

ENVIRONMENTAL & REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE

Population Control is Not the Solution to Global Warming

By Betsy Hartmann and Elizabeth Barajas-Roman, in Hampshire College

We are now hearing escalating rhetoric from mainstream population and environment organizations about how population growth is a major cause of global warming. Some of these groups are reaching out to reproductive justice activists with the argument that we should all join together to advocate for more investments in international family planning since this will help reduce carbon emissions and improve women's health and rights at the same time. This strategy threatens to undermine both climate justice and reproductive justice.

HERE ARE 10 REASONS WHY:

1. The numbers don't add up.

It is not population growth that drives carbon emissions but economic systems of production, distribution and consumption based on the profligate use of fossil fuels. The industrialized countries, with only 20% of the world's population, are responsible for 80% of the accumulated carbon dioxide build-up in the atmosphere. From 1950-2000, the entire continent of Africa was responsible for only 2.5 percent of the world's greenhouse gas emissions. Moreover, most countries in the world are already moving to a smaller family size.

2. Blame games target the wrong people.

Blaming climate change on overpopulation lets wealthy countries, corporations, and consumers off the hook. It is part of a long tradition of eugenic environmentalism in which environmental and economic resource scarcities are attributed to "too many people" – usually meaning too many people of color – and not to highly inequitable and environmentally damaging resource guzzling by the rich.

3. Demographically driven family planning programs erode reproductive rights.

Viewing family planning as a means to solve the climate crisis will set back progress on the delivery of safe, voluntary, and ethical reproductive health services. That's because there's a big difference between family planning programs designed primarily to reduce birth rates and those premised on reproductive rights as an end that is worthy in itself.

4. Population control is no substitute for gender justice.

Gender justice in the climate policy arena means bringing gender issues into the design of early warning systems as well as efforts to strengthen food and livelihood security. It entails looking critically at how corporate-driven climate change policies, such as carbon offset projects, often harm poor women and their communities. Activists should advocate for safe reproductive health services as a vital part of disaster response, not as a tool of population control.

5. The population-climate change connection bolsters anti-immigrant agendas.

By attributing environmental degradation to population growth, population, and environment groups play into the hands of conservative anti-immigrant forces who argue that immigrants to the U.S. should remain in their home countries where they consume less energy. Many of these anti-immigrant groups are tied to white supremacist organizations.

6. Fear-based stereotypes of overpopulation contribute to the militarization of climate change.

Current narratives about 'climate conflict' and 'climate refugees' draw on racialized fears of overpopulation in the Global South. Such narratives serve as a rationale for further militarization of immigration enforcement and the expansion of U.S. military intervention, especially into Africa.

7. Population stereotypes victimize the displaced.

Portraying climate-displaced people as a dark and dangerous horde of violent migrants rather than human beings with human rights has profoundly negative consequences. By propagating the notion that population growth is a major cause of global warming, mainstream population and environment groups make such stereotypes more palatable to the general public, contributing to a climate of fear that can only impede effective disaster planning and response.

8. Population alarmism encourages apocalyptic thinking and distracts us from the search for practical solutions to the climate crisis.

Doomsday scenarios of population outstripping resources and causing climate change make people feel powerless to do anything about the problem. The flip side of apocalyptic thinking is the longing for magic-bullet solutions, such as nuclear power as the answer to climate change.

9. Shifting the blame for the climate crisis to the Global South prevents international solidarity.

If the U.S. is to enter serious climate negotiations on the international stage, it must do so from a position of taking full responsibility for our own greenhouse gas emissions, past and present, and for the culture of greed and waste that has become the hallmark of American consumer capitalism.

10. Inserting population into the climate change debate divides the environmental movement at a time when we should be coming together.

The implicit and explicit race, class and gender biases of population control are detrimental to building an inclusive movement for climate justice. This narrow worldview also blocks a deeper understanding of the powerful economic and political forces that both drive climate change and prevent effective solutions.

There are many positive linkages between struggles for climate justice, environmental justice and reproductive justice. A focus on population distracts us from finding those intersections and working together to "create" a greener, more equitable and more peaceful world.

Betsy Hartmann is the director and Elizabeth Barajas-Roman the associate director of the Population and Development Program at Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts. For more on these themes, see "Ten Reasons Why Population Control is Not the Solution to Global Warming" and "Reproductive Justice, Not Population Control: Breaking the Wrong Links and Making the Right Ones in the Movement for Climate Justice" on <http://popdev.hampshire.edu>.