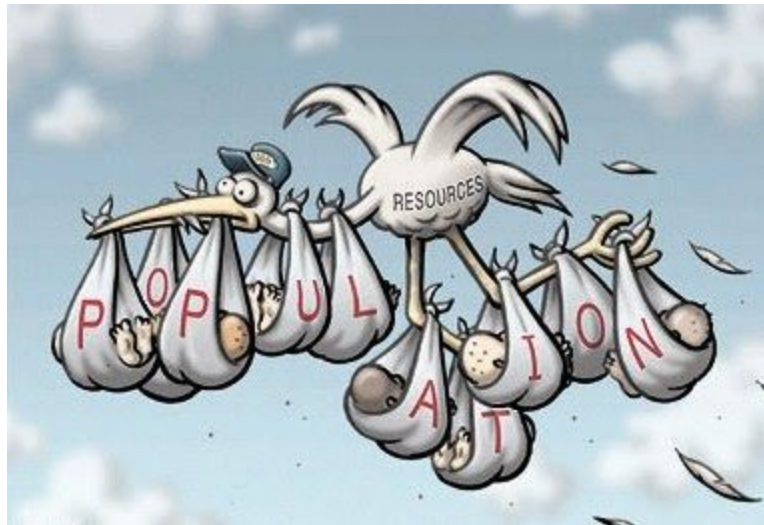


## A response to George Monbiot's *Guardian* Population Column

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George Monbiot's article *Population panic lets rich people off the hook for the climate crisis they are fuelling* can be found [here](#).

George Monbiot's position on population can be summarized as, "Don't worry about fertility rates. They are not the real problem and it's racist to say they are." He points out, correctly, that climate change and other environmental impacts are mainly due to people in rich countries and that poverty and violence come in large part from the exploitation of the poor. He thinks it is racist to worry about population growth in Africa and other poor countries.

Because anti-racism is so deep in our bones, there is a tendency to ignore the Monbiots who accuse population activists, like myself, of racism because we advocate fertility reductions in countries where most people are non-white. I'll digress by saying how offensive that accusation is to me personally. I got my opposition to racism from my parents. My mother was an activist Unitarian. A third of America's Unitarian ministers were at the Selma March, one was killed by racists. My father was fired from a faculty position in 1950, in part because he trusted an African American with an unauthorized key so graduate student's laboratory research could progress on weekends. His Ph.D. students came from nearly every continent and religion.

I was one of the rare American college students so offended by racism that I volunteered for a dangerous summer as a civil rights volunteer with Dr. King's SCLC. During that summer of 1966, I was tear-gassed by Mississippi state troopers, got a death threat in Georgia from the KKK, and

was picked up by police in Marion, Alabama, where police had shot and killed a local organizer 18 months earlier. Sorry to dwell on my lifelong anti-racism, but Monbiot owes population activists, who are mostly progressive anti-racist environmentalists, an apology.

There are two huge holes in his thinking that reverse the logic. First, he ignores the connection between high fertility rates and poverty. He does acknowledge a minor connection between loss of biodiversity and climate change as poor farmers in high fertility countries clear forests for subsistence farms to support growing populations.

Divide the world's 200+ countries into fertility classes—low, medium, and high, for example, and look at statistics on incomes, life expectancy, and infant mortality. Countries, where women have fewer than two children per woman, have incomes six times higher, on average, than countries with fertility rates over four children/woman. Life expectancies are 20 years longer in low fertility countries. Infant mortality is usually under 6/1000 versus some over 50/1000 in high fertility places. (Statistics from the World Bank). This is not a coincidence. High fertility causes poverty as African subsistence farms too small to support families are divided among five children every generation.

Nobel Peace Prize laureate Wangari Maathai lived the consequences of overpopulation and describes the degradation of the environment and people's health in her memoir *Unbowed*. When she was born in 1940, Kenya's population was roughly 5 million, people had enough to eat, she drank from streams and intact forests maintained soil fertility and a moderate climate. Sixty years later she describes unemployment, malnutrition, deforestation, drought, soil erosion, falling crop yields as the population exploded. Kenya now has 53 million people, with the UN projecting over 100 million by mid-century.

Meanwhile, Asian countries, probably poorer than Kenya in 1940, have shown how low fertility delivers "demographic dividends" as health and education improve and more women enter the paid labor force. As the numbers of children per family decline, limited financial resources shift from maintaining growing populations to increasing education, investment, and per capita incomes. Pressures for forest clearing and destruction of soils ease.

The argument about population goes back to Marx v Malthus. Malthus said fertility causes hunger. Marx said injustice causes hunger, fertility is irrelevant, "every stomach is born with a pair of hands." That was true when there were new continents to steal from the natives, but every stomach is not born with a new farm. As noted above, the evidence is in: Countries that achieved fertility transitions, as part of their modernization, got rich. Countries where fertility remained high, stayed poor. The data is clear on the association of high birth rates and poverty,

regardless of political regime. Independence and socialism in high fertility African countries did not turn out to be the path to utopia. Neo-colonialism, government corruption, corporate greed, and the legacy of colonialism, of course, play huge roles in keeping Africans poor. But high fertility and 3% population growth rates means the economy must grow by 3% just to maintain current low incomes. Treading water. Poverty traps.

**An Indian leader who in the 1970s diagnosed the causes of failure of family planning policies in India has reversed his position on the causal links between poverty and population growth:**

*"In 1974, I led the Indian delegation to the World Population Conference in Bucharest, where my statement that 'development is the best contraceptive' became widely known and oft-quoted. I must admit that 20 years later I am inclined to reverse this, and my position now is that 'contraception is the best development'" (Karan Singh, Indian politician).*

The second gap in Monbiot's analysis comes when he says the low environmental impact of the poor makes increases in their numbers unproblematic. For this to be true, the poor must agree to remain poor. They must agree not only to remain poor; they must agree to remain in place. If they migrate, as millions do, to richer countries, they will strive, with success, to raise their consumption. If they stay in place poor, outcomes remain morally unacceptable - 900 million stunted, hungry people with lives blighted by poverty. All of those poor people Monbiot says have a negligible environmental impact would prefer to be better off. They are striving, with great success in countries with honest governments, to get richer. In the long run, if they get more prosperous, as we and they all hope, *then they will have an environmental impact*. In the meantime, even while they are poor, high fertility countries' subsistence farmers are clearing and burning tropical forests, contributing significantly to greenhouse gas emissions and species extinctions.

Therefore, Monbiot takes a far more *de facto* racist position than those who hope poor people achieve the fertility transitions that helped enable prosperity in rich countries. For his position to be correct, the poor must stay poor. And the more their numbers, the poorer they must remain. That is a morally unacceptable argument calling for the perpetuation of misery. Monbiot is far more of a racist than the environmentalists he accuses of racism.

But, pivoting from criticism to self-criticism, the close association between falling fertility rates and rising prosperity, clearly visible in the data from dozens of countries in the past half-century, exposes the fallacy of the "population limits as panacea" position some of us are tempted to take. The biggest example is China. The two-child policy of the 1970s, one-child policy of 1979 that quickly morphed into a 1 ½ child policy with a hurtful son preference, got

birth rates down to about 1.7 children/woman by the 1980s. Although the population will grow from 900 million in 1970 to 1.4 billion due to demographic momentum, China's population will begin to decline by about 2030.

But during the same period, China's average income exploded, rising from under \$200/person in 1980 to over \$10,000/person in 2019. During the same transition, China became the world's largest carbon emitter. Similar decreases in population growth rates helped enable growth in incomes in other "Asian Tiger" economies from Singapore and Thailand to Korea and Japan. Singapore offers a dramatic example of the effects of a radical demographic transition combined with other, wise policies such as universal education and better health care. At its founding a poor slum, a country without resources and birthrates near 5 children/woman in the 1960s, Singapore's birthrate is now 1.1, meaning children inherit from two sets of grandparents. Per capita incomes in Singapore rose from \$500 in 1965 to \$65,000 in 2019, the eighth highest in the world (World Bank, PPP), and with high homeownership and a massive sovereign wealth fund.

If reducing fertility rates contributes as strongly to rising per capita incomes as the data suggests, then Monbiot is right. We can lessen the environmental impact by keeping birthrates high and increasing poverty. A morally unacceptable, racist position, but that is Monbiot's version of population policy. After being insulted by Monbiot, it is a pleasure to reverse the racism accusation, and with a better argument. It seems even the morally pure can unintentionally advocate policies that are *de facto* racist.

The sensible conclusion is "both." Both consumption and population matter. As is obvious from the I=PAT equation that Monbiot appears to accept as a reasonable model of reality. Affluence (consumption) and population are both multipliers of environmental impact.

The easier and morally more acceptable policy is to start with demographic transitions that liberate women, improve health, reduce hunger and infant mortality, and are strongly associated with ending poverty. Yet that is what Monbiot argues against.

What population activists need to accept and advocate is the idea that consumption too must be limited. We must replace ideas of "more is better" with ideals of "sufficiency" and "enough is enough." Luckily, happiness research indicates that beyond the income required for a modest middle-class lifestyle, happiness is not increased by more money and more consumption. There is hope for the world. We can see a feasible path to sustainable justice. Cut our numbers by liberating women, eliminating son preference, reducing "ideal family size" norms to two or less. Fortunately, experience has proven that this is not difficult. Populations are already falling in countries that achieved fertility transitions earliest (Japan, Italy, Germany).

At the same time, the necessity remains to cut consumption and reverse economic growth. Policies to cut consumption and end or reverse economic growth will be harder. First, we must raise incomes of the poor to morally acceptable levels. So, both re-distribution of wealth and income and limits to consumption are needed. A carbon tax to reflect the true costs of fossil fuels would tend to push down the consumption of energy-intensive goods and services. That would be a start.

**Ecological Economist Herman Daly** has suggested macroeconomic policies to curb growth focused on fractional reserve banking. The existing monetary policy has levers that can be pulled to reduce growth rates. If combined with redistribution and robust anti-poverty safety nets, growth could be reduced without undue suffering. We could trade income for leisure—choosing less consumption, but more time for family, friends, and self-improvement. In rich countries, slowing down, consuming less might increase well-being (remember half of Americans are overweight, in part due to stressful lifestyles and lack of time for exercise, socializing, and sleep). With less consumption, we would probably live longer.

**John Stuart Mill, brilliant author of *On Liberty* and an early advocate of the rights of women concluded in his 1848 essay, “Of the Stationary State” that ending population and economic growth would improve our lives:**

*“It is scarcely necessary to remark that a stationary condition of capital and population implies no stationary state of human improvement. There would be as much scope as ever for all kinds of mental culture, and moral and social progress; as much room for improving the Art of Living, and much more likelihood of its being improved when minds ceased to be engrossed by the art of getting on. ...Hitherto it is questionable if all the mechanical inventions yet made have lightened the day's toil of any human being. They have enabled a greater population to live the same life of drudgery and imprisonment, and an increased number of manufacturers and others to make fortunes. They have increased the comforts of the middle classes. But they have not yet begun to effect those great changes in human destiny, which it is in their nature and in their futurity to accomplish. Only when, in addition to just institutions, the increase of mankind shall be under the deliberate guidance of judicious foresight, can the conquests made from the powers of nature by the intellect and energy of scientific discoverers become the common property of the species, and the means of improving and elevating the universal lot.”*

**Wangari Maathai, a courageous African woman, said in her 2004 Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech:**

*“Today we are faced with a challenge that calls for a shift in our thinking so that humanity stops threatening its life-support system. We are called to assist the Earth to heal her wounds and in the process heal our own - indeed to embrace the whole of creation in all its diversity, beauty, and wonder. Recognizing that sustainable development, democracy, and peace are indivisible is an idea whose time has come.”*

Mr. Monbiot, with respect for your moral clarity explaining that injustice perpetuates poverty, high fertility, and environmental catastrophe, the path to justice and a sustainable world requires both population limits and consumption limits. It is racist to *not* talk about the need to reduce African fertility rates for the benefit of Africans. Maintaining those high birthrates condemns women and infants to higher mortality rates, billions (literally, since the UN projects the African population to grow from 1.3 to 4.3 billion by 2100) to poverty, and the world to conflict, climate refugees, dysfunction, and extinction.

There is good news and a feasible path to better futures: Modern contraceptives work and cost little. Liberated and educated women choose to use them for the betterment of their families. Enough really is enough. Greed does not bring happiness. Justice and sufficiency do. A world of limits can become a world of abundance. It will take about 260 years—1800 to 2060, for the world population to grow from one billion to ten billion. At European birth rates, it would take about three centuries to fall back to a billion again, the number ecologists (Ehrlich, Pimentel) estimated as earth’s sustainable population of humans.

Completing the already half-accomplished global fertility transition should be high on the world’s agenda. Growth at 80 million a year cannot continue without increasing, as Malthus put it, “vice and misery.” But with modern contraceptives, the reverse is within reach: A world of universal peace and abundance. Falling population, as Mill and Keynes envisioned, can end the economic problem of scarcity.

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