

HUNGER AND POPULATION EXPLOSION

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What is it like to be really hungry? I expect that at sometime you have all come home after an energetic game of football or netball or after a few hours when you have been too busy to eat, and said, "I'm starving!" But this hunger did not last long. If your meal was not ready for you, after a few slices of bread and butter you forgot all about those hunger pangs. But hunger does not mean missing one meal or even meals for a whole day. It means never having enough to eat. It means, when you have had some thing to eat at least as much again. It also means a situation in which you are always wondering where the next meal is coming from or even if there will be a next meal. Arthur Hopcraft of the *Guardian* said of starving children after visiting a nutrition centre in Kenya, "They are the children whose eyes stare as if blind, whose legs and arms are like sticks of liquorice, who neither cry nor laugh and who weigh 10 lb at the age of two years!"

Famine has been a problem since the beginning of time. The early hunter suffered grave shortages during the winter months and quite often these were serious enough to mean starvation for him and his family.

One of the first records of famine was carved in granite by an Egyptian Pharaoh. He said, "During my reign the Nile has not been in flood for seven years. Corn is scarce and food is lacking. Those who ran cannot even walk. The food bins are broken open and empty. It is the end of everything!"

We read in the Bible of many cases of famine. There were seven years of famine in Egypt and the surrounding countryside during the time of Joseph. Widespread disaster was only averted by the previous compulsory storage of food under Joseph's management during plentiful harvests. Egypt was saved from famine by this national effort but many people in the surrounding countries were left hungry. Joseph's own brothers came to Egypt from Palestine to buy grain.

From the birth of Christ to about 1800, there are records of famine in Europe in 350 different years – one famine every five years. In England during the same period there was at least one major famine every ten years. These were general famines when a large area of the country was affected but there were many more local famines. We can get some idea of these famines from our folk-lore. The stories of Robin Hood often involve local food shortages with Robin helping with transport of food, robbing the rich to feed the poor or poaching for them from the Royal forests.

But famines in Europe have been much less serious than in other parts of the world. China had ninety major famines in one century. Nine and a half million people perished in a

single famine which swept North China in the last century. The Russian famine in 1921 – 22 killed several million people. Ten million died in the great famine of Bengal 1969-70. As recently as 1942 in Bombay one million starved to death when the rice crop failed. In India in 1964-65 there was the worst famine of the century, owing to the failure of the monsoon, and many countries gave aid on a large scale and tried to help. However, imported food could not solve the problem. Even if there had been enough availability the ports could not cope with all the ships bringing the cargoes, and transport problems were so great that the food could not have been distributed to many of the isolated and hardest hit areas. A year later, India still faced an even worse threat of famine.

Famine may be caused by many things. It may be that there are just too many people for the amount of food available. It may be that crops have failed due to disease. Thousands, even millions, will die of starvation because of famines caused by lack of rain.

In fact in the world of today, not only is there not enough food, but each year there are many more people to eat it. The number of people in the world is rapidly increasing rather like a gigantic snowball which not only gets bigger as it rolls but goes faster as well. Half a million years ago the population of the world was very small but since then it has gradually increased, until by the birth of Christ the world population was about 200 – 300 million. The numbers doubled by 1650 and by 1850 doubled again to 1,000 million. Now the world population is over 3,000 million. The population is increasing at a rate which would double the numbers in only 40 years. A tremendous population explosion is taking place. It has been calculated that unless the growth is checked in some way, within two or three centuries there will only be enough room on the earth for people to stand up.

The main reason for population increase is due to the number of people who are born in any year being greater than the number who die – that is the difference between the birth rate and the death rate. For example, in the U.K. the birthrate for 1963 (number of births per 1,000 population) was 18.2 and the death rate (number of deaths per 1,000 population) was 11.6. The population is therefore growing at the rate of 6.6 per 1,000 of the population.

In the past only a fraction of the babies born grew up. Now in the industrial countries of the West, 19 out of 20 become adults. One couple on an average need only produce just over two children to replace themselves and keep the population at the same level.

Among the Western nations the decline in the death rate has been followed after an interval by the reduction in the birth rate so that the population is not now growing so fast. But even in these areas where people have only a comparatively small number of children the low death rate means that the population is still growing fairly rapidly. In the U.S.A., where on an average each woman has only three children the population increases by almost half as many again every generation.

In Asia and the Far East the death rate has been reduced rapidly by modern medicine and epidemic control. In Ceylon, for example, the death rate was reduced by one third in two

years by greatly reducing mortality from malaria. This was due to the discovery of DDT which killed off the mosquitoes which carry malaria.

Another example is yaws which until recently caused a great many deaths. This disease starts as little hard pimples which may join together to make blotches. It then spreads all over the body, forming ulcers. Muscles are destroyed and bones deformed. The sufferer becomes depressed and feels very ill. Soon after the discovery of penicillin it was realized that yaws could be cured in most cases by a single injection and in many others by just two injections. Many countries have carried out massive programmes to free their countrymen of yaws and in doing so have decreased the death rate rapidly.

The most important and the most difficult thing to achieve is a desire among individuals to limit the size of the family.

The study of the population growth indicates one of the greatest paradoxes of our time. The group of countries best able to support a rapidly growing population has a relatively low birth rate while the group least able to support their present population, let alone a larger one, has a very high birth rate.

Let us look for a moment at this second group, often called the under-developed countries, into which so many of the children of the world will be born. Everyone knows an under-developed country when he sees one. It is a country characterized by poverty, with beggars in the cities and villagers eking out a bare subsistence in the rural areas. It is a country lacking factories of its own, usually with inadequate supplies of power and light. It usually has poor roads and railways and not enough of them. Hospitals and schools and colleges are few and far between. Most people, particularly older people, cannot read or write. The goods the country exports are nearly always raw material which are much more subject to price fluctuations. This will have a bad impact on the economy.

The gap in living standards is bound to increase. In the past the population has not only been reduced by famine and disease but also by war. We have the power to abolish war if we have the will. But if one group of people continues to get poorer and sees its families and friends suffering great distress and unnecessary death while another group of people in the world gets richer, we are creating a situation which encourages the poor to make war on the rich.

The only long-term answer for these countries is to reduce their birth rate. But as I have explained this will take time and is not easy to achieve. What we must do in the meantime is to keep alive as many people as we can and at the same time make every effort to encourage the limitation of families.

NOTES

Words Explained:

pangs :	sudden sharp pain
Guardian :	an influential British newspaper
liquorice :	black substance used in medicine and as a sweet
carve in granite :	inscribed on stone
food bins :	great wide-mouthed boxes or vessels for grain, coal, etc.
disaster :	great, sudden trouble
avert :	keep off danger
local famines :	shortages of food in limited areas
folk-lore :	common beliefs, stories, handed down from early times
perish :	come to death, suffer destruction
cargo :	goods transported by ships
threat :	sign of coming danger or trouble
gigantic :	huge
population explosion:	sudden, unusual increase in population
census :	numbering of persons in a country by government
fraction :	small part
mortality :	number of deaths; death rate
pimples :	small hard spots caused by inflammation of skins
blotches :	red patches on skin
ulcer :	open sore
depressed :	feeling unhappy, low-spirited
massive programme:	great, extensive programmes
under-developed	
countries :	backward countries
eking out a bare	
subsistence :	earning just enough to live
power :	work, force produced by machines
few and far between:	rare
fluctuations :	irregular rise and fall
abolish :	do away with
limitation of families:	not having many children, having small families

ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS

1. What does hunger mean on a large scale as viewed by the author?
2. Describe some great famines of the past.
3. How do famines occur?
4. What is the main reason for population increase today?
5. What is meant by birth-rate and death-rate and how do they affect the population of a country?
6. What have public-health measures to do with increase in population?
7. Account for the high birth-rate in under-developed countries.
8. Why is birth rate not so high in the more advanced countries?
9. Give a brief account of the poor economic conditions prevailing in under-developed countries.