*[Ensia](http://ensia.com/voices/a-long-overdue-burial-for-the-population-vs-consumption-question/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)*, August 26, 2015

**A long-overdue burial for the population vs. consumption question**
By Stephanie Feldstein

When the topic of human population comes up, the reaction is often a knee-jerk one that reduces a complex conversation to a choice between fertility rates and overconsumption — as if they are mutually exclusive, when in fact they are part of the same problem. And while we debate this non-debate — Would we argue over whether clean air or clean water is more important? — the effects of population, consumption and production continue to ravage the planet.

The plain truth is they all need to be addressed, and soon.

The attempt to simply isolate the number of people on the planet from how we produce and consume, both for basic needs and excessive wants, defies logic and mathematical principles. Wealthier nations may have lower fertility rates, but they have higher levels of consumption. And production systems created with the tunnel vision of a single bottom line — focusing only on profits without considering social and environmental impacts — are responsible for immense amounts of damage to people, communities, wildlife and the planet.

These are global problems. People migrate, seeking better circumstances while enriching the world’s diversity of cultures. Wildlife and climate know no borders. Neither do extreme weather and drought, or poverty and inequality. Developed countries have exported consumer culture and industrial pollution, but have also exported advances in health care and aid to expand educational and economic opportunities for women and girls. Globalism, like technology, isn’t inherently good or bad. But by separating our globalized society into buckets of population or consumption, we oversimplify societal and environmental problems at a time when we need comprehensive and compassionate solutions.

For many environmentalists, these false dichotomies are dead on arrival. Yet they’ve been continually resurrected since the 1950s, primarily by pundits looking to provoke and simplify rather than inform and find solutions.

Often, any attempt to talk about population comes with the accusation that the world’s poor are to blame for environmental problems. Although the accusers often lack the community-based and rights-focused context of contemporary population advocacy, the history of human rights violations executed in the name of population control — including the ongoing attacks on women and immigrants in the U.S. — should never be minimized or ignored. But those injustices are all the more reason to end the debate so we can focus on policies and cultural shifts that lessen our impact on the environment and expand human rights and equity, particularly in the world’s most vulnerable communities, where the effects of population pressure, climate change and [pollution are felt the deepest](http://ensia.com/voices/the-leading-cause-of-death-in-developing-countries-might-surprise-you/).

It’s important to note, too, that the world’s growing population isn’t only a problem in the developing world. While it’s true that fertility rates in the U.S. are just below replacement rate, half of all U.S. pregnancies are unplanned and, in the past five years, there’s been an unprecedented attack on reproductive rights and comprehensive sex education that makes it even harder for women to make a conscious choice to have children if and when it’s best for them and their families. At the same time, we can’t ignore the lack of health care and freedom in other parts of the world that leads to high fertility rates. Instead, we need to increase equality through education for women and girls, and we need to make sure everyone has the tools to decide if, when and how many children they want to have. That choice shouldn’t be a privilege but a basic human right.

**How Will We Feed Everyone?**

As our population continues to grow, the most pressing question for humanitarians, environmentalists and economists is, “How will we feed everyone?” There are a number of complex sociopolitical factors tied into the response, but one thing is clear: We can’t sustain the world on the average American diet. This is a key scenario where population, consumption and production converge.

Americans eat more meat per capita than almost anyone else in the world. The greenhouse gas emissions, land use, habitat destruction and pollution from our industrial agriculture system reach far beyond individual farms. But it’s not just the by-products of our meat addiction extending beyond our borders: Our taste for meat has also spread, [leading to rising demand for animal products in other countries](http://ensia.com/voices/why-diet-matters/). In some areas, meat is moving from being an additional source of protein where better nutrition is desperately needed to the unhealthy, unsustainable territory of American-style overconsumption. To meet the new demand, damaging industrial production systems are expanding into new areas — [it’s estimated](http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/esag/docs/y4252e.pdf) that 75 percent of global meat production from now until 2030 will come from factory farms in developing nations.

There’s been a long-standing hope that we’ll have another Green Revolution to feed our growing population — in other words, that technology will save us all. But technology alone can’t solve the global crises we face today. Unless such technology is guided by the long-term, best interests of people and the environment, we wind up with “advances” like intensive animal agriculture and genetically engineered monocrops that decimate wildlife populations to grow food for livestock.

The solution to this surge of meat-dependent diets — like the solution to high fertility rates — isn’t to place blame on one population or another. It needs to start in our own backyard, reducing our own meat consumption and [reforming our food system](http://ensia.com/voices/changing-the-global-food-narrative/). Rather than exporting meat products and the factory farm industry for shortsighted financial gain, we need to look at how we can [foster healthier, more sustainable diets](http://ensia.com/voices/agroecology-can-help-fix-our-broken-food-system-heres-how/) on a global scale. Beyond this, we need to increase global resource equity by reducing consumption in wealthier nations so the planet can sustain the increased consumption developing nations need to improve health and opportunity.

It’s not just our food systems tangled in the web of population, consumption, production and equity, though. As population grows in developing nations, there’s a desperate need for more reliable energy systems to meet basic needs — including the necessary sanitation, [refrigeration](http://ensia.com/articles/what-the-cold-economy-means-for-a-warming-world/) and transportation to provide the voluntary reproductive health care services that would help lower fertility rates. This energy equity must be achieved by leapfrogging the polluting technology of the Industrial Revolution with [cleaner, more efficient sources](http://ensia.com/voices/its-time-to-invest-in-clean-energy-in-africa/); at the same time, wealthier nations need to reduce consumption while shifting to less damaging renewable energy systems as quickly as possible. As population grows, so will consumption and production of many things that are already devastating the environment, from energy to electronics to pesticides to plastics. It’s not a question of who does and doesn’t get to consume, but how we can continue to improve the quality of life worldwide while respecting the planet, the species we share it with and each other.

But before any of that real work can start, we first need to erase the false lines [dividing population, consumption and production](http://ensia.com/features/all-consuming/) that should have been dismissed decades ago. With climate change snapping at our heels — drastically changing the shape of coastal communities, agriculture and ecosystems — we can’t afford to waste any more time on scapegoats.