

Environmental Effects

"Our age replaces the food limits envisaged by Malthus with limits of the environment as we place on it the burden of more billions of people, and more trillions of dollars worth of economic activity. . . . The limit (to population) set by the requirement of sustainability is undoubtedly much smaller, much more difficult to calculate."³

The problem is threefold:

- (i) **the poorest populations cannot afford or are ill-equipped to use technology and investment to compensate for their increasing numbers.** To survive, they resort to desperate measures which can lead to desertification, water shortages, crowding on to unsuitable land (as in Bangla Desh), urban squalor, or deforestation.
- (ii) **the process of economic development to keep ahead of population growth can itself be environmentally very costly:** pesticides and fertilisers are introduced everywhere; soft coal is used massively as the energy source for industrialisation, as in India and China; water is pumped unceasingly from non-renewing aquifers.
- (iii) **advanced technology and high resource and energy consumption in developed countries, despite their low population growth, can damage the environment at least as much, although largely in different ways.**

Clearly, the concepts of sustainable development and the finiteness of the biosphere are at the heart of the population-environment issue. There are no easy answers.

Social and Political Effects

Rapid population growth has a highly corrosive effect on political and social institutions. Population pressures, combined with other factors, may strip away family roles, widen income inequalities or weaken traditional authority structures. One response may be to migrate, e.g. to cities, since individuals often believe that life will be marginally better for them in urban slums than in an impoverished over-populated countryside. From cities, some then try to move still further, to developed countries like Canada.

Another response, in the teeming mega-cities as well as in the countryside, is to express communal and class-based interests much more aggressively to the authorities. In addition, differential population growth of ethnic or cultural groups can fuel internal conflict; there are recent or current examples in Lebanon, Israel and the occupied