

# The United Nations Population Fund Promotes Population Denial

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## Humanity heading for 9 billion and the UN's chief population organization says forget about numbers. What's going on?

*by Madeline Weld*

November 15, 2022. That's the day the world population reached 8 billion, according to the UNFPA, the United Nations organization whose original *raison d'être* was to help end population growth. The UNFPA (reflecting its former name, UN Fund for Population Activities) was founded in 1969. Its four-point mandate, established in 1973, was clearly and unequivocally about promoting awareness of population problems (a term used in the mandate) and developing strategies and programs to slow population growth and implement family planning programs.

Some fifty years since the UNFPA began operations, the world population has more than doubled. The environmental impact of those additional 4 billion people is everywhere in evidence and much of humanity remains mired in poverty. Nevertheless, one would look in vain for a call to action about population growth in the UNFPA's press release on the eve of the 8 billion milestone.

The title of the UNFPA's November 14 press release called for "solidarity in advancing sustainable development for all." The second sentence said this was "a clarion call for humanity to look beyond the numbers and meet its shared responsibility to protect people and the planet, starting with the most vulnerable."

"Unless we bridge the yawning chasm between the global haves and have-nots, we are setting ourselves up for an 8-billion-strong world filled with tensions and mistrust, crisis and conflict," UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is quoted as saying.

One might suggest to Mr. Guterres that "looking beyond the numbers" will only serve to widen that chasm. Since the previous billion milestone, on October 31, 2011, 26 people were added in the UN-designated "less developed regions" for every one added to the "more developed regions." Surely the clarion call that humanity needs is that its failure to sufficiently address population growth has and will continue to trap people in poverty and degrade the environment.



Children run down the street after school lets out in Ale, Ethiopia. Photo: [Taylor Flowe, Unsplash](#)

But, instead, UNFPA Executive Director Dr. Natalia Kanem warns that “focusing on numbers alone distracts us from the real challenge we face: securing a world in which progress can be enjoyed equally and sustainably.” This seeming obliviousness to reality is in line with other magical thinking in the November 14 press release, which also calls for “a rapid decoupling of economic activity from the current over-reliance on fossil-fuel energy.” Memo to the UNFPA: fossil fuel use continues to increase annually because energy demand is increasing faster than the growth in renewables (which also have significant environmental costs) and population growth is contributing to that increase.

## **UNFPA messaging on World Population Day in 2022 and 2023 also downplayed population**

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The UNFPA’s press release on the eve of 8 billion was not a one-off by a rogue staffer that somehow escaped head office. As described in an article by Dr. Jane O’Sullivan, the UNFPA’s message for World Population Day (July 11) in 2022 was primarily about shaming “population alarmists.” “Let no alarmist headline distract from the work at hand,” it warns.

O’Sullivan describes how the UNFPA’s disavowal of numbers leads to it twisting itself into absurd rhetorical knots. On the one hand, it admonishes that the “focus should be on people, not population. Reducing people to numbers strips them of their humanity.” On the other, it applauds its own role in facilitating censuses and surveys: “Making sure everyone is counted can allow governments to better assess the needs of a changing population and chart a surer path to addressing those needs for demographic resilience.” But what part of counting people in a census, O’Sullivan asks, is not about numbers? Is the UNFPA not stripping people of their humanity by facilitating censuses?

The UNFPA press release for World Population Day [in 2023](#) also warned about alarmism. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres laments that

*progress is not universal, throwing inequality into sharp relief... In an ideal world, 8 billion people means 8 billion opportunities for healthier societies empowered by rights and choices. But the playing field is not and has never been even... Let no alarmist headline distract from the work at hand: investing in human and physical capital for inclusive, productive societies that uphold human and reproductive rights. Only then can we tackle the enormous challenges facing our planet and forge a world where health, dignity and education are rights and realities, not privileges and empty promises. In a world of 8 billion, there must always be space for possibility.*

There is no hint in Guterres’ words that an already overstressed and depleted planet Earth may not have the capacity to provide opportunities for 8 billion, let alone for additional projected billions. Waiting for that even playing field, which he himself notes has never existed, before taking action on population will be much like [waiting for Godot](#), or more likely, waiting for collapse.

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## **State of World Population 2023: UNFPA’s pièce de résistance of population denial**

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The UNFPA produces an annual publication called State of World Population (SWP). [SWP 2023](#) bears the title “8 Billion Lives: Infinite Possibilities.” It too warns about “population alarmism” (the words “alarm/s,” “alarmism” or “alarmist/s” with reference to population occur 19 times in the document) and repeats the theme that numbers are a distraction. Its executive summary warns that, “This alarmism poses real risks: one, that population anxiety will distract us from serious but solvable problems, and, two, that population anxiety will become a rationale for denying the rights and bodily autonomy of women and children.” The word “anxiety” occurs 19 times in SWP 2023, 16 times with reference to population (in one instance combined with climate), and once each with reference to non-white immigration to the US, women’s fear of infertility, and as a reference.





Front cover of State of World Population 2023

Incredibly and “alarmingly,” SWP 2023 overlooks that overpopulation itself is the mothership of almost all serious problems pertaining to the environment, resource scarcity, and food insecurity. Every single one of those “serious but solvable problems” would be much easier to fix with a smaller population. SWP 2023 refers to China’s one-child policy and India’s partly coercive vasectomy program, US sterilization programs targeting indigenous women, and Japanese forced sterilization programs for people with disabilities as cautionary tales against target-based population policies. The clear implication is that any program concerned with numbers per se inevitably leads to an infringement of human rights.

SWP 2023 frequently cites feminist authors hostile to a focus on population to downplay its importance. Among those cited is the grande dame of feminist population denialism, Betsy Hartmann, a leading proponent of the argument that programs aiming to reduce population

growth are incompatible with the promotion of women's reproductive rights. The following is an example from page 58:

*The idea that [women's] reproductive capacities can be harnessed to solve environmental degradation and loss is both wrong and ineffective because it assumes "there is no fundamental power imbalance between the rich and the poor or contradiction between placing disproportionate blame for the world's problems on poor women's fertility and advocating for reproductive rights and health" (Hartmann and Barajas-Román, 2011).*

But were there not power imbalances in Bangladesh when it implemented a successful voluntary family planning program? Successful and ethical population programs have been implemented in many other countries as well but one wouldn't know it from reading SWP 2023. These programs demonstrate that, indeed, there is no contradiction and can be a strong synergy between elevating women's bodily autonomy and stemming the population growth that impoverishes them. In the UNFPA's new narrative, such programs never existed.

SWP 2023 cites a paper by Bhatia et al. (2020) with the title *A feminist exploration of 'populationism': engaging contemporary forms of population control*, which concerns itself with "the incursion of populationism into feminist work." This passage is from page 39:

*When high rates of population growth are identified as the problem, it becomes impossible to ignore that it is the poorest countries that tend to have the highest fertility and population growth rates. In other words, when viewed through a global lens, much of the "problem" of global population growth is being attributed to the bodies of impoverished sub-Saharan Africans and Asians who make the most minimal contributions to global environmental destruction and climate change (Bhatia and others, 2020).*

The assertion that poor countries make minimal contributions to global environmental destruction ignores the fact that their poverty is deepened by population growth causing degradation of local environments. About 90% of global deforestation is due to agricultural expansion primary driven by population growth.

SWP 2023 notes with concern that human-driven environmental degradation makes people worry about overpopulation. It cites surveys in eight countries that show that "demographic anxiety is real" and that "environmental concerns are indeed among the top causes of population anxiety" (p. 46-47). This, it says, could "make people vulnerable to claims of "too many" or indicate that alarmist rhetoric about "overpopulation" is influencing people's views." The general public is "disserved by simple narratives like 'too many'," according to SWP 2023. Apparently, connecting dots on population growth and environmental degradation is to be discouraged.





Aerial photo of Dhaka, Bangladesh. Photo: [Andy Bridge, Unsplash](#)

SWP also cites a paper called *Malthus's Specter and the Anthropocene* by [Ojeda et al.](#) (2018), who note that the “political ecology” they advocate has Marxist roots and draws on Marxist traditions. Ojeda et al. (p. 2-3) chastise “environmental scholars” who

*have updated Malthus's ideas of human population stretching natural limits, applying them to problems like soil erosion, deforestation, pollution, and now climate change. These neo-Malthusian perspectives often equate human bodies with rapacious resource use and destruction of the environment. This is troublesome, given that these revitalized “population bomb” (cf. Ehrlich 1968) discourses have been historically connected to coercive population control policies and the misogyny, patriarchy, racism, colonial domination and capitalist exploitation that underpin them (Hartmann 1987; Sasser 2014; Silliman and King 1999).*

Never mind that such connections are only made by Marxist-feminist writers, not by the “population controllers” they accuse. The intentional family planning movement, of which the UNFPA was a product, was primarily concerned with liberating women from unwanted childrearing and enabling the gap between rich and poor to be closed.

The *Malthus's Specter* paper politicizes the simple biological reality that more human bodies will place greater demands on the environment, yet SWP 2023 cites it on two occasions, the first time to disparage Malthus (p. 54) and the second to argue that a focus on population works against reproductive rights (p. 58).

The above examples of SWP 2023 using feminist population-denial sources to decry a focus on population growth are by no means exhaustive. SWP 2023 even raises the spectre of white supremacy. In a brief section called “Extreme scenarios at work,” *SWP 2023* links population concerns with fascist movements, “ecofascism,” and white supremacy (p. 43). “Far-right” European parties were said to engage in “ecobordering,” treating immigration as a threat to local and national environments. “Borders then become a source of environmental protection.” From this and other parts of *SWP 2023*, it is evident that its authors consider open borders to be a good thing. Since borders are the only way for a country to maintain national sovereignty, one can surmise that national sovereignty is something the authors of *SWP 2023* resent. Not surprisingly, *SWP 2023* views international migration as part of the solution for social and economic problems (p. 96-97).

## What’s that you say, Dr. Kanem – overpopulation is a myth?

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In a [press release](#) of April 19, 2023, announcing the publication of *SWP 2023*, UNFPA Executive Director Natalia Kanem firmly rejected targets. “Women’s bodies should not be held captive to population targets. To build thriving and inclusive societies, we must radically rethink how we talk about and plan for population change,” she is quoted as saying.

In an [interview](#) with the CBC radio program *The Current* on that same day, Kanem says that “the focus on numbers is preventing us from asking the right questions.” She also makes the shocking assertion that overpopulation is a myth:

*We have actually looked at this and found that a lot of people think that the world is overpopulated and this is a myth because when you use a term like overpopulation, it’s a pretence that there is not enough resources on the planet to be able to sustain the population. But the question is how are we handling the resources of the planet? And it’s inequality that makes a difference.*

Who knew that biophysical limits to growth would be negated by equality? Overall, the interview was high in feminist rhetoric and low in scientific literacy.

## Word salads don’t alleviate hunger

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On September 15, 2022, two months prior to the UNFPA release downplaying the advent of 8 billion, David Beasley, World Food Programme executive director, said that the [world is facing](#) “a global emergency of unprecedented magnitude,” with 345 million people in 82 countries facing acute food insecurity. Fifty million of those people in 45 countries were suffering from very acute malnutrition and are “knocking on famine’s door.”



Photo: [Fatima Yusuf, Pexels](#)

Is it purely a coincidence that the hundreds of millions of food-insecure people live in countries with rapidly growing populations? Will “looking beyond the numbers” improve their access to food, clean water and sanitation? One wonders how Dr. Kanem feels about “women’s bodies being held captive” to starvation.

**Was there a revolution at the UNFPA?**

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The UNFPA no longer identifies as the United Nations Population Fund. Its website announces, “UNFPA is the United Nations sexual and reproductive health agency. Our mission is to deliver a world where every pregnancy is wanted, every childbirth is safe and every young person’s potential is fulfilled.”

How do we explain the UNFPA’s 180-degree turn on population growth and the complete repudiation of its mandate? The UN’s International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), held in Cairo, Egypt, in 1994, was a turning point in moving the focus away from population and predominantly to reproductive health. Subsequent State of World Population reports reflected that shift. Nevertheless, they implicitly acknowledged population growth and contained no warnings about population “alarmism” or “anxiety.” In contrast, SWP 2023 mentions population growth only to delegitimize it as a priority issue or to befuddle the reader about its importance (for example, on p. 22, it emphasizes growth in per capita consumption and downplays the concomitant multiplying effect that population growth has in lower-income countries where consumption is increasing).

UNFPA’s webpage refers to the Programme of Action arising from the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development as the UNFPA’s founding document, thereby erasing the first 25 years of its existence. Is it rewriting its history, à la Winston Smith in George Orwell’s dystopian novel *1984*, by erasing those first 25 years when its focus was on population?

The UNFPA’s messaging regarding the 8 billion milestone and the 2023 edition of its flagship *State of World Population* have all the hallmarks of a coup d’état. The old regime with its focus on population has been toppled, its founding principles as defined in its 1973 mandate have been banished, and we can imagine purges of staffers showing signs of “population alarmism.” The UNFPA’s current position could have been lifted straight from an anti-population Marxist-feminist manifesto. The change seems too radical and thorough to be less than a deliberate campaign to capture and eliminate the population stabilization agenda.

## **UNFPA and Marxism: connecting the dots**

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The denial of numbers is in itself Marxist. Marxists acknowledge the ecological crisis but put the blame entirely on capitalism, colonialism and inequality. To be concerned about population is to blame poor brown and black women for the overconsumption of people in rich white countries and elites in other countries.

In 2011, Canadian Ian Angus and Australian Simon Butler published the book “*Too Many People? Population, Immigration and the Environmental Crisis.*” They deny that overpopulation is a major cause of environmental destruction and argue that a focus on

numbers weakens the movement for real solutions. Angus edits the “ecosocialist” journal Climate & Capitalism. Butler is a former editor of (and still writes for) Green Left (formerly Green Left Weekly) which advocates for ecosocialist action.

The book attracted criticism even from other ecosocialists for its cornucopian thinking and denial that responses to population growth can be empowering rather than coercive. However, Betsy Hartman, who wrote one of the book’s two forewords, gave it high praise, and the UNFPA reflects its language and sentiments. Hartmann and other Marxist feminists, some mentioned above, are cited throughout SWP 2023.

The UNFPA’s messaging around 8 billion used language favoured by Marxists, advocating for “solidarity in advancing sustainable development for all,” warning that a focus on numbers would distract us from “securing a world in which progress can be enjoyed equally and sustainably” and advocating for “investing in human and physical capital for inclusive, productive societies.” The UNFPA has a series of webpages devoted to its commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion, and uses the language of critical theory, a Marxist philosophy that rejects scientific objectivity, allowing evidence-based population concern to be cast as a fetish.

Aspiring for a good life for all is not the problem, but rather the magical thinking that this can be attained despite a growing population and a shrinking resource base, and the idea that addressing growth is a threat to greater equality rather than a prerequisite. The UNFPA has abandoned historical evidence and biophysical reality in favour of ideology.

Despite population concern having been a central motivation for governments to deliver family planning services that women wanted, the UNFPA argues such concerns invariably undermine women’s bodily autonomy. It also insists its approach will stabilise population more quickly than explicit actions for birth control. Yet, under this agenda, the number of women with an unmet need for contraception has barely changed in the thirty years since the Cairo conference, global fertility decline almost stalled, and population growth, which was diminishing in the 1990s, has rebounded to close to 90 million per year. The UNFPA’s failure to progress its mandate is damning, but it exempts itself from its failure by its own admonition against population concern and hence from any critical evaluation of its achievements. George Orwell would feel sadly vindicated.