

# Population is a scape-goat for environmental issues

**By Wayne Visser**

In the last issue of Money Values, I implied that the common perception that "population growth is our biggest environmental problem" is false. It is a convenient way for the comfortable minority (typically, the first world) to point a finger at the struggling majority (typically, the third world). I would argue that the high-impact lifestyles of the first world are worthy of more attention.

The environmentalist Paul Erlich realised this relationship in the 1970s already. He derived a formula which states that:

Impact = population X affluence X technology

The population variable is an obvious factor, which no-one denies. More people, greater impact. But the other two factors are often conveniently ignored. They are the lifestyle issues which cut a little close to most of our bones. They make us wriggle a bit in our seats. Because they imply that we may need to sacrifice something personally to solve some of the larger societal problems. Let's give a few examples to illustrate what we're talking about.

On affluence:

The daily calories per person consumed in the USA is 3603, compared with 1991 in Kenya (the average adult needs 2 200 calories a day to avoid malnutrition).

A person living in the U.S. uses more than 500 times the energy of a person living in Ethiopia.

Europeans use 80% more non-renewable resources and energy than are available for them according to "environmental space" calculations.

On technology:

In the U.S., there is one car for every 1.6 people. If India were to have the same ratio, the number of cars in that country would have to grow from 3 million to more than 550 million.

With only 4% of the world's population, America is responsible for 22% of the carbon emissions; the West and former Soviet bloc produces 80% of the world's carbon dioxide emissions.

The West is responsible over half the world's military spending and sixty percent of arms sales. The environmental impacts of war is only just beginning to be explored.

Of course, North America and Europe are not the only offenders, but they are important ones, because, apart from pollution, one of their main exports are their lifestyle and leadership on world issues. There is no room for finger pointing though.

In South Africa, the contrasts between the "haves" and "have nots" is equally stark and discomfoting. Whether we look at water and energy consumption, or cars and telephones per capita. Of course, these have been exacerbated by apartheid, but the cause is more systemically at the root of economics.

So the issue of population impacts cannot be dealt with in pure population number terms. For every "industrialised baby" we bring into the world, the environmental (and other) impacts are multiple fold that of an "un-industrialised baby". If it were possible to factor these calculations into desired fertility rates, the picture would be very different from present indicators. The responsibility to reduce the population and its consequences would then swing back to high-impact societies.

This all begs the question: Does humanity have the will and wisdom to make the kinds of lifestyle and technology changes which basic mathematics suggests are essentially to avert growing social and ecological disaster scenario? Will simple modifications of economic incentives (e.g. green taxes, adjusted national accounts, etc.) be enough? Will green consumerism do more than ease the conscience of high impact societies? Or will we be forced into a socio-cultural and spiritual revolution the likes of which we can scarcely even imagine?

The bottom line is that it is a complex issue, and whoever still thinks that "population" has a simple solution (e.g. birth control in the Third World) are like hedgehogs in a condom factory - well intentioned but ineffective!

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