crisis. Therefore pointing to overpopulation as the real causes of environmental crisis is a wrong approach and will only succeed in diverting the attention. Certainly more US and West European type of growth will add to our planet's ecological deterioration. But an egalitarian improvement in living standards is necessary to eliminate poverty in the Third World and would ultimately reduce population growth.

In short, the gap between rich and poor is a problem within the Third World countries and also between the developed and less-developed countries at global level. Inequitable distribution of resources, income, food, health care, education, work, social benefits, leisure and money are a universal issue. In many Third World countries, increasing number of people do not have secure income or employment. The migration in search of work is seriously disrupting the social fabric of people's lives, with negative consequences as diverse as martial breakdown and increased ethnic and racial tension. Food production is too high in some regions or countries and inadequate in others, while food distribution is plagued by political wrangling, causing unnecessary hunger and starvation for millions.

Widespread production of junk goods and over consumption patterns accompanied by vast quantities of waste goes on in the developed world, where the primary responsibility for international resource depletion lies. Third World countries too have serious environmental problems, many of which result from supplying the developed world with resources and others from unregulated economic activity. Meanwhile military spending and debt servicing are swallowing national budget in almost all the Third World countries and the worldwide economic recession is destroying much of the progress made in the past decades in economic development, public health and education. By focusing only on high fertility rates and population growth in the Third World means as a refusal on the part of governments to acknowledge other problems, accept responsibility, change their policies or relinquish their power or reduce elitist consumption.

— Concluded