

The Steady State Economy Conference

Working Towards an Alternative to Economic Growth

Policy Proposal

Workshop 2: Stabilising Population

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Question: In a steady state economy, how will population growth issues be discussed and addressed?

Background

- a) Past population growth from one billion in 1800 to 2.5 billion in 1950 to 6.8 billion today, together with rising resource consumption per head, has already: caused climate change, increasing pollution, rising sea levels and expanding deserts; and has been largely “funded” by rapidly depleting natural capital (resources such as fossil fuels, minerals, groundwater, soil fertility, forests, fisheries, biodiversity) rather than sustainable natural income.
- b) The Earth’s capacity is physically finite, reducing with climate change, and cannot sustain indefinite growth in human numbers and resource exploitation.
- c) Global population, increasing by 78 million per year, (9,000 per hour) is projected to grow to 9.2 billion by 2050. The additional 2.4 billion, even in low-carbon countries, equates to two more “carbon USAs”.
- d) Indefinite population growth being physically impossible, it must stop at some point: either sooner through fewer births by contraception and humane, pro-active population policy; or later through more deaths by famine, disease, war, and environmental collapse; or some combination of these.
- e) Each additional person increases total human impact on the natural environment and decreases natural resources per head; so that all environmental (and many economic and social) problems are easier to solve with fewer people, and harder (and ultimately impossible) with more.
- f) Environmental degradation and resource depletion is steadily reducing the number of people the Earth can indefinitely sustain.
- g) Resource-intensive industrialisation, urbanisation and first world consumption patterns are further reducing the ultimate carrying capacity of the Earth.

- h) Global food supply is heavily dependent on cheap and abundant oil and water, both of which are rapidly becoming more scarce and costly.
- i) Development (GDP growth per person) of the poorest countries continues to be hampered by high birth rates (ever more people).
- j) The optimum population (best quality of life for all) is clearly much smaller than the maximum (bare survival).

Conclusion: Current population growth is unsustainable.

Proposals

The United Nations and intergovernmental organisations, governments, and non-governmental environment and development bodies should:

- a) Recognise and acknowledge the factual truth of these statements.
- b) Support, fund or ensure universal access to family planning information and services worldwide, as agreed at the 1994 Cairo Conference and in Millennium Development Goal 5 for 2012.
- c) Support, fund or ensure the education and empowerment of women, enabling them to control their own fertility.
- d) Adopt non-coercive policies to stabilise or reduce populations at or to sustainable levels, including planning for an ageing population.
- e) Take firm measures, especially in high-consuming regions, to promote the reduction of per capita resource depletion and environmental degradation.