

Editors' Introduction: Are We Too Many? Sustainability and Population Politics

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In posing the question "Are We Too Many?" for this issue of *In-Spire* we sought to confront and debate a controversial question in global politics - population control. Since Thomas Malthus' famous *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), the issue has been debated in relation to subjects as diverse (but interrelated) as food, resource scarcity, famine, overcrowding, birth control, migrations, security, reproduction and gender. Today population is even being discussed as one of the ingredients of a recipe to take us out of the current economic crisis: a transition to a low resource and energy economy accompanied by a decrease in population numbers. But can this nexus between population and contemporary global challenges be accepted? The papers in this issue present a range of perspectives on the topic, focusing mainly on the environment-population link, from debating the question and examining the discourse, to presenting case studies which challenge and redirect the focus of the debate. What these contributions have in common is that they show that the population question cannot be solely answered in scientific terms. It goes beyond calculations of the carrying capacity of nature and natural limits. Population is a social issue and a question of distribution.

Sherilyn MacGregor starts by examining the question of "Are We Too Many," assessing its scope, implications, and responses. Over-population seems not only to be a contentious judgement of society's management of resources but a narrow approach to resource-sharing and ecological stewardship which encourages biopolitical forms of regulation. Critics have observed that "We Are Too Many" is a judgement levelled by a particular vein of western society, notably white, middle class, and male, against countries of the global south, women and the young. MacGregor suggests that the question de-prioritises or even evades other questions that represent, perhaps, more serious threats to sustainable living, such as socio-natural relations characterised by high levels of consumption of resources and the generation of wastes. We might ask whether capitalism is a help or a hindrance to sustainability, whether there is in fact a correlation between high birth rates and consumption of resources, or whether westerners are prepared to acknowledge the part their resource-heavy lifestyles play in the poor conditions of, the Niger Delta, for example.

Lockhart's investigation of the discourse of 'survivalism' and the Optimum Population Trust (OPT) examines the view that the ecological crisis is mainly an overpopulation problem, and shows how this rhetoric pervades political and environmental debates. The population control strategies proposed by OPT fail to look at the way social, economic and cultural inequalities arising from the global capitalist and consumer-driven system impact people of different races, classes and genders, while problematising less developed countries as over-populated, out of control and thereby the main

contributors to ecological problems. Lockhart suggests that advocates of population control in fact promote power/knowledge relations, eco-discipline and authoritarian forms of resource-management to the detriment of other possibilities.

OPT's argument is thrown into sharp relief by the other papers in this issue. These intertwine some alternative questions about the global environment with local socio-ecological issues and highlight how the question of population is invalidated by specific inequalities, forms of corruption, and marginalisation of indigenous rights.

Chijioke Evoh exposes the misplaced view of less-developed countries as over-populated and out of control when seen in light of the irresponsible management of the oil industry and its impact on the Niger Delta. MacGregor helpfully posited the question, "who is 'We'?" when we ask "Are We Too Many?" and Evoh's case study demonstrates how there is a diverse and often vulnerable range of 'we's, rather than a homogeneous, over-populating 'we' facing ecological problems. People from different layers of society, youths, national elites, local communities and transnational companies are irrevocably connected to the oil industry and its damage to the Niger Delta. In particular, increased levels of crime and violence, arising from the inequitable distribution of resources, highlights the risks youths face in the context of these problems.

In exposing "petro-violence," Evoh demonstrates how industry and state control over oil is a socio-economic and ecological security issue which endangers local communities in favour of the economic security of the oil industry. Huge amounts of Nigerian oil and gas are wasted annually through mismanagement, while the profits reaped from these resources are rarely used to benefit local communities. Instead, local wildlife is damaged, people are put at risk from damaged pipelines, villages are threatened by gangs supporting oil companies' interests, and communities fail to develop. There are shortcomings to linking security discourse with the discourse of the environment, but Evoh's case study suggests how, all too often, problems relating to the environment and the local community have been eclipsed by capital-protecting security issues. What is called for is a reconceptualised, indigenous understanding of security.

Gail Verasammy looks at this possibility for reconceptualisation. Her article takes a cross-disciplinary approach which links changes in regional politics with the perception of national security threats for the Caribbean Basin. Alongside illicit trafficking, Verasammy explores how the environment entails a threat to the livelihood of the islands and thereby constitutes a threat to national, local and even regional security. The environment is fast becoming one of "the most critical non-traditional security challenges facing the Caribbean Basin in the post-Cold War Era" (Verasammy, 76). Verasammy's paper suggests how policy responses to new security threats can be aligned to responses to environmental problems. This comparative discussion of the impact of environmental disasters and organised crime on the Caribbean Basin suggests how a shift of the security agenda from traditional Cold-War issues to non-traditional problems also allows a shift focusing more heavily on social and economic repercussions for island communities. The discussion moves the question of "Are We Too Many?" away from population-centred responses and towards a candid awareness of the

interconnected nature of the environment with political, security, criminological and other issues.

The books for review at the end of this issue further the breadth of responses to the problems facing the global environment. As well as exploring and critiquing a number of population control policies, some texts look at the various dimensions of the politics of ecology, such as the transition to a sustainable economy, citizen activism, health, security and life reproduction. The question, "Are We Too Many?" posited a problem of excess levelled primarily at the human reproductive body, yet a range of enquiries point to innovations and sustainable futures which undermine this view.

As some of the contributors argue, it may well be considered that the population question is a way to avoid less popular issues like the necessary distribution of wealth and resources in a world of ever-increasing inequalities between the rich and the impoverished, and the urgency of more respectful forms of living on the earth. When posing the question, our intention was to generate a rich debate in which these other views displaced by the population problem could be included. We hope that the articles in this special issue can add new nuances, often neglected, to current debates.