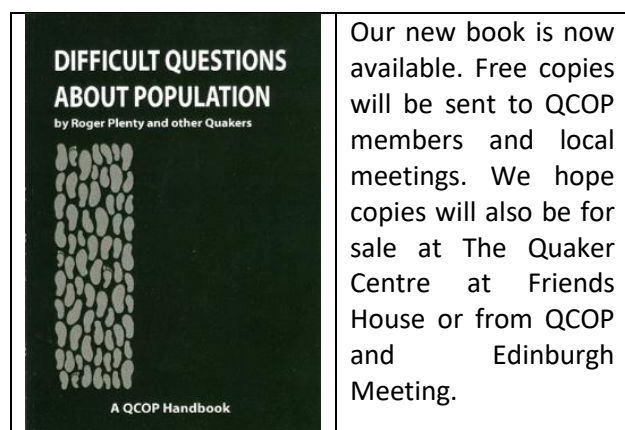


# QUAKER CONCERN OVER POPULATION

## NEWSLETTER 7

AUTUMN 2020

**Difficult Questions about Population by  
Roger Plenty. [ISBN 978-1-5272-7190-6](#)**



### A lesson from Sub Saharan Africa

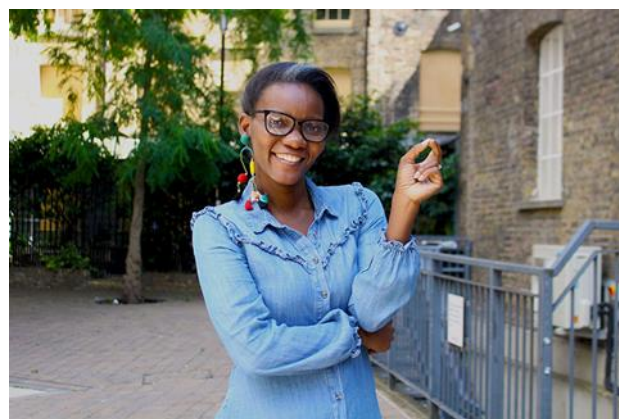
We live on a finite planet with finite resources – what we do on the planet stays on the planet. I learned this from an inspired teacher at secondary school, who lit a match and after blowing it out, asked what had happened to the heat – his answer “it stays on the planet as does everything we do!”

This has led me to being aware of an ever-increasing population on this finite planet, but I have also become sadly aware of the negative emotional response from so many people, especially Friends, to any mention of this concern.

I attended the formative meeting of the Hong Kong Friends of the Earth in the 70s and had the audacity to ask what would be their population policy? I was

turned on, both from the stage and the floor, as an emotional response made me feel very small for daring to raise the issue which was ‘racist, sexist, white supremacist, etc!’ Things haven’t changed today and I have to think carefully and pluck up courage before mentioning the ‘P’ word!

I was, therefore, very pleased to read recently an article: ‘Population Voice’ by Florence Blondell who challenged the naysayers who use emotion to restrict free speech and thinking when she examined the ethical justification for campaigning to reduce the growth of the global population



*Florence Blondell - Population Matter's former Campaign's Officer*

Florence came from Sub Saharan Africa and works for Population Matters and argues that if we don't talk about our growing numbers, we will be doing an injustice not only to nature but to the women who are mostly expected to reproduce and fill the earth. She writes passionately:

*"I am irked when organisations ignore talking about population or when they talk about it and totally misunderstand what it is about. I do not like it when most assume that in low-income countries, or Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) in particular, where I am from, people do not mind the continuous unprecedented upsurge in numbers. Most people fighting against the discussion, especially people living in countries with high income, make excuses like that's racist, eugenics etc. I find the racist point an annoyance. What's racist about it? Have you been to our countries? Have you been to the rural areas which make up most of the countries? Have you smelt the stinking poverty and hunger? Noticed children hanging around their mothers hungry? Found a household with about 5 children under 5 years and another in the womb – with oldest girls married off at 13?"*

She fails to conceal her anger when she goes on:  
*"Why would you be against anyone honestly talking about population when its growth mostly oppresses young girls and women?"*

then continues:

*"Please start talking about population growth and its effects on the environment and on young girls and women. Much more could be done to ensure that all women have access to modern contraceptives and have the decisional autonomy over how many children they have. The Guttmacher Institute estimates that about 218 million women in low-income countries do not want to become pregnant. They have no access to safe and effective modern contraceptives and are held back by 'defenders' like you, plus societal expectations hammered into us right from when we start crawling."*

And ends with:

*"Although I know that you and I do not need convincing, there are still a lot of people who do, which is the reason why our cause is so important, not only to ourselves but to our planet and future generations."*

Please read the full article and share:

<http://qcop.org.uk/a-black-woman-replies>

David Tinsley – Lewes Meeting

## **Zoom Meeting with Friends in New Zealand**

On Thursday 8th October we joined Friends in New Zealand who were interested in the population issue for a Zoom Meeting. The meeting was held at 19.00 hours their time, 07.00 UK time which meant an early start for QCOP Steering Group members! Ten overseas Friends joined us, including two guests from Tasmania.

The Meeting allowed us to remember what QCOP stands for: an understanding of the negative impact that uncontrolled population rise can have on the development of sustainable communities. Most friends recognise and accept how consumption, inequality, loss of biodiversity, climate change etc. contribute to the failure of building an equal and sustainable world, but the impact of population is often too easily disregarded. In the meeting we stressed the need to avoid blame and criticism but instead look for the reasons which lead to unsustainable population growth and work to change them. It is good to know that Quaker 'concern' over population is found in other countries than the UK.

## **International ZOOM Meeting with QCOP – feedback from Australian Friends**

On 8th October 2020, Members of Australia's Tasmanian Regional Meeting's Earth Care Working Group attended a ZOOM discussion with QCOP's David Tinsley and Friends from Aetereo/New Zealand. David presented a video of Sir David Attenborough's 2018 address to the Royal Society which highlighted human overpopulation as the root cause of climate change and habitat destruction.

## **QCOP working with schools - Greta Thunberg and our children's future**

Through the excellent work of Greta Thunberg, many young people and children now have a real concern about their future and ask what they can

do to make things better. They understand and recognise that climate change, inequality, loss of biodiversity and consumption pose a real question to the continuance of life on earth as they know it. However, a 'driver' of these: 'Population', is often not discussed for many reasons including: the challenges of discussing sex, concerns about changing family structures and the misplaced link between population and racism and eugenics.

QCOP has prepared workshops for schools, delivered in person or by Zoom, and offered them initially to Quaker Schools. However, we would be delighted to deliver these to other schools either as a stand-alone lesson or as part of a school's sex and relationship programme. If QCOP members have contact with schools either as parents/carers/grandparents etc. or as governors please make these workshops known. We have a brochure on how these sessions (which involve: direct teaching, small group discussion, role play and research) work – please email QCOP for a copy.

## **QCOP meets QUNO**

On 30th September, 6 members of the Steering Group met via Zoom with Lindsey Fielder Cook and Beatrice Liese from the Quaker UN office in Geneva. We had written to Lindsey asking for her idea on how to improve our effectiveness in talking to Quakers about the place of Population within the sustainability debate. She had been sent our website details, our communication policy, the latest draft of the *Difficult Questions* book and what we have done so far.

In précis here are their suggestions:

The difficult subject of Population would be more acceptable and meaningful for Quakers if it was presented as embedded more obviously within the concept and vision of a Sustainable Society. Rather than facing Quakers with the challenge of Population issues, we need to give them an idea of how life could be, ie. societies living more sustainably, with greater equality and the empowerment of women. This could be more clearly stated in our materials, such as the Home Page of our website.

Beatrice commented that QUNO doesn't advocate on many issues. They practice quiet diplomacy, bringing people together on many linked subjects. Lindsey had used this technique with US Quakers to find a shared narrative on climate change, searching together for the root causes of the problem. In fact, she said that climate change, like population, was not the greatest challenge; rather they are both symptoms. Justice and Equality are the challenges.

She suggested we talk and write more directly about why birth rates are so high, rather than just stating the consequences. She mentioned drawing a contrast between say Scandinavian countries (which are very sustainable and with a low birth rate) and Kenya. It might help to understand and write about what the driver is behind such high fertility and unemployment and why there is so much poverty in Africa compared, say, to Sweden. In our debriefing afterwards, the Steering Group decided to refresh the website home page, long overdue. We would appreciate help from members on this. The new book *Difficult Questions*, will also now start with a reference to population issues in the wider context of the Sustainable Planet. It was also decided to investigate running a zoom event for members and others in the next few months which more firmly links Population with the vision of the future, how a Sustainable Planet might look.

## **Planned Future Events**

### **Talk by Jonathon Porritt to YMG**

It is hoped that the talk by Jonathon Porritt's planned for YMG in 2020 will now take place at a YMG in 2021. Further details to follow.

### **A Hexham Debate (online)**

**The Future of Humanity Depends on the Size of our Population! – A talk by Simon Beard**

This talk at 11am -12.30pm, on Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> March 2021 on Zoom will be part of the Hexham Debate series. You may recall Simon's very oversubscribed and successful talk at Britain Yearly Meeting in 2019. He is the programme manager at the Cambridge University Centre for the Study of Existential Risk and his main research focus is on

population ethics. As a BBC New Generation Thinker he has contributed to BBC Newsnight and Radio 3 programmes and is an associate tutor at Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre.

These debates carry on “a tradition of active radical debate essential for ensuring freedom and justice for all’ is an initiative of Hexham Quaker Meeting. A speaker talks for 30-45 minutes, followed by a questions and discussion. Recent speakers include Richard Reeve, Oxford Research Group; Rupert Read, Philosophy, UEA; Peter Gatrell, Economic History, Univ. Manchester; Paul Rogers, Peace Studies, Univ. Bradford. They are recorded for the website: <https://hexhamdebates.wordpress.com/>.

To attend (via Zoom) you subscribe (free of charge) to the mailing list via this website. Details will be sent to QCOP members nearer the date of the talk. This should be a most thought-provoking event.

## Remembering Mechai

In the 1970s Thailand began an ambitious family planning programme. The Ministry of Public Health was prepared to be pragmatic and innovative, but the success of the programme was due in a large part to the creativity and humour of one man.

Born in Bangkok, Mechai Viravaidya qualified in economics at the University of Melbourne and when back in Thailand was concerned about the lives of the rural poor. He saw that unwanted large family size was causing poverty and driving a move to the cities, which for many young people led to prostitution. He saw that access to contraception was vital, so in 1974 he founded the Community-Based Family Planning Service, now the Population and Community Development Association (PDA). By 2011 the average family size in Thailand had reduced from 7 to 2 or less. This was in marked contrast to the Phillipines, which had begun a family planning programme at the same time, but where family size continued to grow. The Phillipines had to contend with the Roman Catholic Church and a model of provision relying on health professionals. Mechai, however, having found a saying of the Buddha that many children bring hardship, persuaded monks to write it on their prayer fans and display it in public. He also

persuaded abbots to bless pills and condoms. In an open society he could be daring. With the intent of making condoms as readily available as cabbages, he founded a gourmet restaurant in Bangkok ‘Cabbages and Condoms’ with a clinic next door. The proceeds bought pigs for village women's projects and better sanitation. Funds were limited, but Mechai used some government money to hold Vasectomy Days, timed to coincide with popular Thai festivals. The king’s birthday, for example, was Royal Vasectomy Day, with parties for families who took part. Every child was given a crown. Of course, some condoms can be blown up like balloons...

He was involved in wider issues. As well as living conditions, the threat posed by sex tourism and the plight of children orphaned by HIV. I met him in 2002 and joined him handing out condoms in Bangkok’s red light district (the hard-core part, not the one tourists see). Typically, Mechai had made it an occasion for both health promotion and a fantastic fun party. I recall a sex workers’ fashion show and cabaret which was glorious. Now 79 Mechai is now chairman of the PDA. He is greatly respected in his country and is a recipient of the Gates Foundation award for his work in population and prevention of sexually transmitted disease. He would be amused by our preoccupation with monuments and institutions named after famous men. “I am proud to have a building named after me” he said. “It’s a latrine.”

*Jeanette Cayley*

## Our Newsletter

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