

“danger” is mass vegetarianism. The grain and soy we feed to animals gives us a handy buffer against starvation, should we need it. We do produce enough to feed everyone on the planet, and even enough for the additional 3 billion people we can expect to be sharing it with by 2050.

Nevertheless, the world cannot support an indefinitely growing population; in some countries, population growth is already undermining gains in food production. By 2050 Nigeria, now with 144 million people, is expected to grow to 282 million and be the world’s sixth most populous nation. By then the Democratic Republic of the Congo, now home to 63 million people, is predicted to have 187 million, and Ethiopia, 77 million today, is expected to have a population of 146 million.³¹ But to say, as ecologist Garrett Hardin did in the 1970s with countries like Bangladesh and India in mind, that we should not give aid to poor countries with rapidly growing populations ignores the well-established fact that reducing poverty also reduces fertility.³² Where many children die and there is no Social Security, parents tend to have large families to ensure that some will survive to look after them in their old age, and, in the case of rural families, to work the land. As countries industrialize and living standards rise, fertility rates fall. This happened in Europe and North America, and then also in those Asian nations that have achieved similar levels of affluence, including Japan and most recently, Korea.

Education also reduces fertility, particularly when offered to girls. In Ethiopia, women who did not go to school have an average of six children; if most of them survive, this would lead to unsustainable population growth. Women who have at least a secondary education have, on average, two children, which is below the replacement level. In other countries the difference is not quite as pronounced, but overall, women with a secondary education give birth to between one-third and one-half as many children as women with no formal education.³³ Reflecting this

difference is the Indian state of Kerala. Although it is one of the poorer parts of the country, it has higher literacy and greater gender equality than much of the rest of India. Without resorting to a coercive approach such as a “one-child policy,” Kerala has achieved a rate of population growth lower than China’s and also lower than that in some developed countries, including Sweden and Canada.³⁴ When aid is a means of increasing literacy and gender equality, then it can help achieve a sustainable population.

Still, in poor countries with high fertility rates, more direct measures of slowing fertility may be needed if population is to stabilize at a sustainable level that provides a minimally decent standard of living. But that doesn’t reduce the importance of aid, either. Providing basic health care remains central to these efforts, because it is a way of reaching women and talking to them about contraception. If you think that stopping population growth is an overriding priority, you should donate to organizations like Population Services International, or the International Planned Parenthood Federation, asking that your gift be earmarked for family-planning projects.³⁵

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When you’re a philosopher, and people casually ask you what you do, the next question is likely to be “So what’s your philosophy?” My colleague Kwame Anthony Appiah has a good reply: “My philosophy,” he says, “is that everything is more complicated than you thought.”³⁶ I don’t always agree with Appiah, but working out the likely real-world consequences of aid is often more complicated than we thought, and that is true of any large-scale human activity. Whether the complications involve Dutch disease, bad institutions, or population growth, they introduce an element of uncertainty into our efforts to provide assistance. Nevertheless, some degree of uncertainty about the impact of aid does not eliminate our obligation to