

Deconstruction of Population, Politics and Environment: Towards Sustainable Development

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Abstract

The last few decades have perceived a revolution in the relationships between human beings and their natural environment which is confronted with severe pollution, hazardous waste and burdened by the rapid population growth of the developing world along with unequal consumption pattern of the developed countries, starvation, desertification, loss of biodiversity and global warming. Most Developed Countries have posed to a throwaway worldview based on the technocentrism that nature was to be ruthlessly subdued and controlled for the sake of industrialization and economic growth. The result has been the rise of question of sustainable earth. This paper tries to provide a polemical debate between population and environmental degradation centering highly unequal consumption pattern of the developed countries. It also links how population explosion in the developing countries become a political issue in sustaining the world rather than the exploitative and exhaustive nature of the developed countries having a small portion of world's population.

Keywords: Deconstruction of Population. Politics. Environment. Sustainable Development

Introduction

The state of world's environment has drawn a major concern in recent times. Due to increasing pressure by the population and their unbridled consumption pattern, the earth is wounded and sobbed bitterly. Wangari Maathai, Founder of Kenya Green belt Movement, expresses in the way, "I am concerned about the wounds and bleeding sores on the naked body of the earth...the small wars and deaths in so many parts of the world? When we have seen all these calamities, have we done no more than ask: Who is responsible? ...We are all of us strangling the earth" (Rodda; 1991). Now environment has not become only a local or national issue but also a global hot cake in the international community. The scientific community is providing knowledge and expertise along with touching evidence, which requires environment no more an underestimated issue rather than a holistic component towards life sustaining earth.

Many influential writings disclosed the relation between population growth and environmental stress. In the *Blue print for Survival*, Goldsmith and others, tried to provide an ecocentric attempt to unearth the global Predicament, popularize the notion that infinite growth cannot be sustained by the finite resources. *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al.; 1972), a non-technical report by

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the Club of Rome, also signaled the present and future catastrophes caused by the population growth. *The Population Bomb*, published in 1968, which encapsulated the nature of overpopulation and uneven development by arguing that the world had become over populated and paradigmatic development from an ecological point of view (Barrow ; 1995).

Growing awareness of environmental problems led to the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972. This conference was also significant in evolving the term sustainable development. In 1987, the World Commission on Environment and Development (WECD; 1987) published its report, *Our Common Future*, under the chairmanship of Gro Harlem Brundtland. This report introduced the concept of sustainable development by defining in the following way: “*development that meets the needs of the present without the compromising ability of future generations to meet their own needs.*” The report’s policy direction focuses on some serious implications: a concern between resource use, population growth and technological development; a signal about production and distribution of resources, poverty and environmental degradation, loss of biodiversity and ecological imbalance; and a concern about uneven development between poor and rich countries. The earth summit held in Brazil in 1992 also revealed the culmination of unprecedented and unique international awareness concerning environmental issues by adopting agenda 21, climate convention and biodiversity treaty (Rahman and others; 1994). Thus the issue of population and environment has become a catch phrase in the world.

Population Dynamics and Management of Resources

A resource is anything, which we get from the physical environment to meet our needs and wants. There are three types of resources as, renewable, non-renewable and perpetual resources. Among these, the renewable and non-renewable resources are more important and environmentally recognized. Because, human being has been exploiting the earth’s resources both renewable and non-renewable to fulfill their wants having modified the environmental landscape for thousands of years. But in the last two centuries the exploitation of resources over earth has become tremendous –partly because of population growth, and partly unequal consumption pattern through immense scientific and technological advancement. Beyond doubt, population growth has been causing environmental degradation. The cumulative figure of world population is itself an exemplar of showing the pressure on earth both in terms of production and consumption. Researchers show the evidence of interrelationship between population growth and environmental concern but unequal access to resources remains a major factor contributing to environmental depletion – is sometimes hidden, earthed and underestimated.

The following table gives the impression of world population growth:

Population level	Time taken to reach new population level	Year attained
1 billion	2 to 5 million years	About A.D1800
2 billion	Approxomately130 years	1930
3 billion	30 years	1960
4 billion	15 years	1975
5 billion	12 years	1987
6 billion (projected)	11 years	1998

Sources: Gupte, 1982: Population Reference Bureau, reported in Van der Tak et al.1979:4, Schaefer and other: 1992.

World population is increasing in a speed whose exposure in the planet is too serious to make room for all in a sustainable way. The table shows, population has exploded in the last 200 years and continues to accelerate rapidly. The phenomenal growth of world population in recent times can be accounted for by the changing patterns of both births and deaths-population dynamics. So, in order cope with the growing population the natural resources, it is necessary to formulate some pragmatic strategy and tactics, which will contribute to turn the population into resources. A human resource based management system in the globe has been a far cry. All over the world, the earth is always exploited and some time it is too nakedly to maintain the ecosystem. Although, it seems to be the existence of human resources management in some parts of the world but it is just an end for accelerating the consumption pattern through exploitation and domination over the nature under disguise of management system. No management system is there for preserving the resources or sustaining the natural ecosystem in real sense. This system is believed to speed up the magnitude of exploitation of natural resources.

Approaches of Population Growth and Environmental Degradation

The interrelationship between population dynamics and environmental degradation is a sophisticated and complex issue, where there are no clear-cut laws or theories to explain the relationship. But some approaches are mentionable:

Conventional Approach: Thomas Malthus argues that population growth would increase more rapidly than the food supply and ultimately would be checked by various catastrophes like famine, starvation or any other forms of misery.

Functionalist Approach; This approach emphasizes the way that parts of a society are structured to maintain its order and stability. Population has to function on planet under various activities and consume resources to maintain their lives. But population will pose serious problems when their numbers will supersede the existing resources. Thus, over population is a threat to world economy, environment and so on.

Conflict Approach: This approach emphasizes on the issue of tension and conflict in the society arising from unequal access to resources. So population growth is no longer a single problem rather than unequal distribution and consumption pattern for environmental degradation.

In Marx's view, ruling class (capitalists) has the access to enjoy power and to dominate over the subordinate (proletariats) having the almost all capital and resources by exploitation. Similarly, the conflict theorists agree, the developed countries consume resources invariably and contributing to environmental degradation rather than developing countries having a lot of population.

Debate on Politics, Policies and Strategies about Environmental Degradation

The way the West points out that the over population of the world is depleting the natural resources as oil, coal, gas, forests etc deserves some debates on politics, policies and strategies centering population growth and environmental degradation. A wide range of indicators as

deforestation, desertification, ozone layer depletion, global warming etc. accompanies environmental degradation. Now the debate lies – either population growth is responsible for environmental degradation or unbridled consumption pattern is liable for environmental degradation.

Food and Beverage: Although it is believed that more food supply is required for feeding more population, which will create pressure on environmental resources. But various statistics shows that large section of population cannot meet the basic needs when even food supply is abundant. So population is not solely a problem liable for scarcity of resources. According to United Nations and Population Reference Bureau, in 1990, less developed countries (LDC) had a population of 4.1 billion whereas more developed countries (MDC) had 1.2 billion. Surprisingly, Among the 4.1 billion of the people in the LDCs, a significant number of people can't meet their basic needs just to sustain livelihood. According to World Bank estimates, in 1988 approximately 730 million people around the globe could not afford a minimum dietary standard. About 40,000 children are believed to die each day of hunger related causes. Ironically, while world hunger increases, food is more abundant and cheaper than ever before (P.Hendry, 1988).

Health and Nutrition Status across the World

There is a great variation in daily calorie intake per capita from LDCs to MDCs. The table indicates that daily calorie supply in some MDCs (U.S.A) is two times more than that of LDCs (Haiti). And this figure is far less for many developing countries like Bangladesh, Burma, Nepal and so on. In the U.S.A. about a third of the population is overweight. \$33 billion is spent each year in attempt to lose weight.

Countries	Daily calorie supply per capita
LDCs	
Haiti	1902
Nigeria	2146
MDCs	
U.S.A	3645
Sweden	3064
Japan	2464

Source: World Bank, 1990.

There has been an unequal system in food production, distribution and consumption pattern all over the world which, in real sense, is one of the vital causes of scarcity of natural resources and environmental degradation. About 26 % of the population (MDCs) consumes world's 53 % of the fat, whereas 74% of the population (LDCs) consumes only 47 % of the world's fat (WCED). We produce more than enough food to meet the basic nutritional needs of every person on the earth

today. Indeed, if, distributed equally, the food currently produced would be enough to sustain 6 billion people. So it is the politics and policies that determine the global, national and local food crises and ultimately leading to environmental degradation posing a threat to ensure sustainable development.

Energy Resources: Most energy comes from nonrenewable sources, but the west can't sustain its current levels of energy consumption. The LDCs contain 77% of the world's population, but use only 20% of the world's mineral and energy resources. On the other hand, MDCs have 23 % of the world's population but it use about 80% of the worlds mineral and energy resources. The U.S.A. has just 6% of the world's population but consumes 30 % of the world's energy – compared with India where 20% of the global population uses only 2% of world's energy (Miller; 1998). So it is not the population but unequal consumption pattern which is responsible for scarcity of resources.

Safe drinking Water: Water is essential for life itself. It is used for multi purposes. But there is a drastic variation of using water in LDCs and MDCs. In the LDCs, about 55% of the people don't have the access of safe drinking water while in the MDCs only 3 % of the people don't have the access. The average US citizen uses 160gallons of water per day.

Example	Water Used
Each flush of a toilet	3 to 5 gallons
Showering	5 gallons per minute
Cooking	8 gallons
Dishwashing	10 gallons
Talking birth	30 to 40 gallons

(Source: *New Internationalist*).

It takes 2,500 gallons of water to produce one pound of beef and 100,000 gallons to produce one new car. So it is the people of developed countries who consume much water as compared to the total population of developing countries.

Extraction of Timber: It is not alone the population growth, which cause the environmental degradation because it alone no longer causes deforestation, desertification, pollution and other environmental problems tremendously. Since the 1950s, the extraction and export of tropical hardwood to Europe, Japan and the U.S.A. have increased at an alarming rate. Huge timber concessions have been offered, for example, the Madang Timber Project in the Gogal Basin in Papua New Guinea, where a Japanese company is extracting timber from a low land rainforest for the preparation of woodchips.

Unequal Consumption of Mineral and Other Resources: Both new and renewable are important for development of the country and advanced life style. Developed counties are desperat in increasing their livelihood in order to improve quality of life through consumption.

In one year, the average person in the west is likely to:

- Consume more than 264 lbs of paper, compared to an average consumption of just 17.6 lbs per person in the third world.
- Consume over 990 lbs of steel compared with 94.6 lbs in the third world.
- Consume 57.2 lbs of other metals compared with 4.4 lbs in the third world. (Source: New Internationalist)

Industry and Consumers: The role of industry in the environment is well recognized, using natural resources to make products for the consumer and in doing so causes degradation and pollution. It is important to consider the contrasting positions of the North and the South. The pattern of consumption varies between developed and developing countries, with the developed countries consuming more and producing more waste. Comprising less than one quarter of the world's population, citizens of rich nations control some four fifths of its resources. A case of China shows that for a long time, total energy use in China grew rapidly due to population growth and introduction of heavy industry simultaneously. According to the UN, carbon dioxide emissions from industrial sources in China went up from 215 million tons of carbon in 1960 to 406 million tons in 1980 and up to 678 million tons in 1990. But it is mentionable that the natural growth of population in China came down to about one percent per year due to adoption of fruitful population policy having one child per couple since the late 1970s. So the role of industries in accelerating pollution is significant (Unnoyan Podokkhep; 2000).

The Debt Crisis: Although the more significant effects of the debt crisis on the livelihood pattern of the people have been recognized since the early 1980s, but recently it has become a concern of environmental degradation. In many cases, developing countries exploiting their natural resources, such as tropical hardwoods, to export to industrialized countries, in order to pay their debts which is one of the major causes of deforestation. For example, Ghana, a country of Africa backed by the donor institutions, is exploiting its timber. From 1984 to 1988, the total forest felled rose from 578,000 cubic meters to 1.15 million cubic meters annually (Rodda; 1991). So, burden of debt has meant that developed and developing countries have less to spend for environmental management and eventually overexploit natural resources causing environmental degradation and pollution.

Military Activities and the Environment: Although the impact of military activities on the global environment has drawn scant public attention, its exposure in environmental degradation and pollution is disastrous. The military activities includes –conventional, chemical, biological and nuclear.

Among these, nuclear weapons industry is undoubtedly the most serious military polluter because of the unprecedented destructive capability of nuclear weapons and the long-term problems posed by the explosives and hazardous wastes that are produced. While US\$ 1,900,000 is spent each minute on the global military, most of the population of the world lives below the poverty line. The Brundtland Report on Environment and Development argues that stopping military

production would not only free resources for development purposes, but it would also eliminate a major source of environmental destruction and hazardous waste.

Throwaway worldview of the Developed World: Most people in today's industrialized societies have a throwaway worldview based on some beliefs as resources are unlimited, the more we would produce and consume, the better off we would remain, and the command and use of the world's resources is important to be believed as a powerful and dominating nation all over the world. Thus, the MDCs have increased consumption pattern to an unprecedented rate by throwing hazardous waste and pollution on the world than ever before. Thomas Berry calls industrial – consumer society built upon the throwaway worldview the “supreme pathology of all history” (Miller; 1998).

Westerners produce more waste than any other society in history. The waste thrown per person per year in Singapore and Jakarta is respectively 539 and 305 lbs being more industrialized than Bangladesh, Maldives. So the amount of waste thrown by Bangladesh, Maldives, and Burma will be insignificant.

Countries and cities	Annual domestic waste (000 tons)	Equivalent per person (lbs)
U.S.A.	200,000	1,925
Australia	10,000	1,496
Canada	12,000	1,155
Singapore	--	538
Jakarta	--	305

Source: New Internationalist

Global Warming: Global warming is caused by the accumulation of certain gases, called green house gases, in the atmosphere. In the context of global warming, carbon oxide along with CFCs, Methane, Nitrous oxide plays an important role. Carbon dioxide alone constitutes 55% in causing global warming. But who are producer of carbon dioxide. A statistics shows that 25% of the world's population (that is, MDCs) consumes:

- 75 % of all energy used;
- 79 % of all commercial fuels;
- 85 % of all wood products and
- 72 % of steel production.

And generate:

- 75 % of all carbon dioxide emissions, which occurred for nearly half of all greenhouse gases (UNFPA, 1991; 14).

CFCs are the product of the chemical industry, which are used in aerosols, refrigerators, air conditioning, solvents and foam insulation. The MDCs have the access of these privileges and they are the real consumer of those. So, developed nations are emitting CFCs more.

The per capita emission of carbon dioxide in any developed country is more than any developing country. As the more they consume energy, the more they throw waste on the earth in multifaceted forms.

Emission of carbon dioxide in U.K. is forty eight times more than that of Bangladesh (Prothom Alo; 2007).

Countries	Emission of carbon dioxide per capita in tons.
U.S.A.	16-36
Russia	7-16
Japan	7-16
China	2.5-7
India	0.8-2.5

Source: Time Magazine, April-9, 2001.

Conclusion

If we visualize our world as a spacious landscape in which the people's interactions and the consequences of those activities are compartmentalized within nations, within sectors (agriculture, energy, land), and within broad stressing issues (economic, environmental, social, cultural), we find these divisions are no longer an isolated arena but a compact substance which are leading to global crises-diverging into economic crisis, environmental crises, energy crises and so on. So there is a strong need for effective international cooperation and coordination to manage economic and ecological interdependence by accounting the pace of population dynamics and unequal distribution and consumption pattern of the west all over the world enhanced by technological advancement to exploit natural resources. The developed countries must have some positive initiatives in order to make the world comfortable and sustainable one. So, proponents and leaders of the MDC's must adopt some policies, if possible ignoring the issue of political and economic in some respects, along with developing countries. Some controversial and dual policy must be revised –firstly, developed countries are using environment friendly technology and secondly, they are creating pressure to buy the harmful technologies on the developing countries under disguise of aid, debt and politics. Japan has adopted a tough policy to protect its own forestry, but they are purchasing a large amount of timber from Malaysia.

So, we no longer claim population growth as the sole enemy for environmental degradation. Could we say-the weight of human beings on this globe, in terms of resources extraction, is directing to the global time bomb which ultimately explode in the forms of famine, starvation, environmental disaster, and so on? At the dawning of twenty first century, we are living in the Excellency of technology transforming everything to easier and comfortable one. Is there no way to translate the human potentiality into human resources rather than being destined as the curse? Undoubtedly, economy is the miracle, the driving force, for any country even a potential view in leading the globe and attaining the chauvinistic imperialism. But it should not hamper our earth,

our existence, and our shelter for the sake of politics as well as labeling the super one. Both ecology and economy are becoming interwoven than ever before, in terms of local, regional, national, and global togetherness, into a seamless network of cause and effect. The slogan of UNEP is wise enough: “Only One Earth, Care and Share”-should be the motto of human beings both in actions and attitudes just to save our earth and build up a world towards sustainable development. In fine, the Noble winner poet Rabindranath’s quotation (Quoted in Bangladesh Environment; 2001) is remarkable: “Nature, man’s first love, which brought to him the hospitality of gods, became his arch-enemy .Man indiscriminately destroyed forest to build his brick-tenement. ...Man ignored her and earned her curse ...To save ourselves from utter disaster, we have to propitiate the sylvan goddess our patron, so she makes our land fertile and fruitful. ...It’s a great problem to save our forest wealth from the all consuming greed of mankind. ...God sent down life and provided for his consummate reception .Thus man converted this to a death-trap, an apt return for his greed. Thus man frustrates the purpose of God. This comes down as a curse to the social order. The greed of man destroyed the forest, as well as man. The tree purifies the air, fertilizes the soil is greeted by the human axe .Man forgets the good God provided for him and ignorantly destroyed it. It’s time now to repent .We will use all our energy to build anew. ...This is our vow!”

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