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Against Population Alarmism

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

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Rather than an “elephant in the room” as [argued](#) by Ian Lowe, the population issue and neo-Malthusianism are both alive and kicking. Recent examples include David Attenborough’s film *A Life On Our Planet*, which talks about humans overrunning the world and the threats of population to the environment; Washington think tanks making links between so-called climate refugees, scarcity, and overpopulation; and even the UK’s Prince William claim that Africa’s population is a threat to wildlife and conservation.

We are sadly still in a world where neo-Malthusian thinking posits simplistic linkages between soaring numbers, climate change, conflict, and resource scarcity. Links with Hardin’s “tragedy of the commons” are clear where environmentalism and development thought more broadly interpret a slew of issues ranging from global poverty and economic development, environmental change, conservation, and even national and global security through the lens of overpopulation and scarcity. This has tended to give rise to techno-authoritarian narratives which disproportionately target poor and marginalized people in the Majority World, who consequently often face a range of draconian actions, e.g., displacement, dispossession, bodily control (largely of poor non-white women), and biopolitics.

Thus, this fixation with overpopulation diverts attention from more crucial issues such as how power is distributed in society, gender inequality, caste and ethnic discrimination, unfair terms of trade, state planning, centralizing technologies, tenure arrangements, ecological degradation, and so on. Furthermore, we need to link population debates with issues concerning unequal and skewed patterns of consumption, allocation, and distribution.

A lot of my past work has focused on scarcity and limits. The scarcity postulate—i.e., the assumption that needs and wants are unlimited and the means to achieve them are scarce—is the basic tenet of modern economics. But this notion has led to scarcity emerging as a totalizing discourse in both the North and South. The “scare” of scarcity has led to scarcity emerging as a political strategy for powerful groups. As argued by the late Steve Rayner, spreading fear about the planet’s diminishing resources largely has served to keep poor people poor and enrich those already wealthy.¹ This is why in past works, together with several collaborators, I have argued that scarcity is not a natural condition: the problem lies in how we see scarcity and the ways in which it is socially generated.² Thus, we need to focus on the fundamental issues of resource allocation, access, entitlement, and social justice, rather than drawing on simplistic universalizing notions of scarcity.

As we know from recent and past reports of the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition and also the UNDP, there is enough food and water to go around.³ Still, globally, the problem of chronic hunger exists and has intensified during the pandemic. In wealthy countries, perverse subsidy regimes have led to a generation of surpluses, and the poor eat cheap packaged food. Hunger and obesity are two sides of the same coin. There is currently an explosion of food banks in the UK, and about 8% of the population is food insecure.⁴ The UK is the fifth richest country in the world. Malnutrition and hunger in the UK are not because of overpopulation but instead due to austerity, cuts, rising poverty, and inequality.

These issues notwithstanding, the scare of scarcity and overpopulation remain a means of diverting attention away from the causes of poverty and inequality that may implicate the politically powerful. This is why Marie Sneve Martinussen (Norwegian MP from the Red Party) at a recent event on *Limits to Growth* plus 50 in Oslo so eloquently urged us to focus not on the Tragedy of the Commons, but instead the Tragedy of the Few, i.e., the role played by the powerful, the rich, and elites, in perpetuating GDP-obsessed growth, consumption, and environmental destruction. Similarly, the degrowth movement is largely calling for limits on consumption / growth to be largely for rich countries and elites across the world, rather than on poor and vulnerable groups and countries.

Talk about teeming numbers and the need for birth control usually seem to pin all hopes and expectations on women. Invariably, the targets are Black and Brown women in Asia, Africa, and Latin America who are considered to have too many children. Rarely is the lens on white women in rich countries, their babies, or indeed the carbon or ecological footprints of white families in the minority world.

On June 24, 2022, the United States Supreme Court overturned the country's constitutional right to abortion, which was a very tragic day for women's rights and human rights. How can we even talk about population issues when such basic rights are denied to women? Even though similar bans don't exist in many other countries, there are still so many socio-cultural and economic hurdles around women's reproductive rights which are still shaped by discriminatory male biases and laws. Within the US context, there is growing acknowledgement that lack of access to abortion will largely negatively affect immigrants, indigenous communities, women of color, disabled people, etc. So much of the US anti-abortion discourse is racist and can be linked to white supremacy. Thus, it is important to be aware that population growth and population control policies tend to be gender- and race-blind and thus risk reproducing colonial and racialized processes of reasoning and discrimination.

In sum, rather than talking about population growth, let us focus our attention on moving towards achieving gender equality, climate justice, just processes of resource allocation and distribution, and development processes that are sustainable and socially/gender just across both the Global North and South. These are what really matter and would go a long way toward enhancing human and planetary well-being that will allow all beings (human and non-human) to flourish and thrive.

Endnotes

1. Steve Rayner, "Foreword," in *The Limits to Scarcity*, ed. Lyla Mehta (London: Routledge, 2010), x–xvi.
2. Lyla Mehta, ed., *The Limits to Scarcity: Contesting the Politics of Allocation* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Lyla Mehta, Amber Huff, and Jeremy Allouche, "The New Politics and Geographies of Scarcity," *Geoforum* 101 (May 2019): 222–230.
3. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Beyond Scarcity: Power, Poverty and the Global Crises. Human Development Report 2006* (New York: UNDP, 2006).
4. UK Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, "United Kingdom Food Security Report 2021: Theme 4: Food Security at Household Level," December 22, 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/united-kingdom-food-security-report-2021/united-kingdom-food-security-report-2021-theme-4-food-security-at-household-level>.

About the Author



Lyla Mehta is Professor at the Institute of Development Studies and Visiting Professor at Noragric at the Norwegian University of Life Sciences. She focuses on the politics of scarcity, gender, human rights, climate change, access to resources, and resource grabs. She has extensive research and field experience in India and southern Africa and is currently leading a project on “Transformations as Praxis” in South Asia. She is the author of *Water, Food Security, Nutrition and Social Justice*, *The Politics of Climate Change and Uncertainty in India*, and other books. She holds a PhD in development studies from the University of Sussex.

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