

Can the world hold the line on population?

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We share our world, according to *The United Nations Department of Economics and Social Affairs*, with approximately seven billion fellow citizens (*London Free Press, July 18*). Sadly, one-seventh of the population of our planet is starving, as indicated by reliable sources including *Doctors Without Borders*. That is, one billion people are dying because they lack adequate nourishment to combat the diseases and ailments that lead to their deaths. "One billion" is difficult to grasp, but it may help if we compare this large number to the population of 300 cities the size of London, Ontario. No ethically-minded world citizen can be happy with this situation--but are there solutions to our moral dilemma?

One approach may be to implement equitable food distribution. It is possible that the planet can produce enough food for everyone provided our leaders and those fortunate enough to be well fed are willing to support equal distribution of food among those in need.

Another solution is increased production. Using the best seeds, the best irrigation and fertilizers, and selecting the most favourable climate and soil locations, more food can be produced. One difficulty with this approach is that it requires farming in larger units of production. Already, huge agricultural operations exist that monopolize food-production industries. Small operations are unable to compete with huge conglomerates. Home-grown seeds are unable to compete with genetically altered seeds, vegetables, and meat, or the expensive machinery required to sustain profitable food production.

The difficulties of producing adequate food are exacerbated by the fact that world population, according to demographers, will continue to increase to approximately nine billion or more by the year 2050. Agronomists (crop scientists) are not certain that maximum food production will be adequate, even when all factors are optimally favourable. Even if nine billion people could be fed, we will not have solved the problem. Most experts on food production believe there are finite limits to the number who can be fed, whether the limit is nine billion or 20 billion. Even with the best intentions, there will likely come a time when the planet's capacity to feed everyone will be surpassed by continued population growth.

So we come to yet another attempted solution. Can we decrease the growth of our world population, or at least hold it to the present seven billion? We know that wars, disease, starvation and birth control, limit the rate of population growth. But with each of these approaches there are significant ethical issues. The unfortunate moral effects of war, disease, and starvation are usually already agreed upon as horrible *solutions*. So let's look closer at birth control.

There are ethical concerns involved with the use of chemical or surgical means of sterilization, and with condoms and birth control pills. A significant number of Christians, as well as those of other religions, are troubled by the use of birth control pills, which they believe are unnatural means of terminating life in its early stages. For them, life is a God-given gift which they hold sacred, and hence the use of birth control pills is regarded as unethical. To them, abstinence, and the use of the rhythm method are seen as more natural and morally acceptable. The number of people world-wide, who are convinced that the rhythm method is appropriate is probably too small, though significant, to affect the world problem of over-population.

Ironically, those who believe in the use of birth control pills and condoms think it is unethical not to use these methods. Since they are effective in reducing and controlling world population—and moreover, are convenient—they will have more users. And so the solution to the population issue faces us with a dilemma.

For convenience let's call non-users of birth control the "Roman Catholic position" and users of birth control pills the "non-Roman Catholic position." In doing so, I recognize that some Roman Catholics use the pill and some non-Roman Catholics agree with the Roman Catholic ethical stance. But given these two simplified positions, we arrive at a moral dilemma. That is, which side seems to have the better balance that is both an ethical and effective solution ?

This is an important question that I leave for readers to ponder. What do you think?