

Curbing Population Growth Limits Global Warming

BY ROGER SHORT

Few can have any doubt that halting population growth in developed and developing countries is the greatest challenge now facing our world.

The inexorable increase in human numbers to 6.8 billion is exhausting conventional energy supplies, accelerating environmental pollution and global warming. The developed world must curb its profligate use of non-renewable energy, and the developing world its exponential population growth, if we are to arrest global warming.

It is therefore surprising that when the United Nations announced its Eight Millennium Development Goals in 2000, halting population growth was not one of them. It has since been added as an afterthought.

The Scottish economist Adam Smith warned in 1776 (*The Wealth of Nations*) of a greed that has “no limit or certain boundary”. When empowered by an economy such as the global economic recession from 2008, this greed may prove to be our Achilles Heel. Unless we can ensure that the economy is kept subservient to our ecology we will self-destruct.

In his *Common Wealth – Economics for a Crowded Planet* (2008), the economist Jeffrey Sachs wisely concludes that in the future the challenges of sustainable development – protecting the environment, stabilising the world’s population, narrowing the gaps between rich and poor, and ending extreme poverty – will take centre stage. Sachs advocates that we attempt to stabilise the world’s popula-

tion at eight billion or below by 2050. Halting population growth makes sound ecological common sense.

We can also learn from the brilliant mathematician, the Rev. Thomas Malthus, who drew one simple conclusion in 1798: the power of population is indefinitely greater than the power in the Earth to produce subsistence for man.

In 1993 the Population Summit of 60 of the world’s scientific academies concluded: “If current projections of human population growth prove accurate and patterns of human activity on the planet remain unchanged, science and technology may not be able to prevent irreversible degradation of the natural environment and continued poverty for much of the world”. The academies therefore called for “zero population growth in the lifetime of our children”. Given common sense, that is achievable.

The shortcoming of the scientific academies meeting was that it did not explore the constraints that effectively deny women access to the new generation of steroidal contraceptives and safe abortion.

Unfortunately, in his encyclical letter *Humanae Vitae* of 29 July 1968, Pope Paul VI condemned “any action ... specifically intended to prevent procreation”. Pope Benedict XVI put the lid on it by announcing in 2008 that contraception and abortion were to be added to the list of Seven Deadly Sins. Only celibate male



Prof Roger Short at the 2009 Prime Minister’s Prizes for Science. Photo: Peter Pockley

theologians could be so ignorant and so callous about the plight of women at the hands of men.

Another major barrier to making contraceptives available to the women who need them has been the pharmaceutical companies of the Western world. They have no interest in marketing steroidal contraceptives in the developing world, where there are no profits to be made even though this is where they are most needed. Big Pharma has found it far more profitable to keep all steroidal contraceptives only available on medical prescription.

There is absolutely no medical justification for this cautionary action. The highest priority must be given to providing knowledge about and access to safe, cheap contraceptives, particularly to young women throughout the developing world. If we enabled all the women of the world to have control of their own fertility there would be a dramatic decline in population growth.

So it should be possible to achieve that goal set by the world’s scientific academies: zero population growth in the lifetime of our children. That is not much to ask, when the future of all life on Earth is at stake.

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