

Putting Population at the Heart of Sustainability
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Director of the Forum for the Future

The issue of world population is rarely discussed, but it is about to reach 7 billion. The speaker would be writing an invited article for the Independent to mark the event. A major problem was how the world would feed the estimated 9 billion by 2050.

Mr Porritt spoke of a visit to Mumbai, a city of 16 million expected to reach 22 M by 2020. He drew a distinction between the poverty and lack of running water compared with the opulence of his hotel where there was no notice about saving water. A growing problem was water scarcity or stress with 70% of the world affected by 2025.

India will become the world's most populated country by 2020, but is not controlling its growth of population apart from Kerala. Reasons for this are the rights of families to decide their number of children and the lack of birth control services. International funding for birth control has been declining, despite an International Conference in 1994 agreeing that basic contraception be available to all women.

The most extreme human rights issue is China with its one child/family. Chinese politicians ask whether the world would prefer no limit on population, with a resulting extra 400M people. China has decided to limit the growth of its population to enable it to achieve greater prosperity.

Considering CO₂ emissions/capita, the UK on current rates has some 25 years before it trips the unsafe threshold. If its population was to decline by 50% it would have 60 years to reach the limit. The higher the world population the greater will be CO₂ emissions. The Population Matters Forum suggested that families be restricted to two children, but this was rejected in a campaign led by the Daily Mail. There were vicious attacks on the Forum which showed the intensity of feeling.

Mr Porritt concluded that population and sustainability are inter-connected, and so far the former has been ignored by politicians. He believed we will control population growth, but it is uncertain whether it will occur quickly enough to have a major effect on climate change.

Given on Thursday 20th October at the Royal Agricultural College