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An Obstacle to Radical Consciousness

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

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The impulse for this debate on the population question is largely premised on an observation/experience shared deeply by many of the respondents in this conversation, that population is not central to the environmental discourse—especially the discourse on catastrophic climate shift—and what to do about it. As an educator and organizer, rather than a scientist or systems analyst, I would say that this is not my experience at all.

On the contrary, I am overwhelmed, and have been for decades, by an ingrained, impenetrable populationist set of assumptions primary to the large preponderance of people's gut understanding of what is happening on this planet. In spite of the important gains in structural analysis rooted in feminist political economy leading up to the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, and deepened and validated in practice since, the conventional, "popular" conviction, especially in the affluent Global North, is that the root of the "climate crisis," and the biggest roadblock to "solving" that crisis, is overpopulation, and that the population that needs to be diminished, controlled, is over there—largely, "the poor."

I meet this conviction in the classroom and in meetings—yes, including meetings of committed environmentalists, as well as development practitioners. I also confront it constantly in casual conversations, and in deeper discussions at the dinner table, among friends. And now I find it in the concerns of my grandchildren, a new generation, while walking along the river, imbued in them in the classroom and the schoolyard.

I know that this crude understanding is not what is being promoted by Ian Lowe in his [essay](#), nor by those who have strongly identified with the preoccupations he expresses. But it is the

core apprehension of reality embraced by the majority of “ordinary” people who need to be the expanded audience for awareness-raising, organizing, and mobilization.

What troubles me most is that in my experience, this imbued conviction/intuition of a single primary cause/solution reduces people’s urgency in engaging more deeply in the issue of climate shift, let alone confronting the profound issues of environmental justice that lie at the very heart of where humanity stands at this moment (for those interested, I expand on this theme [here](#)).

The focus on overpopulation and, in particular, the need for concerted population control measures as a primary imperative—for that is the implication of this discussion, however couched—is a block to developing the radical consciousness and popular momentum to embrace the transformative political will that is required to achieve anything like the Great Transition that the GTI project has been promoting all these many years.

About the Author



Brian Murphy is an independent analyst, organizer, educator, and writer. Formerly, he was a lead programmer and policy analyst at the Canadian international social justice organization Inter Pares. He is a co-founder and Steering Committee member of the Ottawa-based International Civil Liberties Monitoring Group (ICLMG) and the author of *Transforming Ourselves, Transforming the World: An Open Conspiracy for Social Change*.

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