

# Ending the Explosion:

## Population Policies and Ethics for a Humane Future

William G. Hollingsworth

*Ending the Explosion: Population Policies and Ethics for a Humane Future*

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Reviewed by David Simcox, Senior Fellow, Negative Population Growth, Inc.

### Two years ago the world

badly needed William Hollingsworth's tough-minded but humane prescription for urgent reduction of human fertility.

His book offers what the 1994 UN Conference in Cairo on Population and Development (UNCPD) should have produced but studiously avoided: a strategy and a moral and political justification for a global effort to reduce world fertility to replacement level in the next 15 to 20 years. Just such an urgent endeavor, he warns, is the world's best chance to stabilize its population at less than 10 billion by the end of the next century. A central argument of this book is that humankind's ability to limit its own fertility is now the most critical determinant of finding or losing a humane future.

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Where the UNCPD uttered only exhortations, the author prescribes fertility and population goals and timetables. While the UNCPD soft-pedaled money talk, Hollingsworth suggests the sums needed and their sources. Most crucially, he makes the case that incentives and disincentives, a concept scorned at Cairo, can reduce fertility while enhancing human freedom and dignity.

It is folly, says Hollingsworth, to wait for glacial social trends such as the improved status of women or economic development to slow fertility in time to prevent a population disaster. Women's rights are a moral imperative in themselves, but not a cure-all for exploding population. Waiting for a demographic transition, which is unpredictable and at best gradual, is more temporizing the world can't afford.

Two tough tasks must be begun promptly. First, family planning services must be provided to those who now want lower fertility but lack the means — about 1 in 5 of the world's women of childbearing age. The second task is far harder. Effective contraception can only lower fertility enough if most couples want no more than two children. Individual and community incentives are vital in lowering desired family size.

### The Greatest Immorality: Massively Tragic Overpopulation

For ethicist Hollingsworth, an ordained minister and Professor of Law at Tulsa University, the greatest violation of human dignity will not be democratically-chosen antinatalist incentives, but a global population between 12 billion and 17 billion by 2100 — a terrifyingly likely outcome with today's global population momentum if attainment of replacement fertility is delayed.

Massively tragic overpopulation will not redeem, liberate or dignify anyone. Rather, it will imprison the human spirit, heighten economic inequality and kindle unending strife and despair.

Where is the human dignity, Hollingsworth asks, in a trend that will yield rising child mortality and morbidity, extinction of species, and apocalyptic pollution? He sees overpopulation as intrinsically at war with the preciousness of every person. The self-perceived and socially perceived value of each human suffers in a world of too many people.

### Incentives and Disincentives: Antidote to Coercion

Incentives can expand freedom and dignity. They can signal the larger society's support for the childbearing couple against extended family and traditional pressures for high fertility. Planners must weigh whatever coercion that may come from incentives against the co-

ercion inherent in the status quo. The author examines the subtle and shifting line between coercive and humane incentives with realism and sensitivity.

The author anticipates and rebuts the long-held moral objections to incentives — they encourage abortion; bear unduly on the poor; deny freedom of choice; “monetize” childbearing; or impose Western cultural norms. He responds:

- Sound family planning will reduce abortions, along with maternal and infant mortality.
- The poor are already those most burdened by their societies’ pressures for large families. But any program of incentives and disincentives can and must apply equally to all.
- Freedom of choice is essential in a humane, non-coercive program. Disincentives must never be life-threatening. But freedom to choose can never mean that the individual’s choices themselves are cost-free.
- The seeming economic advantage of children has long been a factor in high fertility. State and community incentives can bring solutions other than more child-bearing to the search for economic security.
- The plummeting world death rate that has sustained the population explosion itself reflects the penetration of such Western cultural norms as public health and antibiotics. The West has a moral obligation to help deal with the effects it helped bring about.

Incentives envisioned by Hollingsworth might even involve priority access for smaller families to some jobs, advanced education, housing, or fertility taxes. If it sounds draconian, Hollingsworth reminds us that scarcity is the draconian reality — one that overpopulation would tragically intensify.

## From A Conscientious Effort, Quick Results

Hopeful of generous Western aid, Hollingsworth optimistically estimates rapid dramatic results from a combination of endeavors in family planning, health, education and direct incentives. Fertility in developing nations would likely fall by about one child per woman every three to four years, reaching replacement level before 2015.

His scenario may sound too optimistic. The third world lacks the participatory institutions to build a democratic consensus for prompt fertility reduction. The process of creating goals and incentives democratically would, for many societies, be an unnatural and, accordingly, a time-consuming act.

Yet what is a better alternative? Certainly not the dilatory, “something will turn-up” approach of the UN’s population conferences. Less palatable authoritarian measures are likely if the problem is allowed to grow. Hollingsworth points to a way out of a disastrous population trap that is within the world’s means and morally defensible.

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The book’s good advice is valid for growing developed countries such as our own. The remaining pronatalist biases in American society must be offset with education and incentives if U.S. population growth is to be halted quickly and begin to recede to a size that is sustainable indefinitely.




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