



## Overpopulation is not to blame for world poverty

Many people think that a crowded country equals a poor country – that some countries just have too many people, while other countries have smaller populations and so can provide enough resources for all their citizens. But population density alone does not cause poverty. Japan and the Netherlands, for example, are crowded countries but do not have widespread need, and there are countries like Sudan, Chad or Bolivia, where population density is low, yet poverty is severe.

A clearer relationship exists between poverty and rapid population growth. A rapidly growing population can put pressure on food supplies, health clinics and schools, government institutions and natural resources.

But rapid population growth does not cause poverty either. Rather, it is often a symptom of poverty. High birth rates occur in countries where adequate health care, land, education, jobs and social security are not available to most people.

History shows that when a country's standard of living rises, the birthrate usually declines. We only need to look at the changing size of families in countries like New Zealand to find evidence of this.

## There are many reasons for large families

For people living in desperate poverty in developing countries, there are many social and economic reasons for having several children.

- A larger family is commonly perceived as a richer family – "richer" in terms of security and status, as well as enjoyment and quality of life. A family with many children may carry weight in community affairs.
- In some societies, the number of children she bears – especially the number of sons - largely determines a woman's status. To have no sons may result in desertion or divorce.
- Needy parents often choose to have more children as they have the very real fear that some of their children may not live to adulthood, because of a lack of nutritious food, health care, clean water and adequate shelter.
- Children can contribute to the family income and help with the household chores. Often, by the time children reach their teens, they earn more than they themselves consume. If just one child is clever enough to do well at school and find a secure job, he or she may eventually be able to support the whole family.



Mothers like Phyllis of Zambia hope their babies will grow up strong and healthy

- Since old-age pensions do not exist in many developing countries, impoverished parents need children who will be able to care for them when they are too old or sick to keep working.
- On the other hand, some parents may wish to limit the size of their families, but do not have information about or access to methods of family planning.

Gertrude in Zambia has six surviving children aged four to fifteen. She lost her last baby after a difficult labour and a painful 15 kilometre trip by ox sleigh and boat to the nearest health centre, where the staff saved her life. *“Children are important because a child will grow up and assist at home. Ploughing is the hardest thing to do. I feel happy to have children around me. When I’m a mother I have respect in the community. I have someone to help me with work. Now that there’s a school, kids will go to higher education, maybe become a doctor and look after the two of us.”* (1)

## Does the world need to reduce its population growth rate?

The world’s population is growing faster than ever before – by around 90 million people each year. Yet food production has also increased – to more than 2500 kilocalories per day for every man, woman and child by 1995 (2) compared with the 2200 to 2400 kilocalories regarded by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization as the daily requirement for healthy living.

Unfortunately food and other resources are generally available to people with money and power, rather than to those who need them most. Wealthy countries use far more than their share of the world’s resources – of food, minerals, energy and forests. According to researchers, if the present world population was to live as the average person does in Auckland, we would need three times all the productive land on earth (3).

A child born in the industrial world adds more to consumption and pollution than do 30-50 children born in developing countries (4).

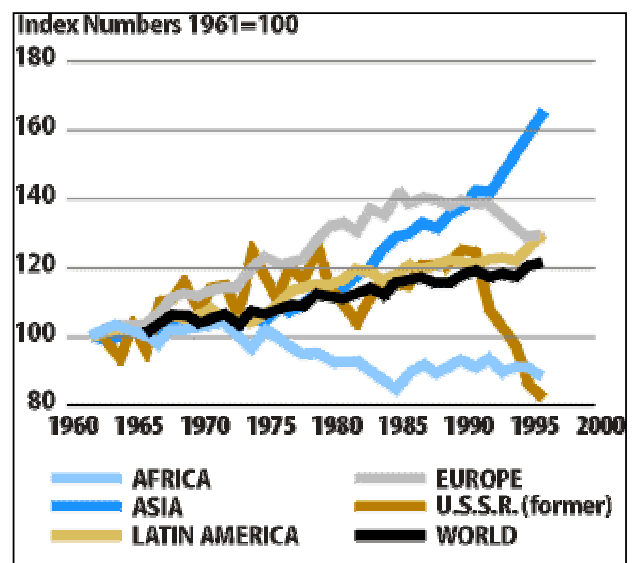
The world’s **unequal resource consumption** is as serious a concern as its population growth.

The lifestyles of both rich and poor people place strains on the natural environment. While the rich use vast quantities of resources, those who are very poor may fell trees or overcrop their small plot of land because they have no other choice.

A balance needs to be found between the world’s population and the use of the world’s resources. This responsibility belongs to everyone, not just to people in developing countries. New Zealand and other affluent nations must find ways of moderating their use of resources like food, energy and minerals, and of changing the systems which deny poor people a fair share.

*“Even if population growth went to zero in the South, only 20% of the environment problem would be solved because the North (and the Southern elite) would still be using up 80% of global resources.”*  
Evelyne Hong, Third World Network, Malaysia (5)

**Trends in World Per Capita Food Production 1961-96**



The world’s total food production increased faster than its population but in some regions, especially the former USSR and Africa, food production did not keep pace with population growth. Source: Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO). 1997. FAOSTAT Statistical Database.

Resource	Consumption share of the richest 20% of the world's population	Consumption share of the poorest 20% of the world's population
Cereals	15% (est)	19%(est)
Meat and fish	45%	5%
Energy	58%	4%
Paper	84%	1.1%
Vehicles	87%	less than 1%
Total consumption expenditure	86%	1.1%

**Unequal Resource Consumption** (United Nations Development Programme 1998 (4))

## What is the world doing about population and poverty?

At an international conference in Cairo in 1994, representatives from more than 180 countries arrived at a detailed strategy for population and development for the next 20 years. The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action stresses that the population issue cannot be addressed in isolation. Rather than focusing on targets for population numbers, it set goals for a number of related areas of human development.

These goals include:

- expanding availability of education, especially for girls
- reducing death rates of infants, children under five years and mothers
- making reproductive health information and services available (on a voluntary basis) to all by the year 2015 (6)

The ICPD goals are closely related to the Millennium Development Goals, and the United Nations believes achieving the ICPD goals will be an important step towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

## What role can family planning have in overcoming poverty?

Family planning cannot solve the problem of population growth and poverty on its own. However, within a wider programme to improve people's health, raise the status of women and increase children's survival, there are sound reasons for educating parents about spacing births and limiting the size of their families. Here are a few:

- It can improve the quality of life for children, as parents are able to invest more of their time, energy and money in bringing up each child.
- It can improve the nutritional health of children by allowing mothers more time for breastfeeding and weaning.
- It can reduce "high risk" births which claim the lives of several million each year. These include births which are within two years of a previous birth, or to mothers who are under 18 or over 35 or who already have four or more children. (2)



- It can reduce deaths of women from causes related to pregnancy, giving birth and abortion. It is estimated there are close to 600,000 such deaths each year.
- It can improve the quality of women's lives by reducing the physical and mental burdens of having too many children too close together. This leaves more time available for education, employment, family and community activities, rest and leisure.



## Does World Vision support family planning programmes?

The wellbeing of children and their families is at the heart of World Vision's work. World Vision believes parents have a right to the knowledge and means to plan their families. It supports family planning programmes when they are desired by the local community, where they honour people's free choice, and where the methods of family planning are chosen because they are culturally acceptable and medically proven. Family planning is just one part of a broader programme to address community health issues and development.

Family planning is not an issue that can be treated in isolation. It's important that people focus on improving other areas of their lives like health care, education, food, production and family income. When parents see their children growing up healthy and able to go to school, they are free to make confident choices for the future.

The people of the Omosheleko Valley in Ethiopia, for instance, have seen their lives changed by improved crops, tree-planting, clean water and health care during World Vision's ten-year partnership with the community.

*"We women view the number of children we have differently. We say that the woman who gets her children educated and they get employment and come back and help their mother, she's the one who will have prestige in our eyes. I have four children now and I have decided to stop giving birth."*

*Asmaketh, Ethiopia.*

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