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Op-ed

Many ethical hurdles to overcome in managing global population growth

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The global population, surpassing seven billion in 2011 [and currently just over 8 billion], could potentially reach over 15 billion by 2100, marking a 50% increase, according to a United Nations report. This population growth presents profound social, economic, and environmental implications that demand immediate attention, particularly from an ethical standpoint.

As population dynamics undergo significant shifts, ethical considerations emerge, touching on issues of human dignity, well-being, and justice. Concerns about dignity revolve around whether changing conditions will support decent human habitation or lead to deplorable and dehumanising living conditions. Questions about well-being centre on access to essential needs for a thriving life. The justice perspective focuses on safeguarding the interests and welfare of future generations.

Population growth raises complex challenges for policymakers and ethicists, emphasising the need for ethically robust policies to address fertility rates and stabilise human numbers. The motivation behind population stabilisation lies in the direct correlation between population changes and consumption patterns.

"Population changes" encompass more than growth; they include migration, urbanisation, age and education dynamics. Human reliance on natural resources is crucial for producing goods for consumption and, as the population grows, the demand for them increases, impacting not only humans but also other species.

Human activity exerts the most extensive influence, placing substantial demands on Earth's finite resources. The planet's limited capacity poses ethical questions about how to respond to the increasing demand for natural resources in the face of their finite supply.

Human existence is intricately tied to the environment, forming the context for what is humanly possible. Ethical duties toward the environment, including non-human components, raise critical questions. Should humans acknowledge responsibilities towards mountains, rivers, forests, animals, and oceans?

Our attitude towards the environment is key

At the core of environmental ethics lies the question of whether the natural environment, in whole or in part, is an object of moral concern warranting duties of respect. Simultaneously, the ethics of means address the ethical justification for the technological choices used to produce goods for human consumption. This dual ethical reflection is pivotal in determining whether we perceive the environment merely as a resource or if we adopt respectful attitudes and duties toward it.

Central to these ethical considerations are values of dignity, human well-being, and intergenerational justice. These values directly impact human survival and flourishing for current and future generations, guiding the ethical choices needed to navigate a finite planet and its resources.

The ethical inquiry into our responsibilities towards non-human components in the environment, including the environment itself, is critical due to the adverse impact of our attitudes and actions on the natural world. Many ethical theories, primarily focused on human relations, contribute to large-scale environmental degradation by excluding non-human elements from moral consideration.

Two influential ethical theories, one religious and the other secular, shape our perspective on the environment. The religious view, rooted in Christianity, centres moral concern on humans bearing the divine image, neglecting the broader natural environment. The secular perspective, emphasising rationality as the highest good, justifies human-centric exploitation of the environment, perpetuating attitudes of disregard.

Environmental ethics emerges as a response to these human-centred theories, challenging the exclusion of the environment and its non-human inhabitants from moral consideration. Focusing on animals as a heuristic, environmental ethics questions our cultural, institutional, and individual attitudes towards their production and consumption. The ethical consideration of animals extends beyond mere resources for human consumption, advocating for their moral standing based on sentience.

Ethical reflections on animal rights extend to environmental policy, urging intentional support for sustainable food production. A shift towards plant-based foods becomes imperative to mitigate the high environmental costs associated with meat and fish production. Environmental ethics prompts a positive approach, urging the abandonment of anthropocentric moral theories in favour of humble and respectful attitudes toward the environment.

Weak anthropocentrism, recognising some elements of nature's intrinsic value while prioritising human interests, offers a basis for environmental ethics. This perspective allows criticism of excessive human consumption and fosters respect for the environment. Enlightened anthropocentrism, acknowledging indirect duties to the environment for human well-being, emphasises ethical decision-making in pursuit of economic growth.

A rethink is needed

Environmental ethics, rooted in these frameworks, guides policymakers to adopt sensitive approaches to economic growth that respect diverse cultures and prioritise environmental sustainability. Ultimately, it challenges society to rethink its attitudes and conduct towards the environment, promoting a harmonious coexistence that ensures the planet remains habitable for present and future generations.

To effectively address population growth and its ethical dimensions, a comprehensive approach must be taken, particularly in matters related to fertility. Debates in moral philosophy, especially regarding abortion, play a crucial role in contexts marked by unwanted pregnancies resulting from poverty, lack of economic opportunities, limited access to contraceptives, and inadequate sexual education.

Clear ethical perspectives are necessary to guide policies aimed at reducing fertility rates and the permissibility or impermissibility of abortion and contraceptives is a central question with significant implications for population policies.

Ethical theories, both religious and secular, shape perspectives on abortion. While religious views often forbid abortion based on the sanctity of life, secular perspectives, typically permitting abortion, emphasise factors like sentience. The stance on abortion correlates with views on contraceptives, creating a nexus between moral theories and family planning strategies.

Nuanced approach essential

Cultural beliefs, particularly in Africa, may influence the permissibility of abortion and contraceptives. For instance, some African cultures view abortion as impermissible due to metaphysical commitments related to the existence of a community of the unborn. Addressing such cultural beliefs requires a nuanced approach through proper ethical education, distinguishing between metaphysical and ethical issues.

To overcome cultural barriers, a focus on comprehensive education, especially ethical education, is essential. Emphasis should be placed on understanding cultural debates and beliefs that impact policy decisions regarding abortion and contraceptives. Secular approaches, aligned with human rights policies, can facilitate the establishment of family planning services, including accessible abortion clinics and contraceptives.

Education, particularly for women, emerges as a pivotal factor in managing population growth. Access to robust and meaningful education empowers women to make informed decisions about family planning, contributing to lower fertility rates. Global policymakers must prioritise women's education, particularly in economically disadvantaged regions, as it directly influences poverty alleviation and reduced fertility rates.

Addressing extreme poverty and high fertility rates requires a multifaceted approach. Elevating over one billion people out of absolute poverty must be done sustainably, considering limited natural capacities. Macro-ethical interventions, such as prioritising women's education, can play a significant role in achieving sustainable development goals and addressing population growth by empowering women with education and economic opportunities.

Dr Motsamai Molefe is a member of the Inclusive Society Institute's Advisory Council. This article is based on a paper titled "Ethical reflections on population challenges", which was published in the Institute's Journal for Inclusive Public Policy, Volume 3, Issue 2.