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The Other Population Bomb

Contribution to GTI Forum [The Population Debate Revisited](#)

Guy Dauncey

The population explosion has been the side effect of an incredible success story. Before our ancestors found ways to defeat the deadliest diseases, a mother needed to have ten children for two to survive. The lifetimes of accumulated grief must have been enormous. The population explosion has been caused by parents continuing to have many babies, most of whom now survive to have babies themselves.

The solution has been another success story, for history tells us that whenever people organize to end the power of their nation's elites, enabling progressive parties to achieve women's rights, education for all, easily available contraception, and secure systems of welfare, the desire by parents to have numerous babies falls dramatically.

By 2017, thanks to such political activism, more than half of the world's couples were producing fewer than 2.1 babies per mother. In the United States, it's 1.8. In China and the United Kingdom, it's 1.7. In Canada and Poland, it's 1.5. In Hong Kong, Japan, and Spain, it's 1.4. In Italy, Greece, and Portugal, it's 1.3. In South Korea, it's 1.1.¹ Among my friends, women who choose not to have children enjoy a shame-free life. In my grandparents' generation, they would have been called spinsters, a word loaded with pity and judgement.

The questions that arise, therefore, are why so many nations are failing to develop and how all future development can become transformational development that accords with the needs of the planet and its critical resilience boundaries, and no longer invites careless and boastful overconsumption, causing climate chaos, environmental destruction, and species extinctions.

The economists Mark Koyama and Jared Rubin have offered answers to the first question in *How the World Became Rich: The Historical Origins of Economic Growth*, in which they reference the work of 350 fellow economists and historians. In their analysis, there are some thirty barriers to development, one of the most significant being the corrupting power of political, economic, and religious elites.²

Logically, then, since Earth's ecological health requires that population growth cease in countries where fertility rates are still high, our response to continued population growth must be to support political activism that can end the power of such elites, including the Western bankers and accountants who enable corruption and tax avoidance. With the obstacles removed, such nations could proceed with transformational development.

As a final thought, there is a population explosion, but it is not the one attracting the most attention. It is among farm animals, whose population is growing at twice the rate of humans. When we talk about the impacts of consumption, we should start here: the billions of animals we raise and kill for food each year (10 billion a year in America) have a greater climate impact than all the world's transportation.³ Worldwide, 27% of Earth's land surface is devoted to livestock grazing and animal feed production; 41% of the land in the lower 48 US states. Compared to getting the same protein from nuts, cows are a near 200-fold greater climate disaster.⁴ They are also an ecological disaster: livestock is booming, but wildlife is collapsing.

In 2016, Marco Springmann and his team at the Oxford Martin Programme on the Future of Food found that if everyone ceased eating meat and dairy (as part of a Great Transition):

- Food-related climate emissions would fall by 60-70%;
- 20% of the land could be used to grow more crops;
- 80% of the land used for livestock could be used to capture carbon and restore wildlife through forest-planting and ecological restoration;
- 7 to 8 million people (a 10% reduction) would no longer die each year, thanks to a healthier plant-based diet;
- Medical costs would fall, saving 2–3% of global gross domestic product.⁵

The big meat and dairy oligopolies would fight this with every kind of propaganda, just as many religious leaders have fought the use of contraception, but it needs to happen.

Endnotes

1. United Nations Population Fund, "World Population Dashboard," 2022, accessed June 15, 2022, <https://www.unfpa.org/data/world-population-dashboard>.
2. Mark Koyama and Jared Rubin, *How the World Became Rich: The Historical Origins of Economic Growth* (Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2022).
3. Humane Ventures, "Animal Clock," accessed June 15, 2022, <https://animalclock.org/>.
4. Hannah Ritchie, "Half of the World's Habitable Land Is Used for Agriculture," Our World in Data, November 11, 2019, <https://ourworldindata.org/global-land-for-agriculture>; "Greenhouse Gas Emissions per 100 grams of Protein," Our World in Data, accessed June 15, 2022, <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/ghg-per-protein-pooore>; Dave Merrill and Lauren Leatherby, "Here's How America Uses Its Land," *Bloomberg*, July 31, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2018-us-land-use/>.
5. Rachel Nuwer, "What Would Happen if the World Suddenly Went Vegetarian?" *BBC*, September 26, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20160926-what-would-happen-if-the-world-suddenly-went-vegetarian>.

About the Author



Guy Dauncey is an author and ecofuturist working to develop a positive vision of a sustainable future, and to translate that vision into action. He is the founder of the British Columbia Sustainable Energy Association, and the author or co-author of ten books, including *The Climate Challenge: 101 Solutions to Global Warming* and *Journey to the Future: A Better World Is Possible*. He is an Honorary Member of the Planning Institute of British Columbia, a Fellow of the Findhorn Foundation in Scotland, and a Fellow of the Royal Society for the Arts.

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