

March 2010



**Friends of
the Earth**

Briefing

Friends of the Earth Policy on Population

Friends of the Earth makes life better for people by inspiring solutions to environmental problems.

We are:

- the UK's most influential national environmental campaigning organisation
- the world's most extensive environmental network, with around 2 million supporters across five continents and 77 national organisations worldwide
- a unique network of campaigning local groups, working in more than 230 communities throughout England, Wales and Northern Ireland
- dependent on individuals for over 90 per cent of our income.

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1. Introduction:

Friends of the Earth recognises that population growth is one of the drivers of environmental degradation. However, in our view it is not the major driver. Rather, it is consumption issues which present a much greater and more urgent threat to the environment. We also believe that consumption issues, while challenging, are more amenable to influence by an organisation like Friends of the Earth England, Wales and Northern Ireland, based as it is in a high-consuming rich country. For these reasons Friends of the Earth does not campaign on population growth per se but focuses its limited resources on consumption issues. For example we work on:

- The consumption of fossil fuels which is driving climate change. Per capita fossil fuel consumption is closely aligned with wealth rather than the numbers of people (an American baby consumes far more fossil fuels than many African babies).
- The consumption of resources which drives biodiversity loss, climate change and pollution from extractive industries.
- The consumption of intensively produced meat which is driving forest destruction and climate change. Currently individuals in rich countries eat far more meat than individuals in poor countries. The World can feed 9 billion people but not with the current western diet and not with intensively produced meat (www.foe.co.uk/resource/briefings/eating_planet_briefing.pdf).

There are good grounds, at the same time, for being sceptical about the efficacy of 'population control' campaigns. Academic research has repeatedly shown that the most effective drivers of reduced birth rates are improving access to education for women, providing sexual and reproductive health services and creating sustainable economic development to move people out from absolute poverty. As well as being necessary to meet the UN global targets on poverty reduction, the Millennium Development Goals, they also reduce family sizes in areas of highest growth. We are supportive of work by other organisations on these issues because these changes are necessary for a fair and just society regardless of their impact on population.

Below we address population in relation first to equity, then climate change, food and finally resource use.

2. Population and equity

There is a plentiful supply of renewable energy available to man-kind so energy equity between countries and populations is not essential to living within environmental limits (although as Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett demonstrate in their book *The Spirit Level*, greater equality is desirable for a host of other reasons.)

There are however much tighter environmental limits on the ability of the planet to provide food and resources for mankind at the same time as maintaining the ecosystems and the essential services they provide. Greater equality of access to these resources is essential if man-kind is to live within environmental limits.

Some in the population debate consider the achievement of greater equality to be pie in the sky (or even undesirable). The thinking goes that Americans will never give up their burgers; therefore we have to reduce population growth, and even reduce current population levels. Friends of the Earth is not aware of any credible or ethical solutions that will lead to rapid reductions in population growth. Even the most draconian policies such as China's one child policy, has not stopped population growth. We also need to bear in mind that population growth is the result not solely of high birth rates but also of increasing longevity as populations receive better health care etc. The push for greater equality, and sustainability of consumption, is therefore essential, even though it is difficult.

3. Population and climate change

Fossil fuel use and the release of carbon dioxide is the primary cause of climate change. However the greatest release of emissions is not due to population size, but to consumption of fossil fuels. It is well known that a minority of the World's population is responsible for the vast majority of greenhouses gases in the atmosphere (see table 1).

UK	23%
USA	21%
Germany	15%
Canada	15%
Russia	13%
Japan	7%
China	1%
India	1%
Source: Hansen (2007)	

A study published in September 2009 in the journal Environment and Urbanization identified that the growth of carbon emissions is more related to the wealth of the nation than population growth. For example it found that:

- High-income nations had 7% of the world's population growth and 29% of the growth in carbon dioxide emissions.
- Low-income nations had 52.1% of the world's population growth and 12.8% of the growth in carbon dioxide emissions

This doesn't deny that population growth is currently correlated with increased carbon emissions in some places, but it does point to consumption being a greater driver.

Within international climate negotiations rich countries are committing to reduce emissions in the future, albeit not by enough, even though populations are forecast to grow. This is because they are aiming to shift their energy supply from fossil fuels to low carbon. They are therefore planning to delink population growth from carbon dioxide emissions. If adequate finance is providing to developing countries then they can do the same.

It is the per-capita emissions that matter not the total population. Fortunately there is no shortage of low carbon energy available to provide the World with its all of its energy needs, although this would require very significant use of desert energy (concentrated solar power). What is missing is political will, and therefore the finance, to drive the development to global low carbon economy.

The need to address consumption is given added urgency by science suggesting that the need for global greenhouse gas emissions to peak within the next ten years at most, and decline rapidly thereafter, to have even a moderate chance of avoiding runaway climate change. It is overwhelmingly the consumption patterns and resultant emissions of those alive today which will determine whether global emissions peak early enough and decline rapidly in the ensuing couple of decades.

4. Population and food

The story of population and food is remarkably similar to that of population and carbon dioxide. The rich countries consume excessive amounts of food and have a meat rich diet (which happens to be

leading to a rapid growth in a range of diseases). Poorer countries are not on a per capita basis major consumers of food. Recent research by Friends of the Earth, together with Compassion in World Farming, demonstrated that it is possible to feed a growing world population.

http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/briefings/eating_planet_briefing.pdf

Doing this will require fairer distribution of food and a significant reduction in meat consumption in countries like the US.

5. Population and resources

It has been calculated that if everybody on the World consumed as much as the average UK citizen, we would need three planets. Clearly we need to reduce resource consumption substantially and probably by a factor of 10 if we are to live within environmental limits and share resources fairly between the World's growing populations. The good news is that because we are so inefficient at the moment in using resources to provide us with the goods and services we need, a factor 10 improvement may not be impossible (although it will be challenging).

In some locations, the destruction of ecosystems to produce commodities (e.g. palm oil, soya) for export to wealthy countries is driving both environmental degradation and social harm. When indigenous people are forced off their lands to make way for commodity crops this can lead poverty, the erosion of their customary institutions, loss of identity and cultural collapse. Again this is related to the over-consumption in rich countries rather than population growth in poorer countries.

6. Conclusion

The impact of population growth on the environment can only be properly understood in the context of consumption patterns. While population per se is one driver of environmental degradation, consumption patterns are even more significant. Friends of the Earth will therefore continue to focus its work on consumption as the major driver of environmental degradation. We will also continue to push for greater equity of access to the world's limited resources. Although we do not campaign on population issues we continue to be supportive of campaigns on access to education for women, provision of sexual and reproductive health services and eradication of poverty.