

# PREFACE

## Why a New Curriculum on Population?

*The world is overpopulated... Population pressure is destroying the environment... People go hungry because there is not enough food to go around... Poor people keep themselves poor by having too many babies... If we don't get population growth under control in the Third World, those people are going to migrate here and take our jobs... Whatever your cause, it's a lost cause without population control...*

These statements reflect the conventional wisdom on population growth in much of US society. Ask almost anyone and they will tell you that overpopulation is one of the major causes, if not *the* major cause, of hunger, poverty, environmental degradation, migration, and even political instability in the Third World. Most people hold these beliefs because that's all they've read or heard about the subject – and all they've been taught in school.

This was literally brought home to me by my own daughter. Several years ago, when she was a high school sophomore, I looked at the section on human population in her biology textbook. Side by side were two photographs depicting the impact of population growth in the Third World: one a picture of a herd of cattle overgrazing the land, the other a starving African child. “Either we will voluntarily reduce our birth rate or various forces of environmental resistance will increase our death rate,” the text pronounced ominously. “Facing the problem of how to limit births is politically and emotionally difficult, but continued failure to do so will be disastrous.”\* In addition to blaming population growth for causing poverty and hampering education and technological development in the Third World, the authors also suggested that lenient immigration policies were getting in the way of necessary population stabilization in the US. My students at Hampshire College, where I have taught for 15 years, have consistently told me that this is what they learned about population in their high school textbooks too. Just recently, a student said one of his high school teachers told the class a deadly flood in India was a good thing because it reduced the human population.

There are many reasons why this conventional ‘overpopulation’ wisdom is unwise. First, it ignores demographic trends, such as the fact that today population growth rates are declining in most areas of the world more rapidly than anticipated. Ironically, many demographers are increasingly worried about *negative* population growth or the so-called population ‘implosion.’ Second, it ignores history, notably the impact of the colonial encounter on subject populations in Asia, Africa and Latin America, and the enduring inequalities between the Global North and Global South. Third, it reduces complex webs of causality to a simple linear cause-and-effect relationship, as if there were a single explanation for poverty, hunger and environmental

\* Teresa Audesirk and Gerald Audesirk, *Biology: Life on Earth*, 4th ed., (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1996), 865.

degradation. Fourth, it reinforces gender discrimination, positioning poor women mainly as breeders of too many babies. Fifth, it reinforces racism, for the face of overpopulation is typically that of a person of color, like the starving African boy in the biology text. It also foments fears of immigrants overpopulating the country. And last but not least, it often leads to a problematic ethical relativism – human rights abuses are excusable if they are in the interest of saving the planet through limiting births.

Fortunately, at the international policy level, the conventional ‘overpopulation’ wisdom no longer holds as much sway. For example, the 1994 UN International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo embraced a more comprehensive view of population dynamics and put forward women’s empowerment and access to reproductive health and high-quality, voluntary family planning services as a far better approach than coercive population control. Yet in the US these new understandings have yet to reach a larger audience and many people still fear that the population bomb is ticking away. This fear will persist as long as that’s what students are learning in schools across the nation.

In 1998, as part of a larger mission to encourage more complex, gendered and culturally sensitive views of population, the Population and Development Program at Hampshire College and the Committee on Women, Population and the Environment (CWPE) began the Population Curriculum Project to look at population education in US high schools. Our first step was an investigation of how social studies and biology textbooks present population issues. (See Acknowledgements, page v, for information about the papers resulting from our survey.) Not surprisingly, we found that many US textbooks uncritically reflect the conventional ‘overpopulation’ wisdom, providing very little background in demography or international development that would help students place the population issue in a broader context. The result is the reinforcement of ‘us’ and ‘them’ stereotypes, such as the industrious Europeans on the one hand and the hungry Third World masses on the other. A survey of British geography texts we undertook found a more nuanced approach toward population issues, with the impact of population growth presented as the subject of considerable scholarly debate. This is not surprising given the UK’s better attention to international development issues within its standardized social studies curricula. We also surveyed curricular materials produced by various private population and environment advocacy organizations in the US, but these generally seemed limited in their approach.

As the result of our research, we came to the decision that what was needed was a new, easily adaptable population curriculum which teachers could use to supplement existing curricula in social studies, environmental studies, global issues, geography and biology classes at the high school level, with units also appropriate for students in the first years of college. Our intent was not only to challenge simplistic views of overpopulation, but also to use population as an entry point for the discussion of a wide array of urgent global issues: If population growth is not one of the most important causes of poverty, hunger and environmental degradation, then what are? We also wanted to bring the issues back home to the US, by exploring, for example, why hunger and poverty still exist, and in fact are intensifying, in one of the richest countries in the world.

In 2001 Mary Lugton and Phoebe McKinney, international education and human rights educator/activists, began the challenging task of synthesizing and making accessible to high school and early college students the vast literature and diverse points of view in the population field. *Population in Perspective* is the fruit of their considerable labors, wide and deep knowledge of the world, and strong commitment to effective and accessible global education. We offer this curriculum resource not only as a way to educate students on population issues, but to bolster their critical thinking skills and broaden and deepen their understanding of the world. In its current form, *Population in Perspective* remains a work in progress, as we welcome feedback from students, teachers and curriculum developers.

We do not pretend that this *Population in Perspective* is neutral and objective. In the social sciences, as well as in the larger realm of human affairs, that is an impossible feat. Just the word ‘population’ is loaded with hidden values and assumptions. Our goal here is to help students take it apart, bring those values and assumptions to light and examine them closely in the face of competing understandings of how the world works. Pedagogically, the population issue offers many opportunities for lively discussion, and *Population in Perspective* makes a point of presenting diverse points of view and different interpretations of the ‘evidence,’ whether statistical or historical. Throughout, however, we foreground the issues of human agency and social justice, asking teachers and students to consider how inequalities in wealth and power from the local to the global level shape the relationships between population and hunger, the environment, and poverty. *Population in Perspective* offers no easy answers; it does not substitute one simplistic understanding for another. Rather, in complicating the world, it gives students important tools with which to analyze and comprehend it, tools that they can carry far beyond the immediate classroom and into their adult lives.

We live in one of the most powerful nations on earth, but also one of the most parochial. Our hope is that *Population in Perspective* will foster a new sense of global citizenship based not on fear, but rather on deeper understanding.

— Betsy Hartmann  
Hampshire College, 2004