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Overpopulation

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Abstract

This article discusses the concept of overpopulation and its practical relevance. Definitions of overpopulation are considered, including approaches centred on sustainability and on average or total welfare. Overpopulation has been linked to the wish for national population policies, which raise various ethical matters and coordination problems at the international level. Long-standing debates have arisen over Malthusianism and the differing views in rich and poor countries towards population control. Any practical applications of overpopulation have always proved difficult and controversial.

Keywords: sustainability, optimum population, Malthusianism, demographic transition, population policies

Overpopulation

As a formal concept, overpopulation means that a human population is too large relative to some sustainable or optimal level. It pertains to global studies because it can be defined either globally or nationally and in each case has important consequences for international affairs. If the Earth is judged to be overpopulated, then an effective response has to be global, organised by international bodies or by national governments working together. Any failure of international cooperation would impede efforts to deal with overpopulation and increase the risk of a demographic crisis. If an individual country is judged to be overpopulated, then it can make internal policy responses or perhaps transfer its excess population to countries seen as underpopulated. Problems of overpopulation may overlap with international migration and associated issues.

In defining and quantifying overpopulation, much depends on how the desirable population is specified. Many assessments of overpopulation have pointed to the physical and environmental limits to population growth: among the items in limited supply are food, water, living space, agricultural land, minerals and non-renewable energy sources. Such assessments have a Malthusian tone, comparing the infinite capacities for population growth with the finite means of subsistence. The desirable population must be sustainable as a long-run steady state and stay within the Earth's carrying capacity. To evaluate overpopulation, one needs to estimate the sustainable population and set it beside actual and projected populations – the task is complex and the results are open to challenge.

Along with sustainability, the desirable population may also be decided by welfare criteria based on income, wealth, consumption, health, education and other dimensions. Different choices among the dimensions and weightings may give rise to widely differing optima. A population optimum can maximise either average or total welfare – the total method usually gives a larger optimum population with a lower general living standard. Both methods have awkward ethical implications, and recent academic literature on population optimality has sought a middle way between them.

Arguments about overpopulation go hand in hand with a desire to reduce the population growth rate. Neo-Malthusians advocate restrictive population policies such as compulsory limits on family size, stringent birth control and punitive action against countries that refuse to comply. Their proposals have been much criticised as being authoritarian and misguided. Established models of demographic transition tell us that fertility levels in developing countries will eventually decrease and fall into line with reduced mortality: the peak of world population growth was reached in the 1960s, and since then it has decelerated. Whether these adjustments will suffice to prevent a demographic crisis is debatable, but everyone accepts that they are occurring. If the slow-down in population growth can be ascribed to industrialisation (as demographic transition models would suggest), then the ‘solution’ to the population problem may intensify the environmental difficulties from climate change, pollution and resource scarcity.

Even though we often perceive overpopulation as being global, the policy responses must be implemented locally by national governments. Population policies have been

piecemeal and uncoordinated. The strongest measures can be found in countries with a centralised and collectivist political culture, whereas liberal democracies have been wary of taking overt action. Any population policy raises ethical disquiet over reproductive rights, birth control, gender equality, family relationships, and conflicts with welfare programmes. National governments may have the option of using international migration to alleviate population pressures, but recent migration from less developed to developed countries has seldom been interpreted as a remedy for overpopulation. To argue thus would imply that the recipient countries are underpopulated, which sits uneasily with the high population densities in many developed countries. Large-scale international migration as a response to overpopulation would invoke the barriers and social problems that stem from cultural, linguistic, ethnic and religious differences.

The concept of overpopulation has been subject to widespread scepticism. Its most vociferous critics are the ‘cornucopians’ who deny that population faces severe limits to growth and argue that an expanding population stimulates the economy and promotes economic development. From the cornucopian angle, neo-Malthusian beliefs are flawed because they are too static and neglect the role of markets and technical change: population growth may indeed bring scarcity and rising resource prices, yet these higher prices provide the incentive for new technologies and resource discoveries that resolve the short-term problems and yield long-term benefits. Far from wanting population policies, cornucopians champion a free-market, laissez-faire stance as giving the appropriate adjustments to dispel resource scarcity and accommodate a growing population. The stark disagreements between neo-Malthusians and cornucopians illustrate the absence of any consensus about overpopulation.

Disagreements have also arisen between national governments of rich and poor countries. Warnings about overpopulation have emanated mainly from authors in developed countries and been espoused by the developed world. Less developed countries have been reluctant to embrace ideas of overpopulation and suspicious of the recommended policy responses. They would prefer to control population by undergoing the same demographic transition as the developed countries and enjoying the same material rewards. Population policies to create an artificial check on population growth seem to cheat them of the benefits of economic development. During the late twentieth century, international debate about overpopulation was marked by clashes between developed and developing countries, with the latter accepting its relevance only grudgingly. The current outlook adopted by international bodies such as the UN reflects a compromise between neo-Malthusian and cornucopian attitudes and between the views of developed and developing countries. Population growth is acknowledged as causing significant problems and requiring coordinated responses, but there is no endorsement of neo-Malthusian alarmism.

Further readings

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