

The burning issue of population control

January 17 2020, by Beth Amato

CARBON FOOTPRINT PER YEAR

		DAINFERN FAMILY	ALEXANDRA FAMILY
Electricity		360kWH	72kWH
Gas		20 litre	20 litre
Flights		1 x Joburg to JFK (NY) 2 x Joburg to Cape Town	None
Car		SUV – 2 Litre diesel 15 000km	None
Taxi/Bus		None	11 040km
Food		R24000	R12000
Clothes		R7500	R1500
Books/ Magazines/ Newspapers		R750	R100
Phone		R7200	R2400
Bank/ Finance		R216000	None
School		R120000	R720
Recreation/ Sport		R4800	None
TOTAL CARBON FOOTPRINT		13,8 metric tonnes	2,07 metric tonnes
WORLD TARGET FOR CARBON FOOTPRINT		2,0 metric tonne	

Credit: Wits University

The increasing human population is putting large amounts of pressure on our natural resources and is contributing to climate change, leading many people to call for increased population control—especially for poorer communities. Beth Amato investigates whether this could be a solution to decrease the rate of climate change.

While the world's resources are limited, increasing population figures are adding pressure on both our available resources and the rate of [climate change](#). The human population has doubled since 1960 and currently stands at 7.7 billion. The United Nations estimates that it will continue to 9.8 billion by 2050.

It is no secret that humans have too large an impact on the sustainability of our planet. According to the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), we currently need 1.6 Earths to produce all the renewable resources we need. We are using far too many resources, and every person living on the planet is adding to that impact. Concerns over climate change have led to ever increasing calls for population control to mitigate our impact on the planet.

In a letter to The Star Newspaper in May 2019, for example, a letter writer voices this call, writing that "work needs to be done to educate Africa's people about the benefits of having small families."

"Unless Africa gets a good handle on its out-of-control population growth, the continent will continue to be the beggar of the world, unable to take care of its own," the letter writer said.

Like many others, this letter writer believes that overpopulation is the "elephant in the room" and the direct cause of deepening poverty and environmental degradation.

Celebrity environmentalists such as Jane Goodall and Sir David Attenborough are only some examples of people who have added their voices to the plea for greater [population control](#) to avoid the devastating freefall into ecological mayhem.

Thriving (selectively) together

As an ambassador for the Thriving Together campaign, led by the Margaret Pyke Trust, Goodall is at the forefront of advocating for the "removal of barriers to family planning" for the health of women, all humans and our fragile ecosystems. The trust is supported by 150 global organisations, including the United Nations.

"Women everywhere must be able to choose whether to have children, how many children, and the spacing between them. This is critical for their own wellbeing. But, they also need to be equipped with the knowledge as to how their choice affects the health of the planet and thus the future of their own children," says Goodall.

"The Thriving Together statement demonstrates the widespread support and attention that this issue is finally beginning to receive from both the conservation and reproductive health communities."

While women and girls should have autonomy over their bodies and have access to reproductive health services, Goodall has been criticised for not necessarily and primarily being motivated by women's freedom and justice.

UK columnist Ella Whelan wryly asserts that "Thriving Together is

prioritising beetles over black people ... There is something deeply unpleasant about white environmentalists like Dr. Jane Goodall and Sir David Attenborough fronting these campaigns to strongly discourage women in developing countries from giving birth to 'too many' children."

While the world's resources are certainly limited, highlighting the link between climate change and fertility rates in poor countries fails to confront the deep systemic issues that have driven mass ecological damage, says Distinguished Professor of Public Health and Medical Anthropology at Wits University, Lenore Manderson.

The World Economic Forum, and data analysis organisation Our World in Data, both show that North America, home to five percent of the world's population, is responsible for 18 percent of carbon emissions. On the other hand, Africa—with 16 percent of the world's population—emits only four percent of the total carbon dioxide (CO₂). The top 10 richest countries in the world are responsible for 75 percent of the world's CO₂ emissions, and 100 countries emit just three percent.

Comfortably numb

A (hypothetical) Joburg businessman wakes up in his Dainfern Townhouse and puts on a pot of coffee while he runs a shower. In the shower, which took a minute to get hot, he is spoilt for choice in shampoos and shower gels, all in plastic containers. He makes a mental note to buy a new shampoo only when the others are finished. Deep in thought of the business day ahead, he enjoys an eight minute shower. In the middle of the winter, he makes sure that his towels are on the heated towel rail, while his house is heated throughout. He chooses to wear an outfit he bought a few months back, but because his checked shirt is a 'fast fashion' item, it is already starting to fray. He makes a mental note to buy a new one on his way to the airport later that day.

His office in Sandton is 45 minutes from his house in a gated estate, and he gets into his SUV. He travels alone to work, stopping at a local drive-through ATM to withdraw some cash. He then drives to a fast food outlet and joins the long queue to order his meat-based breakfast and a grande latte in a non-recyclable cup. His breakfast comes with a plastic fidget toy, which he tosses out of the window.

At lunchtime, he orders lunch after forgetting to take his packed lunch in the morning. His wife often complains of having to throw out a fortune of expired food.

After a day's work, he heads on to the airport to fly to the US on a five city business tour. His wife and children will join him a few days later for a short holiday.

Living the (high risk) life

Two hours before our businessman hits his shower, his domestic worker has already been busy, getting her family ready for the start of their day. She has three children, with a fourth on the way. The businessman often chastises her for having too many children.

Upon waking in cramped accommodation in Alexandra township, Johannesburg, the woman prepares a simple breakfast of pap [mielie meal] on a gas stove. The night before, she collected water for washing and drinking from a local communal tap.

Ready to leave, the woman starts her 23km commute to Dainfern, where she works. It takes her two taxis and around two hours to get to work. Her children walk to the local school with their lunch tins. No food is wasted. Sometimes there is spare change for the children to buy sweets from the informal shop.

With nothing else to do at night, the whole family winds down in front of the television.

Being a conscientious person—he's actually labelled a "greenie" at work—the businessman decides to calculate his carbon footprint while waiting for his airplane meal. He is shocked to see that, should every person on the planet lead the same lifestyle as him, we would need 2.7 planets to support ourselves.

His family produced at least 13.80 metric tonnes of CO₂ per year, which is just under double the average footprint for people in South Africa (8.98 metric tons) and just under three times the global average (5 metric tons).

His domestic worker's family, on the other hand, produces just about the same amount of CO₂ per year as what is needed globally to combat climate change, at 2,07 metric tonnes per year (worldwide target is 2 metric tonnes). If each person on earth lived the same lifestyle as her family, we would need just one planet to sustain ourselves.

If our Dainfern businessman lived in Texas, in the United States, things would have been much worse. According to Our World in Data, an average African's carbon emissions is 17 times lower than the average American, with the average African's carbon footprint coming in at 0,3 metric tonnes and the average American being responsible for 19,8 metric tonnes.

Removing the beam from one's eye

Professor Matthew Chersich of the Wits Reproductive Health and HIV Institute, says countries with low fertility rates are those which emit the most amount of carbon dioxide owing to their lifestyles. The WWF has said that if everyone lived like an average resident of the U.S., "a total of

four earths would be required to regenerate humanity's annual demand on nature."

"By using poor people's family sizes as a scapegoat, wealthier people feel they don't need to alter their carbon-rich and consumerist lifestyle," he says.

Chersich acknowledges that unintended pregnancy can lead to mortality and morbidities, especially in poorer communities. Programmes to improve access to contraception and other family planning resources are a key health priority. Reducing the population number in poorer settings will lower the nutritional consequences of climate change and increase the resources available to countering climate change impacts. "However, reducing unintended pregnancies in these settings will probably do little to prevent further greenhouse gases ... and halt climate change," he says.

As far as climate change is concerned, Chersich says family planning initiatives should be implemented in carbon-loving countries. "We should strongly encourage wealthy people to have as few children as possible. Each additional child means a whole lot more carbon dioxide and considerable harm to people elsewhere."

Manderson concurs that supporting women to have fewer children contributes to sustainable development, and food and water security.

It is critical to note, however, that climate change will affect demography more than demographic change will affect the climate. "Telling poorer people to have less children is a wonderful way to shift responsibility, given that the people who have the most children use the technologies that contribute to climate change the least," says Manderson.

Climate injustice

Those who contribute the least to climate change—those in low to middle-income countries—will suffer the most from its effects. Richer countries (and people who live more comfortable lifestyles) should therefore focus less on the red herring that poorer countries with high populations contribute to climate change, and more on the idea that existing inequalities and poverty will only worsen on a warmer planet.

Jacklyn Cock, Professor Emerita in Sociology and Honorary Research Professor in the Society, Work and Politics Institute (SWOP) at Wits, has noted that the climate crisis is less about the "poor other" overpopulating and destroying the planet, and more about the outcome of an unjust global system, where so few reap the benefits of capitalism.

Cock believes that alleviating climate change begins with establishing "alternative social forms, institutions and practices outside of capitalism." These are mainly collective arrangements and mobilisation: bulk buying, decentralised, community-controlled forms of renewable energy, community food centres and seed sharing. In an article in *The Conversation*, Cock says: "The concept of environmental justice provides a radical alternative to the discourse of conservation, questioning the market's ability to bring about social or environmental sustainability. It affirms the value of all forms of life against the interests of the rich and powerful."

It is wealthy and educated people, Cock says, that have to change by consuming less and conserving more.

Indeed, activists from the global south should forge ahead with alternatives, lobby powerful fossil fuel interests and certainly impress upon countries in the global north to have fewer children to save the planet.

More information: Calculate your carbon

footprint: www.carbonfootprint.com/calculator.aspx

Calculate your ecological footprint: ecologicalfootprint.com

Provided by Wits University

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