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Countdown to 7 Billion

Population Bomb Fizzles

By Father John Flynn, LC

ROME, JAN. 23, 2010 (Zenit.org).- Later on this year the world's population will reach the seven billion mark. As Brendan O'Neill recently commented in an article published by the online site Spiked, this will inevitably lead to an outpouring of Malthusian gloom and doom predictions.

National Geographic magazine is focusing this year on the population issue, and in a feature essay in the January edition, it does indeed quote a number of pessimists. Among those cited is Jared Diamond, whose book "Collapse" argues that the massacres of hundreds of thousands of Rwandans in 1994 were in part caused by overpopulation.

The article, however, does provide a counterbalance from some authoritative sources. "The population as a whole is on a path toward non-explosion," said Hania Zlotnik, director of the United Nation's Population Division. This is the body that publishes statistical information, not the family planning agency.

Zlotnik also told the magazine that the speed with which fertility has declined in so many countries and cultures is "mind-boggling," and that they still don't understand how it came about.

A striking example of just how much fertility has plummeted came in a report published last June 25 by the Pew Research Center.

Nearly one-in-five American women ends her childbearing years without having borne a child, compared with one-in-ten in the 1970s, it said.

According to the report, white women are most likely not to have borne a child. Nevertheless, in the last decade, childless rates have risen more rapidly for black, Hispanic and Asian women, so the racial difference is less now.

Figures vary quite a bit in other countries. The report said that for women born in 1960, 22% were childless in the United Kingdom, 19% in Finland and the Netherlands, and 17% in Italy and Ireland. Rates ranged from 12% to 14% for Spain, Norway, Denmark, Belgium and Sweden.

Wrong

National Geographic also interviewed Joel E. Cohen, author of the 1995 book "How Many People Can the Earth Support?"

In relation to the impact of higher population and global warming, he said: "Those who say the whole problem is population are wrong." According to Cohen it is not even the dominant factor.

The father figure of modern Malthusianism is more pessimistic. On Jan. 14, the Guardian newspaper reported that Paul Erlich, author of the 1968 book "The Population Bomb," considers that the earth is well past its carrying capacity.

In spite of the fact his book's predictions of disaster turned out to be thoroughly wrong, Erlich declared he is even more pessimistic now than when he wrote his book.

A more measured view was taken in a Jan. 14 report published by a British body, the Institution of Mechanical Engineers. The study did not minimize the challenges posed by a growing population, but it did affirm that they can be dealt with.

Nevertheless, as Dominic Lawson pointed out in an opinion column for the U.K.'s Independent newspaper, our appetite for bad news far outstrips that for good news. His own newspaper buried the report in a brief story, while other papers ignored it completely.

In his Jan. 18 article, Lawson observed that another report published the previous week by the French national agricultural and development research agencies had also been unreported by the media.

The French study looked at the question of whether a global population of 9 billion, which is the maximum peak forecast, would be able to have a diet of 3,000 calories a day. Their answer was affirmative.

Too many?

Turning back to the U.K. study titled "Population: One Planet, Too Many People?" it starts by saying that meeting the needs of a population that might reach over 9 billion by the end of the century "will provide a significant challenge to governments and society at large." It then goes on to examine four key areas: food, water, urbanization, and energy.

There have been huge improvements in the quality and quantity of food produced in the past few decades, the report points out. In the early 1900s, a farmer in the United States produced enough to feed about 2.5 people. A century later this had skyrocketed to 97 Americans and 32 people living abroad.

The report observed that continuing to increase food production does not just depend on future developments in technology. Huge gains could be made simply by reducing wastage. No less than 25% of fresh food purchased in developed countries is thrown away.

In India, for example, between 35% and 40% of fruit and vegetable production is lost each year before the produce reaches the consumer. This is greater than the entire consumption of the UK, due mainly to poor storage and inadequate handling, the report said.

The ability to produce enough food does not itself guarantee there will be no hunger. The study observed that hunger is often a political problem or one of poverty, rather a question of productive capacity.

Turning to water, the report commented that many of the technologies and practices necessary to ensure water security already exist.

It called for making water a higher priority when considering development projects. There are many possibilities, ranging from desalination, to increased water recycling. Another step that could be

taken is to provide separate sewage and storm-water systems. This would mean the less-contaminated stormwater could be stored in times of heavy rain and used in drier times.

The authors also urged reconsidering the current practice of delivering water at a very high purity level regardless of its intended use, and labeling waste water as contaminated to the highest degree regardless of what it had been used for.

City challenge

Almost all the population growth in coming decades will take place in urban areas of developing countries.

"As is the case with many other issues posed by population growth, there are often very few technological barriers for why solutions to increasing urbanization cannot be found," the report affirmed.

What needs to be done is to ensure that there is sufficient planning, and that the right solutions are chosen that will fit in with the local needs. As well, matters such as finance, ownership and community participation need to be addressed.

In regard to energy, the report commented that future demand is difficult to predict, and that estimates vary widely on the amount of oil still remaining. New energy technologies are being developed, although costs are high.

Once again, the report said that we don't need to base our hopes on some future technology. "It is likely, however, that despite the projections for increases in future demand, engineering technology which is currently relatively well understood, mature or in advanced stages of development, will be able to contribute the required energy throughout the 21st century without the need for major new scientific breakthroughs."

It went on to caution that, while the solutions are available, there are difficulties in the areas of regulation, financing and politics. This means that greater coordination take place between engineers, communities and governments.

The report concluded by repeating the affirmation that the forecast increase in population can be dealt with by existing technologies. The barriers that exist are not technological, therefore, but are related to implementation, communication and coordination. Something worth keeping in mind when reading the disaster scenarios that only too often pop up in the media.

| More