

## FOCUS

# POPULATION 6 BILLION AND COUNTING . . . . .

BY AINSLIE SCHROEDER

WINNIPEG (CUP) — This month, the world's population reached, and then exceeded, six billion people.

Zero Population Growth, a United States-based population issues group, dubbed October 12 "Y6B" (Year six Billion) to commemorate the estimated birth of the world's six billionth citizen.

This is a reason for both celebration and alarm.

It's a victory of growing life expectancy, along with the natural momentum of population growth, which has culminated in this milestone of human existence.

But with patterns of ever-growing human consumption and continuous environmental degradation, our ability to ensure quality of life for all six billion people on earth can only be met if substantial changes are made in the way we live.

Although some continue to believe technology will create an answer to the plague of resource depletion, the rate of innovation is losing the race to destruction.

The marking of each additional billionth member of the human race will increasingly become a more common event.

It took from the beginning of our species until 1804 to reach one billion, but it only took 12 years for the world's population to rise from five to six billion.

The global death rate has been cut in half since 1950, while life expectancy has risen from 46 to 66 years.

The United Nations, non-governmental organizations (NGO's) and individual countries have been working for more than 30 years on broad-based population control programs.

The goal of these programs is to reduce population growth and to increase quality of life. Much stands in their way, most notably gender inequity, AIDS, poverty, resource scarcity and environmental pollution.

While it is developing countries that contribute most to population growth — 98 percent — industrialized nations are responsible for the majority of consumption, waste and environmental degradation.

The average Canadian consumes 60 times as much energy as

the average Cambodian.

The wealthiest 20 percent of the world consume 86 percent of all goods and services and create 53 percent of global carbon dioxide emissions. The poorest 20 percent, in contrast, consume 1.3 percent of all goods and services and produce 3 percent of carbon dioxide emissions.

And although the world's food supply is enough to feed all six billion of us, there are 841 million people suffering from malnutrition.

The gap in wealth and quality of life between the countries of the north and south means death for millions of people in developing countries every year from curable diseases and starvation.

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Disappearing forests, soil erosion, carbon dioxide emissions and pollution from hazardous waste are examples of dangerous environmental trends that are a result of overpopulation and over consumption.

Five to seven million acres of farmland are lost annually to urbanization and unsustainable farming practices. Oxygen-rich tropical forests are being burned and razed to grow crops. Rising ocean temperatures resulting from carbon dioxide emissions have killed 85 percent of the Indian Ocean's coral reefs.

We are left with less and lower quality space for growing food and ecosystems are losing the diversity they need in order to cope with environmental change.

And then there is the problem of diseases such as AIDS.

In countries like Botswana, Namibia, Zimbabwe and South Africa, over 20 percent of the adult population is currently HIV positive.

Botswana's adult HIV infection rate is the highest at 26 percent, and their life expectancy has plummeted from 62 in 1990 to 44 today. In Zimbabwe, half of the country's health care spending is dedicated to AIDS patients.

Some hospitals in South Africa report that 70 percent of hospital beds are occupied by AIDS victims. The infection rate

in all industrialized countries has remained under 1 percent.

AIDS is currently the leading cause of death in Africa, with two out of the 2.5 million deaths worldwide from the disease in 1998 happening in Africa. Last year there were 5.8 million new HIV infections worldwide.

In addition to the massive personal tragedy of the millions of AIDS deaths, they are leaving millions of orphans behind and huge holes in employment and social structures.

In Africa, infection rates are highest among the more educated and socially mobile, and there is neither a sufficient volume of workers nor a pool of teachers to replace those who die. Also, the tremendous financial responsibility of caring for AIDS victims means that health care access is reduced for all people in AIDS crisis areas.

The global focus on population control has caused some well-deserved controversy. The Vatican calls the west's initiatives towards population control in developing countries a form of biological colonialism.

Certainly, motives for population control must be searched for classism and racism, especially since it is in poor nations populated by people of colour where these programs are most often being called for.

There is also profit to be made from birth control, and Western-based contraceptive companies have used women in developing countries as guinea pigs for drugs not approved for use in Europe and North America.

The profit motive must be recognized and not allowed to supersede the real needs for contraception and family planning education.

Certainly, there is still hope, there is still good news to come. Although the threat of population momentum looms incessant, we know what works, and we know what has to be done.

And if the world commits itself to the health and prosperity of its every citizen, and every species, the six billionth baby may have a chance after all.

