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## **Should There Be A Right To Have As Many Kids As You Want?**

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Maintaining a civil society depends on a general acceptance of certain human rights and a collective (governmental) suppression of practices that interfere with those rights. The founders of the United States of America declared that everyone has a right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Everyone, that is, except those with the wrong skin color. Nonetheless, it seems to me that asserting rights is a good idea; it is one way that human beings become “ethical,” by discussing and deciding what kinds of social behaviors we want to encourage and discourage. People are the only animals that can be ethical because they are the only ones possessing language with syntax, which allows the discussion, and it seems to me that we need more of such discussion. I also feel, mostly because of things my mother taught me, that the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights<sup>1</sup> is pretty much on the right track. Even where I think it sometimes misses the mark, I must still live by the laws that protect that human right.<sup>2</sup> I believe discussion of rights and ethics is good in itself and having a few generally accepted principles for sharing this planet with other people and other living beings helps guide policy.

This brings me to the “right” to have as many children as one desires. This right is commonly assumed to exist, although not explicitly propounded in any official statement. I know that simply raising the issue unsettles many for immediately the question of “how” comes to mind

and people fear coercion; but my purpose is to set forth the need and to trust that compassionate, humane governance will design strategies and policies to achieve the goal. This blog is about the “need” and not the “how” —so please, stick with me. All rights, regardless of their putative origins, clearly have attached responsibilities and limitations where they impinge on other people’s’ rights. The right to pursue happiness does not allow one to drive 100 mph through school zones, burn down other people’s houses for toasting marshmallows, or throw garbage over the back fence, no matter how joyous it makes you. And your right to life does not include cutting out another living person’s heart to replace your failing one. In order to suppress such activities, people form governments, and governments prohibit various actions because they interfere with one of the main functions of government – maintaining peace and order. Since overpopulation is now a major threat to both, indeed to the persistence of civilization,<sup>3</sup> regulating the size of their populations is clearly a central duty of all national governments.

Unrestrained population growth is in direct conflict with most of our commonly accepted human rights; having too many people threatens the life, liberty and pursuit of happiness of others. While the need for limitation and reduction of the global population is no longer debatable, the means remain open to discussion. It is possible that giving women everywhere absolutely equal rights to men and providing everyone with access to modern contraception and safe back-up abortion might lead to the necessary slow decline in numbers.<sup>4</sup> But that would be a very slow process in many societies, and the methods of achieving those goals would be controversial and difficult to implement. More direct regulation, as in China’s famous (and at times too aggressive in some communities) one-child family program, might prove necessary in some cases.<sup>5</sup>

The risk of collapse is much too close to condemn the notion of population limitation, which is essential for the preservation of civilization, or to pussy-foot around it with euphemisms like “family planning.” People shouldn’t have the right to have as many children as they want just because they can plan the timing of their births. Responsible reproduction is not just about supporting one’s offspring – it’s also about considering the world in which they and future generations will try to live, and that means carefully limiting their numbers.

There is real work to do if we are to bring global population size in line with resource limitations. We need to continuously calculate how much decline is required by when if the population is to be at a sustainable figure in 100 years or so. We also need to redesign our economic system so that it doesn’t depend on growth; we need to begin *now* to shift society’s ambitions in a more sustainable direction. We surely don’t want to count on the inevitable resource wars (nuclear or conventional), refugee tragedies, pandemics, poisoning and starvation to achieve alignment between population and resources. Humanity needs to bring its

best minds to solve the challenges we face, including achieving a population size in which it is possible for those most fundamental human rights to be realized—life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

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*MAHB-UTS Blogs are a joint venture between the University of Technology Sydney and the Millennium Alliance for Humanity and the Biosphere. Questions should be directed to [joan@mahbonline.org](mailto:joan@mahbonline.org)*

MAHB Blog: <http://mahb.stanford.edu/blog/right-to-as-many-kids-as-wanted/>

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations. 1948. [The Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#).

<sup>2</sup> For instance, one might argue, say, with part of Article 17 that says “Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others.” The world might be considered more ethical if that read “No one has the right to own property alone or in association with others.” Hunter-gatherers did have little fixed property and much more equitable societies.

<sup>3</sup> Barnosky AD, al. E. 2013. [Scientists Consensus on Maintaining Humanity's Life Support Systems in the 21st Century](#). Ehrlich PR, Ehrlich AH. 2013. [Can a collapse of civilization be avoided?](#) Proceeding of the Royal Society B, National Academy of Sciences USA. 1993. [A Joint Statement by Fifty-eight of the World's Scientific Academies](#). Population Summit of the World's Scientific Academies. New Delhi, India: National Academy Press, Union of Concerned Scientists. 1993. [World Scientists' Warning to Humanity](#).

<sup>4</sup> Bradshaw CJA, Brook BW. 2014. [Human population reduction is not a quick fix for environmental problems](#). Proc Natl Acad Sci U S A 111:16610-16615.

<sup>5</sup> Ehrlich PR, Ehrlich AH. 2013. [Can a collapse of global civilization be avoided?](#) Proceeding of the Royal Society B.