

The **NO-NONSENSE GUIDE** to

WORLD POPULATION

Vanessa Baird

‘Publishers have created lists of short books that discuss the questions that your average [electoral] candidate will only ever touch if armed with a slogan and a soundbite. Together [such books] hint at a resurgence of the grand educational tradition... Closest to the hot headline issues are *The No-Nonsense Guides*. These target those topics that a large army of voters care about, but that politicians evade. Arguments, figures and documents combine to prove that good journalism is far too important to be left to (most) journalists.’

Boyd Tonkin,
The Independent,
London

About the author

Vanessa Baird is a co-editor of the New Internationalist magazine. Her previous books include *The No-Nonsense Guide to Sexual Diversity* (New Internationalist); *Sex, Love and Homophobia* (Amnesty International) and, as co-editor, *People First Economics* (New Internationalist).

Acknowledgements

Special thanks are due to Mohan Rao and Sarah Sexton for their detailed and insightful comments and suggestions. Any mistakes that remain are mine alone. Thanks are also due to several other writers and academics for their ground-breaking work – people like Betsy Hartmann, Matthew Connelly, Fred Pearce and David Satterthwaite who kindly wrote the Foreword.

And finally, thanks to the book's editor Chris Brazier and its designer Andrew Kokotka, whose skill and professionalism are a pleasure.

Dedication

In memory of Jane Brodie, a kind and true friend who remained intelligently curious, passionately engaged and open-minded to the end. The last of our many long, deep and wide-ranging conversations set me on the journey that resulted in this book.

About the New Internationalist

The **New Internationalist** is an independent not-for-profit publishing co-operative. Our mission is to report on issues of global justice. We publish informative current affairs and popular reference titles, complemented by world food, photography and gift books as well as calendars, diaries, maps and posters – all with a global justice world view.

If you like this *No-Nonsense Guide* you'll also enjoy the **New Internationalist** magazine. Each month it takes a range of subjects, from Iraq to Population, Climate Justice to Islam in Power, exploring each issue in a concise way that is easy to understand. The main articles are packed with photos, charts and graphs, and each magazine also contains music, film and book reviews, country profiles, interviews and news.

To find out more about the **New Internationalist**, visit our website at: **www.newint.org**

The **NO-NONSENSE GUIDE** to

WORLD POPULATION

Vanessa Baird

New Internationalist

The No-Nonsense Guide to World Population
Published in the UK in 2011 by New Internationalist™ Publications Ltd
55 Rectory Road
Oxford OX4 1BW, UK
www.newint.org
New Internationalist is a registered trade mark.

© Vanessa Baird/New Internationalist

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, electrostatic, magnetic tape, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior permission in writing of the Publisher.

Cover image: Elke Van de Velde/Getty Images
Series editor: Chris Brazier
Design by New Internationalist Publications Ltd.

Printed by Bell and Bain Ltd
who hold environmental accreditation ISO 14001.



British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.
A catalogue for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN 978-1-906523-46-6

Foreword

‘There are shortages that threaten the world and the survival of humans and other species within it – scarcities of equity, justice, genuine democracy and respect for nature.’

‘The “problem” with global population – if there is one – is too many rich people consuming too much, not too many poor people.’

‘The idea that population pressure inevitably leads to increased land degradation is a much-repeated myth. It does not.’

These quotes from this book give a good sense of what it is about. ‘Population is so often about something else, something other than sheer human numbers.’ As this book describes, many of those lobbying for ‘population control’ are a pretty unsavory bunch. They use inaccurate or misleading statements about what they term ‘over-population’ as a cover for their racist views or their support for eugenics. They include the anti-immigration lobby in high-income nations who often exaggerate the scale of immigration. As this book points out, the countries with the biggest increase in refugees in recent years are actually not those with high incomes but those in Asia and Africa that are next to conflict-torn nations.

But as support for ‘over-population’ was waning in the 1990s, so the dangers posed by climate change came to be recognized and allowed a new set of inaccurate claims – this time regarding the contribution of population growth to climate change. If the impact of climate change is portrayed as tens of millions of immigrants rushing to high-income nations, it helps underpin completely inappropriate responses. If population growth is a major contributor to the growth in greenhouse-gas emissions, this will also

underpin completely inappropriate responses. And neither of these responses do anything to address the underlying drivers of climate change – the high-consumption lifestyles of the wealthy and the fossil-fuel powered production system that caters for and encourages their demands.

‘People are not pollution. Blaming too many people for driving climate change is like blaming too many trees for causing bush fires’ (quoting Simon Butler).

But this book does recognize the need for more attention to supporting what might be called a population policy but is better termed the provision of healthcare services that include a strong focus on sexual and reproductive health. ‘When women can make their own fertility choices, without pressure, without coercion, it is better for them, better for their families, better for their communities and better for the world too.’

When the needed equity, justice and genuine democracy mentioned above also means attention to the other needs of low-income groups – for secure housing, adequate livelihoods and access to water and sanitation – we know that this would bring dramatic reductions in infant, child and maternal mortality, and in population growth rates. But this too does not reduce the high-consumption lifestyles of the wealthy.

This is a very readable, jargon-free book that challenges the many myths and inaccuracies about population. In so doing, it also challenges us all to rethink what the real drivers of resource shortages, land degradation and global warming actually are.

David Satterthwaite

International Institute for Environment and
Development (IIED)

CONTENTS

Foreword by David Satterthwaite	5
Introduction.....	8
1 Are too many people being born?	11
2 A brief history of population	24
3 Being alive, staying alive – and growing old.....	41
4 A woman's body	55
5 For richer, for poorer	65
6 On the move	76
7 Population and climate change.....	92
8 How can we feed nine billion?	102
9 Wild things	117
10 Conclusion	129
Resources.....	133
Index	134

Introduction

WHEN SHE WAS young, my great-aunt – a tiny, sprightly woman who painted vast canvasses – had wanted to become a nun. Then she met a Flemish poet and they fell in love. She agreed to marry him on one condition: that they had 12 children. True to the old baking tradition, they made 13.

Her niece, my mother, also briefly flirted with the holy life. Her tryst with celibacy was equally convincing. As the eighth of her brood, I approach the subject of global population with a touch of trepidation. By most people's standard of reasonable family size I really shouldn't be here.

But then the subject of population – and in particular population growth – is one that seems capable of provoking all kinds of emotions.

Today there are around 7 billion people occupying this planet. That's up from 5.9 a decade ago. By 2050 it is projected to top 9 billion (see chart).

Talk of 'overpopulation' has been with us for some time. Already, in 1798, when there were a mere 978 million people in the world, mathematician Thomas Robert Malthus was warning of an impending catastrophe as human numbers exceeded the capacity to grow food.

He was, as it turned out, wrong. Population increased but so did farming efficiency.

Since then, the global history of counting people has gone through some murky periods, the most extreme human rights abuses having taken place under the mantle of 'population control'.

Often the real cause of concern was the fact that others – be they people of other races or social classes or religions or political allegiances – were reproducing themselves perhaps at a faster rate.

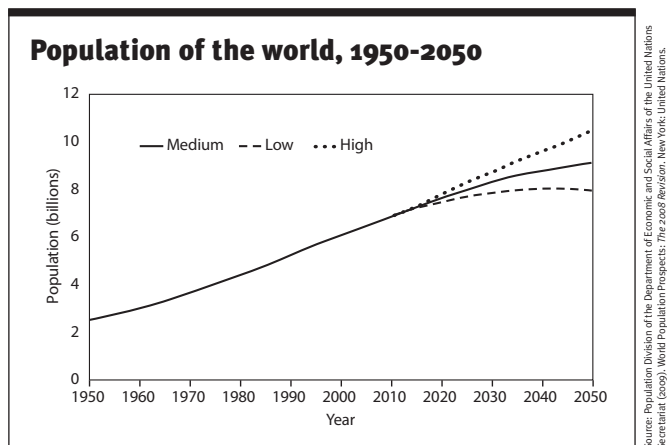
That attitude is not consigned to history. In 2009 Michael Laws, Mayor of Wanganui District in New

Zealand/Aotearoa, was proposing that in order to tackle the problems of child abuse and murder, members of the ‘appalling underclass’ should be paid not to have children. ‘If we gave \$10,000 to certain people and said “we’ll voluntarily sterilize you” then all of society would be better off,’ he told the *Dominion Post* newspaper.

Most contemporary worries about population are less offensively expressed. For many people the issue is primarily an environmental one. The logic is simple. The more people there are, the more greenhouse gas is emitted, the more damage is done. Any attempts to reduce carbon emissions will be negated by runaway population growth.

Food is another worry. Will there be enough to feed the world? Already one billion of us go hungry – what will it be like when another two or three billion join the planet? Many people are saying it will be a hell. The world is at breaking point; overpopulation will tip us over the edge.

Some are even saying we need fewer people than we currently have. The UK-based Optimum Population



Trust is suggesting that to achieve sustainability we should be aiming to reduce global population by at least 1.7 billion people. The Voluntary Human Extinction Movement goes even further, saying that the best thing anyone can do for the Earth is to stop breeding altogether and give other species a chance at least of surviving the mess we have made.

On the other side are people who point out that such apocalyptic scenarios are not new; that, time and again, fears about population have concealed underlying problems of inequality and have been used to push other agendas, such as anti-immigration. Population is growing, they say, but we humans will do what we have always done faced with challenges: innovate, adapt, get more efficient, and use our ingenuity to survive.

Who is right? Should we be taking more notice of the ever louder clamor of alarm bells? Or is today's population panic as unfounded and potentially manipulative as earlier panics turned out to be? And is 'how many' people the main issue anyway?

Recently, I set out to do a special report on the subject for *New Internationalist* magazine. Back in the 1980s I'd been involved in producing press kits for the UN Population Fund. But that was a while ago. Since then I'd had only occasional contact with the issue and I didn't really know what to make of today's increasingly heated debates.

This book is a journey through what has become a veritable minefield. As the story of global population began to unfold I saw it to be a gripping narrative of life, death, sex, power, religion, money, food and the future of the planet itself.

The story begins with babies... or perhaps a little before that.

Vanessa Baird
Oxford, 2011