Population Taboo Study Group

Session 4 (last session) December 4, 2023

We’ve discussed the as yet only partially solved population growth problem, some of the negative consequences, and the forces that shifted probably a majority of public opinion from awareness and concern to denial and negative opinions of “population control.” To the extent that even discussing overpopulation and fertility transitions has become taboo for many organizations and individuals.

In this session the focus (if we can get past hand wringing and worrying about the coming apocalypse) should be on how to get completing a universal fertility transition back on the world’s agenda. What are some practical “leverage points” to push public opinion and policy towards reversing growth.

1. Summary of facts and possibly controversial conclusions
2. Population doubled from 4 billion in 1974 to 8 billion in 2022, with growth linear averaging 80 million/year, adding a billion each 12 years:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 1974 | 4 |
| 1987 | 5 |
| 1999 | 6 |
| 2011 | 7 |
| 2022 | 8 |

1. Fertility rates (total fertility rate TFR) diverged over the same half century ranging from over 6 children/woman to under 1. Most of the remaining high fertility countries are in Africa. Many countries that have transitioned to lower fertility are still above replacement and population momentum will keep population rising for half a century (ending with about 40% more people) than in the year when fertility fell below replacement (TFR<2.1).
2. Remaining high fertility countries’ cultures and poor government health and education services are major factors delaying fertility transitions.
3. The world is on paths leading to serious problems: climate change, soil exhaustion, a “sixth extinction event” (see Kolbert book). Ocean acidification, forest clearing, overfishing, violence, poverty.
4. Quality of life remains the most convincing argument: Wouldn’t two lanes of traffic be better than six? Birds, flowers, trees, rather than concrete and endless cornfields?
5. Population did not fall off the world’s agenda, it was pushed off. Roe v Wade, new environmental protection laws, the limits to growth book, government fiscal problems due to Vietnam spending, a shift left politically in the anti-war generation all combined to shock businesses and wealthy individuals into a political counterattack. (Read the 1971 Lewis Powell memo that lays out the strategy for using money to push public opinion towards Friedman/Hayek “free market” economic theories, and libertarian distrust of government (easier to sell than “let our refinery pollute your water supply).
6. The most chilling quote is from Bernays’ 1928 book *Propaganda*. This innovative father of marketing, PR, and propaganda mentioned: “those who pull the invisible wires that control the public mind.
7. Immigration and other problems caused by too many people/not enough planet, have been used to get power by strong men. Democracy which seemed to have won the Cold War in 1990, is in retreat. The ability to manipulate and control and confuse public opinion by control of mass media and social media has given dictatorial governments greater power to control public opinion. The Russians, hearing nothing but Putin’s propaganda support their immoral war in Ukraine. The Chinese would support an invasion of Taiwan. Israelis are split (bless them) but a majority seem to think that bombing children will bring them safety. A significant minority of Americans, who selectively absorb lies from Right Wing media and crazy conspiracy theories, support Donald Trump, a sociopathic would be dictator who only failed in taking over power illegally because he was afraid to tell his supporters to shoot Congressmen and because a few Republicans had enough integrity to oppose his illegal schemes.

These problems don’t go away, they get worse as the overpopulated world uses up the last of natural resources. An example:

**We’re grappling with a climate ‘information crisis’ on X, Facebook and Instagram, disinformation experts say.**

Misinformation is exacerbating the climate crisis, experts warn as world leaders prepare to meet for COP28 in Dubai.

In 2023, you’d be forgiven for thinking that any widespread doubts about the scientific facts of climate change - and the urgent need to act on them - have been laid to rest.

But this year has seen a “re-mainstreaming” of outright denial, as well as insidious new tactics by big oil and bad faith actors online, a new report by the Climate Action Against Disinformation (CAAD) coalition reveals.

<https://www.euronews.com/green/2023/11/29/from-russian-pr-to-online-grifters-who-is-peddling-climate-disinformation-in-2023>

Note that the meeting is in Dubai, chaired by the local dictator. Half of the GDP of the Middle Eastern oil sheikdoms would be gone if fossil fuels were phased out.

1. What to do about it? How to put population and fertility transitions back on the agenda?
2. General thoughts. Because population is “the elephant in the room nobody talks about” it might be possible for the taboo to reverse, with many people adding “and complete fertility transitions” to their existing concerns. Because population is connected to many other issues that people do talk about. (Immigration, extinctions, poverty, etc. etc.)
3. Getting organizations and individuals, one at a time, to add population to the discussion, is not easy given the taboo. So it is important to deal with the ways the taboo manifests—accusations of racism, sexism, eugenics, colonialism, genocide, murder of babies.
4. But, the driving force that helped motivate insertion of those lies and slanders was probably the pro-growth, profit motivated backlash against the general idea of limits to growth.
5. Personal actions. Have fewer kids? We’ve already done that and look what it’s got us—outnumbered by the “quiverful” fundamentalists. Individual solutions can’t solve global problems very often. Mostly policies and governance are needed for big problems. Recycling has been a substitute for “no single use plastic” laws for example. (Eric Kaufman, *Shall the Religious Inherit the Earth*, has lots of data showing fundamentalists in all religious have more children than more secular believers.
6. We need to organize and market ideas. (But as academics this is the opposite of my skill set.)
7. My personal response has been:
8. to try to write a book advocating for completing the world fertility transition. (“Having two or less is like brushing teeth—you get better outcomes, it shouldn’t be a political controversy.”)

ii) Give a little money to NGOs advocating for ending population growth, and for legal abortions.

iii) I’ve tried to think in system dynamics jargon about where there might be “leverage points” where a little effort could have a big effect. I’ve come up with two (maybe three if the aforementioned “get people talking” idea is another one.)

First, if the anti-abortion people could be persuaded to respect a woman’s autonomy to choose whether to bear a child—which I think would be feasible—then it would have a very good effect on international family planning support (remember the Republicans who repaid their Evangelical voters by cutting off family planning aid). And it would give us better governance on a whole range of important issues. Shifting public opinion (the Koch/Bernays insight) could make abortion rights permanently safe.

Second, if the Catholic Church would finally admit that they got birth control as wrong as the Galileo science denial (sex in humans is not just for procreation, the biology is clear) that could have a huge impact worldwide, especially in high fertility countries where Catholic medical facilities are important (Africa, Haiti, Philippines, Central America).

How to get those schemes off the ground?