

Tackling the population taboo: Creating a Sustainable future for children

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Keynote Abstract:

The premise of this forum is that many of today's environmental woes are due to the number of contributors to those problems—that is, to the global population. Climate change, food scarcity, biodiversity loss, waste management, etc, are all made worse as more people contribute to them. A solution, then, naturally suggests itself: we need less people on the planet doing less consuming, producing, and emitting of greenhouse gases.

This sort of response, however, is a *moral* one. The claim sometimes hides its explicitly ethical foundation, but what it really suggests is that we *ought* to make fewer people, and perhaps even that you and I *ought* to make fewer people. And then lots of other claims might seem to follow: that it's bad for a population to have a high fertility rate; it's wrong to have a big family; and perhaps even that we ought to do something about it—for instance, consider population policies. But it will surprise no one that these are not popular claims. Not only are they contentious, but many people find them offensive. No one has the right, it might be objected, to tell anyone else how to form their family. And the history of population policy is rife with terrible human rights abuses and contaminated with eugenic reasoning. As natural as the response to overpopulation is, then, it is not unproblematic. There are legitimate worries that must be taken seriously.

In short, discussion of overpopulation is *ethically fraught*, and requires serious, careful moral reasoning. So that's one of the first things we'll do at this forum. Recognizing that we are not making merely empirical claims about, say, the planet's carrying capacity, but also moral claims about what we ought to do, we will reflect on the nature of these claims and whether they are defensible. In particular, we will investigate two, broad questions essential to the discussion of overpopulation. First, would it be permissible to adopt policies designed to lower fertility rates? And second, is it wrong for individuals to have a large family—or even any children at all?