



DISEC

Topic A: Overpopulation and International Security

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# Overpopulation and International Security

## Introduction

At present, the world population stands at roughly 6.8 billion people. While some countries are experiencing a decline in their populations, the overall population of the planet is still growing. As it does, it begs the question: How many is too many? While there are several competing theories about the world's carrying capacity for humans, is it worth testing these theories to their limits? Since the planet's resources are finite and human desires theoretically are not, this competition for resources for human consumption may threaten not only the environmental stability of the planet but international stability as well. Even within overpopulated nations, stresses on governments for adequate provision of resources may threaten national stability. Thus, with the threat that overpopulation has on national and international security, how can the United Nations tackle this situation before it gets out of hand? This issue is a very complex one and many nations have attempted to address it in the past with varying levels of success. It should be the goal of the committee to formulate a well-planned and feasible approach to addressing the issue of overpopulation of the planet. Should population growth be controlled at all? If so, how? If not, why? As always, an important issue to take into consideration when implementing any strategy or policy is that of national sovereignty. In addressing the issue of overpopulation, the challenge will lie not only in trying to solve the issue of overpopulation but also in doing so while living up to the United Nations' mandate of respecting the sovereignty of its member states.



## Background

Before delving into the history of the issue of overpopulation, it is important to have a definition of this phenomenon. Simply put, overpopulation is the situation in which the population of a species (in this case, human beings) exceeds the limit to which the environment can support it.<sup>i</sup> This limit is known as the carrying capacity of the environment. Overpopulation is related to population density but also, to a great degree, on the relationship between the population and the resources available to it. It is also impacted by life expectancy, birth rates, and resource depletion rates, among many other factors.<sup>ii</sup>

Around 10,000 years ago, humans began the shift from a pastoral, hunter-gatherer lifestyle to an agrarian one. Over the next several thousand years, as agricultural technologies developed and crop yields improved, the population increased to between 200 and 300 million people.<sup>iii</sup> For centuries, the population continued to increase slowly, but explosive growth was constantly hindered by famine, plague, and the like. One of the deadliest and most catastrophic plagues to affect human civilization was the “Black Death” of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, which is estimated to have killed between 30% and 60% of the European population. It was not until the Industrial Revolution began, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, that the world’s population began to balloon; from that point to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Earth’s population grew from a few hundred million people to almost 1.6 billion.<sup>iv</sup>

Since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, an ever-increasing rate of technological improvements, combined with greatly increased food production and vast improvements in healthcare (and therefore reductions in mortality rates and increases in life spans), allowed the global population to grow at unprecedented rates. Although our species continues to get besieged by catastrophic natural events, such as the “Spanish flu” outbreak of 1918-19 or the Southeast Asian tsunami of 2004, their effects have been greatly mitigated by scientific and technological progress.



Many nations have instituted programs to address population growth. One such example is the One Child Policy (計劃生育政策) that was implemented in the People's Republic of China in 1979. This policy allows for urban married couples to have only one child; government authorities assert that over 250 million births have been prevented from 1979 to 2000 because of this policy. It is important to note that this policy does not apply to rural couples, ethnic minorities, or the residents of Hong Kong, Tibet, and Macau.<sup>v</sup> Although this policy has brought some benefits, it has had some negative side effects as well, such as an increase in female infanticide and abortions that have led to a gender imbalance. It has also placed a great financial burden on married couples struggling to support both sets of parents, themselves and their child. The manner of enforcement of this policy is overall very simple: parents who have only one child receive government benefits and those who have more than one typically have to pay a fine, known as the Maintenance Fee (社會撫養費), that is calculated as a multiple of the annual disposable income. Because of this policy, the female fertility rate has dropped from approximately 3 to approximately 1.8 and has resulted in a net reduction of the Chinese population of 300 to 400 hundred million people up to 2008.<sup>vi</sup>

While China has had a degree of success with this policy, other nations, such as India under the administration of Indira Gandhi, have had extremely limited success with similar initiatives; India's program was abandoned shortly after it was implemented. The Indian program relied on the sterilization of men after they have fathered two children. In addition to this sterilization policy, a quota was imposed in which each locale had to sterilize a certain number of men per year in order to keep population growth in check. The drawback to these regulations was that local officials began



to forcibly sterilize many young men against their will, and some conspiracy theorists suggest that demographics such as the urban poor and political opponents were disproportionately subjected to this policy in order to meet the goals. As a result, the program ended in failure after encountering significant criticism and backlash from the public. The Indian government now relies, to a degree, on public service announcements and general education, encouraging men and women to utilize contraception. Additionally, an increase in the rate and quality of education for the population has allowed for many countries to gradually reduce the birth rate.

### Current Status

The current status of the world's population is fairly clear: the population is predicted to continue its growth until at least 2050, with estimates of its peak value ranging between nine and eleven billion people.<sup>vii</sup> Most of this growth will take place in underdeveloped countries; the population of the developed regions of the world is expected to remain relatively stable, at approximately 1.2 billion. In addition to population growth, life expectancy is also predicted to increase to around 75 years of age, which complicates matters further. According to the United Nations World Population Prospects, Asia is predicted to have by far the largest peak population of any continent at 5.3 billion, followed by Africa with 1.9 billion, Europe with 664 million, and North and South America with just over 1.2 billion collectively.<sup>viii</sup>

There are still more unsettling statistics. According to Jared Diamond, China's current per capita consumption is 11 times below US levels. However, if their consumption rose to match that of the United States, all else equal, total world consumption rates would double. If, in addition, India's consumption rates rose to match the U.S., total world consumption rates would triple; if the entirety of the developing world were to consume as the United States does today, rates of



consumption would increase eleven times, necessitating resources that, at current consumption levels, would provide for 72 billion people. Further, this model assumes only present consumption levels, not future (and perhaps increased) levels of consumption per capita.<sup>ix</sup>

Even if only one of China or India reaches a level of consumption equal to the United States' current level of consumption, the consequences for the rest of the world could be dire. Many theories of economics assert that indefinite long-run growth is possible; this is precisely what China and India are trying to achieve, along with nearly all other nations on the planet. Unfortunately, this is an imagined reality that cannot be achieved. The actuality is that resources on this planet are limited in quantity and are being spread ever thinner as the global population continues to grow. The environmental consequences of such a growth could be disastrous. As more and more resources are consumed by humans, the already destabilized biodiversity of the planet could be damaged beyond any hope of recovery or repair. Unless human consumption becomes far more efficient and/or reduces overall, the shortage of resources could wreak havoc on human populations across the world.

A simple example can be found in the problem of food production. Some experts report that in the not so distant future, agriculture may be reduced to pure subsistence levels if farming methods are not improved drastically. If a famine occurs, hundreds of millions could perish; worse, lacking nutrition and crowded conditions in countries like India and China could lead to outbreaks of infectious disease, which could cause further social and economic problems and destabilize the situation still more.

Another issue to consider is the fact that entire countries will compete for multi-national resources. There are many contemporary examples of countries compete for water and other



resources. More complex resource sharing problems could even lead to political instability within countries, which might precipitate the toppling of governments or even outright war.

The major players in this issue are those countries that have high populations or high population densities. For example, by 2050, it is expected that Britain, which is already overpopulated by current estimates, will have a population of over 80 million, which would put a huge strain on the resources of the island and could cause difficulties in relations with countries on the Continent. The social effects of overpopulation in a place like Britain could be tremendous. The cost of living in Britain is already comparatively high, even by the standards of the developed world, and it is expected to rise dramatically over the next few decades. The problem is that wage increases are not expected to keep pace with this rise in costs, resulting in a net drop of quality of life for Britons. Additionally, most European countries, France and the United Kingdom particularly, experience high rates of net immigration. Should overpopulation create a stress on resources and the environment, one might infer that there would be a level of resentment against immigrant communities as people who “steal” precious resources from natives, which might serve as a catalyst for broad social unrest. Though this scenario is by no means a certainty, the consequences of its coming to fruition make it worthy of the delegate’s consideration.

Ultimately, the dangers of overpopulation will have an effect on all people, no matter where they live. The current “American way of life” may become affordable only to the extremely wealthy, as resources become ever more scarce. This scarcity of resources as the population continues to grow threatens the very fabric of human societies everywhere and could plunge the entire globe into a conflict that would have devastating consequences on our species and the environment.<sup>x</sup> The United Nations Environment Program has assembled a team of almost 400 scientists and experts that constantly monitor the situation of the global population and its relationship with natural



resources. Through the UNEP's Global Environmental Outlook, the United Nations has been able to spread awareness on environmental concerns across the globe; the UNEP has frequently debated how to address the issue of an increasing global population and its consequences.



## Bloc Positions

The main bloc positions for this issue are quite simple. There is the Asia bloc, consisting not only of the Eastern Asian countries but also that of South Asia. Since this block contains the greatest population and two of the most populous nations, it is important to understand the relations that these nations have with each other and how they address population control. Another bloc is comprised of the African nations, who may not have the largest populations but will nevertheless also face similar situations as the Asian nations, in terms of population growth and the consequences that follow. In line with these criteria are the European and American blocs (separate). There will, of course, be considerable overlap amongst all the blocs due to the intricate and complex effects that overpopulation in one country might cause for another country across the world.

## Question to Consider

- What can be done to address overpopulation in developing nations?
- Can developed nations be considered overpopulated? If so, how can that be addressed?
- Is population reduction necessary?
- Should the world's carrying capacity be tested?
- Have we reached or surpassed the world's carrying capacity?
- Is there a feasible way for the world's population to maintain a comfortable lifestyle without straining world resources?

These questions are simply a few to get you started on your research. They are not the only questions that you should consider, but they should give you a start on what you should think



about when representing your country's policy on this issue and how you can defend your policies at the United Nations.

#### Recommended Sources

- <http://www.unep.org/geo/>
- [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)
- The Economist, [www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com)
- [www.un.org](http://www.un.org)
- <http://www.ist-world.org/>
- [www.footprintnetwork.org](http://www.footprintnetwork.org)



## Bibliography

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Guardian.co.uk. August 31, 2007.
- <sup>ii</sup> [http://www.facstaff.bucknell.edu/mvigeant/univ\\_270\\_03/Rob/history.htm](http://www.facstaff.bucknell.edu/mvigeant/univ_270_03/Rob/history.htm)
- <sup>iii</sup> <http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/worldhis.html>
- <sup>iv</sup> Historical Estimates of World Population, U.S. Census Bureau
- <sup>v</sup> BBC: China steps up "One-child policy".
- <sup>vi</sup> Family Planning Law and China's Birth Control Situation
- <sup>vii</sup> United Nations Population Division Home Page, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
- <sup>viii</sup> <http://esa.un.org/unpp/>
- <sup>ix</sup> Friedman, Thomas L. Hot Flat and Crowded page 66-67
- <sup>x</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/25/world/europe/25iht-environ.4.8056185.html>

