

# Overpopulation denial syndrome

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Professor Diana Coole of the University of London helpfully identifies what she calls *silencing discourses* – arguments used by those who wish to shut down, avoid or divert any reasoned discussion about the impacts of human population upon the environment and, indeed, upon our own wellbeing as a species. According to Coole (2013) there are six such silencing discourses: *Population Scepticism, Fatalism, Decomposing, Declinism, Growth, and Shaming*. As Director of Population Matters (<https://populationmatters.org/>) and seeking to raise the issue with colleagues in the environment movement, I’ve experienced all six silencers – sometimes as a volley!

The first five of Coole’s silencing discourses can be summarized as follows.

- 1 **Population Scepticism** brushes away any concerns about population: ‘Birth rates are falling, the global population will peak at some point this (or maybe the next...) century. The problem will take care of itself’.
- 2 **Population Fatalism** goes a step further: ‘Global population is set to hit 9, maybe 10 billion by 2050, and there’s nothing we can do about it’.
- 3 **Population Decomposing** magics away the problem with technology: ‘It’s true that population growth presents some challenges – but technological fixes (like genetically modified crops, carbon capture etc.) can extend the boundaries of our planet, easily enabling it to absorb another 3, 4 billion or even more people’.
- 4 **Population Declinism** is the preference of nationalistic politicians, neoliberal economists and journalists seeking alarmist headlines: ‘A declining, ageing population means a declining, moribund, stagnant economy. Without more new workers – another cohort of consumers – who’s going to pay for our pensions?’.
- 5 **Population Growth** presents the shiny face of that two-sided coin: ‘All growth is good – of people, of GDP. More people equals more productivity. Rapidly growing populations in time offer developing countries a “demographic dividend” rather than a strain on infrastructure or ecosystems’.

I won't elaborate here on the counter-arguments to these five silencers (see Maynard, 2018, for more detailed discussion). A basic understanding of the principles of ecology and the extent of the current and increasing stresses on biodiversity and the Earth's ecosystems can unpick them.

Which leaves the sixth of Coole's silencing discourses: *Population Shaming* – perhaps better termed *Naming*. Rational, factual responses to Population Shaming dry in the throat, as insinuation and moral condemnation are its *modi operandi*, attributing underlying dark motivations and associations with the worst manifestations of past population control (such as eugenics or ultra-nationalist movements) to anyone who raises the issue of human overpopulation.

We can agree that past coercive approaches (e.g. sterilization campaigns in India in the 1970s, or China's previous 'one child policy') were deplorable; however, there are many other, more recent, progressive initiatives that have succeeded in reducing population growth. For example, South Korea, Sri Lanka and Thailand have all succeeded in managing down their fertility rates from 6 or more children per woman on average in the 1960s and 1970s, to below replacement levels (2.1 children) today through non-coercive family planning programmes (Dérer, 2019; United Nations Population Fund, 2018; O'Sullivan, 2013; Bongaarts and Sinding, 2009). Another example is Bangladesh, where over the past 25 years, fertility rates have fallen from an average of 7 children per woman to 2.3 today, because safe, modern family planning has been made accessible through civil society and women-led programmes (Rizvi, 2018). Of all of what the UN used to term 'impoverished countries', Bangladesh is the only one to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (precursors to the Sustainable Development Goals). Its progressive family planning programmes are acknowledged to have been key to that achievement (Asadullah and Savoia, 2018; World Bank, 2005).

Population Shaming relies on triggering emotional, deeply-embedded ideological and personal value responses. The power of this silencing discourse is that it thereby appeals to precisely what tends to make people environmentalists: strongly held, personal values grounded in, or informed by, some form of ideology. I include myself in that characterization – motivated by a passionate belief that a better, fairer, greener world is possible, and driven by personal outrage at the stripping away of all other species bar our own or those useful to us. Such beliefs motivate us to fight for that better world, but they also make us vulnerable to having our thinking about population short-circuited by insinuations that anyone who considers population an important factor is in some way keeping company with 'eco-fascists' or harking back to abhorrent eugenicist views. This is palpably absurd, when you consider that respected international scientific bodies such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2014, 2018), the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (2019), and the collective *World Scientists' Warning to Humanity* (see Ripple *et al.*, 2017) all acknowledge and highlight population alongside and in harness with other drivers of the ecological crisis.

Refusing to think clearly about population is also, in a way, convenient, for it allows people in the Global North to shut their eyes to the personal responsibility and agency that, in the main, they are privileged to possess in comparison to those in the Global South – not just in what they choose to consume, but also in the decisions they make about parenthood. It can be hard for us to recognize that extreme capitalism and consumerism – whilst deservedly centre-frame – are to some degree only playing upon, and amplifying, our own needs, addictions and desires.

Environmental writer and polemicist George Monbiot is a notable ‘Population Shamer’. He writes (Monbiot, 2020) that:

*Population is where you go when you haven't thought your argument through.  
Population is where you go when you don't have the guts to face the structural,  
systemic causes of our predicament: inequality, oligarchic power, capitalism.  
Population is where you go when you want to kick down.*

Given such pronouncements from *The Guardian*'s ‘green guru’, it is unsurprising that few in the environmental movement dare to raise population as a factor, alongside and in harness with others. Monbiot has an honourable record in standing up against global injustice and ecocide, but with a platform affording him considerable reach, he is also an influencer of ‘norms’ in discourse about environmental matters – in this case, population matters. The great irony and moral flaw in Monbiot's ideological stance is that, in particular for people living in high-consuming countries like the UK, the most impactful eco-action they can take is to choose to have a smaller family (as researchers at Lund University, Sweden, have shown – see Wynes and Nicholas, 2017; Carrington, 2017).

For the poorest people living in the Global South, addressing population is primarily about enabling choice, and empowering those over 270 million women and girls that the World Health Organization (2020) estimates have an unmet need for safe, modern contraception, and so lack the capacity to exercise their right to manage their own fertility. The additional benefit arising from addressing that unmet need and enabling that fundamental human right, is to cut a greater quantity of carbon emissions than from almost any other available solution. Project Drawdown, the global research project set up to identify the top 100 available, most effective solutions to the climate crisis, ranked the synergistic solutions of universal education for girls and access to family planning as the number one solution, saving more CO<sub>2</sub> over the next 30 years than all offshore and onshore wind-power combined. Its 2019 revision demotes that solution to number two, although still avoiding 85.4 gigatons of CO<sub>2</sub> by 2050, marginally below the top ranked solution of ending all food waste globally at 87.5 gigatons (<https://drawdown.org/solutions/table-of-solutions>).

Fittingly, Project Drawdown founder Paul Hawken described that combination of girls' education and family planning as a ‘No Regrets’ solution. His comments are worth quoting at length (Hawken, 2017: 81–2):

*An intrinsic right, education lays a foundation for vibrant lives for girls and women, their families, and their communities. It is the most powerful lever available for breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty, while mitigating emissions by curbing population growth. A 2010 economic study shows that investment in educating girls is “highly cost-competitive with almost all of the existing options for carbon emissions abatement” – perhaps just \$10 per ton of carbon dioxide.*

*Education also shores up resilience in terms of climate change impacts – something the world needs as warming mounts. Across low-income countries, there is a strong link between women and the natural systems at the heart of family and community life. Women often and increasingly play roles as stewards and managers of food, soil, trees, and water. As educated girls become educated women, they can fuse inherited traditional knowledge with new information accessed through the written word.*

Monbiot and his acolytes appear ignorant of – or choose perversely to ignore – the inconvenient facts of the considerable human rights, climate and biodiversity benefits of addressing the human population factor. A perverse position, as it is those oligarchs, capitalists and free market economists whom he rightly rails against, who gain most from the denial of population growth as an issue of concern. They have a vested interest in a growing population, seeing expanding markets for their goods and services, boosting consumerism globally (3.5 billion high-level consumers globally currently, set to rise to 5 billion by 2050 – Kharas, 2017), and seeding exaggerated fears in the public’s and politicians’ minds that without fresh cohorts of young people as labour, social services and pension funds will collapse.

Population Matters, the organization I work for, partners with groups and individuals across the world, supporting grassroots and community organizations from Kenya, Poland, to the UK Midlands through our crowd-funding programme, Empower to Plan (<https://is.gd/bAoFne>). We do not impose our views or presence upon people anywhere, but operate and engage only where we are welcomed. An example was the invitation we received from the Nigerian Conservation Foundation (NCF) to co-host a seminar in 2019 in Lagos marking UN World Population Day (<https://www.ncfnigeria.org/>). I assume Monbiot would not accuse NCF’s director, Dr Muhtari Aminu-Kanu, of ‘kicking down’, ‘poor blaming’, being ‘far-right’ or ‘racist’ in posing the rhetorical question in his opening address, “We will be making big progress if at first we acknowledge we have a population problem. If we don’t discuss it, who will?”.

For Nigeria, where the average number of children per woman stands at over 5, and with the country’s population projected to double from 200 million to 400 million by 2050, the problem and challenges are clear – and were openly acknowledged by Nigeria’s State Minister for the Environment who also spoke at the seminar. Infrastructure is overstretched, and there is burgeoning social unrest. Unemployment stands at over 30% and with over 40% of the

population made up of young men between the ages of 15 and 40, insurgency groups are gaining recruits – especially in northeast Nigeria, where climate breakdown further undermines livelihoods (Olurounbi, 2021).

In the Global South, population is primarily a human development, social and welfare issue, exacerbating environmental impacts. For those of us living in wealthy countries, population is an issue of personal responsibility, morality and justice. Alongside doing what we can to empower disadvantaged communities, we must make responsible choices, including regarding our family size, to secure a better future for all human beings and for the Earth as a whole.

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