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Thanks Andrew for your work highlighting these immensely complex issues. I am certain these issues are important. I am equally confident that "mainstream" opinion, be it from (most) environmentalists, from almost all demographers and from most economists has been shamefully complacent in the last few decades. If this sounds too alarmist, consider the opinion held about Wall St 12 months ago, by most economists, stockbrokers and regulators. These financial "experts" proved hopelessly, culpably wrong.

Similarly, I fear a form of naive groupthink has for several decades pervaded the demography and economic literature, and our descendants will lament the lack of insight of many of these "experts". Solving the population problem is intimately linked to global sustainability. That challenge has numerous dimensions -- including future food security (a task likely to be heightened by climate change), "peak oil" and the global deterioration of per capita water quantity and quality.

But if I had to identify the single biggest problem, it would be the extent of global inequality. Too many people continue to act and think on a small scale, primarily caring for the well-being of themselves, their families, and occasionally people of a similar faith, color or belief. The scale of global inequality is extraordinary and shameful. It is not absurd to speculate that a "fortress" (or enclave) world is evolving before our eyes. Within the enclave, people have ample food, access to health care, and are subject to good governance. Judges (in the main) apply the law. Outside the fortress live people in Zimbabwe, the Congo, and Darfur. So do many tribal and minority populations in Indonesia, Bangladesh and Burma. Consider the Rohingya, the minority Muslim population of Bangladesh. There are reports, from only last week, that 500 of these unfortunate people were denied entry into Thailand. Even worse, they were forced back into the ocean in leaky boats without engines, and with little food or water. Hundreds are thought to have drowned (<http://www.abc.net.au/am/content/2008/s2471660.htm>).

Confident assurances that poverty will be solved with "more of the same" economic policies should, by now, be thoroughly discredited. However the voice from the very poorest of the global population is almost silent on the world stage. The Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) recently estimated that the number of people living with daily hunger has increased, and is now almost one billion people. This is more than the number of hungry people who were alive 40 years ago. These hungry people do not reliably consume enough calories to work hard. The Indian author P Sainath describes "rotating hunger", a phenomenon in which family members take turns to eat enough food to perform a day's labor. They lack energy to learn. Almost all of the very poor will also have been deficient in micronutrients (especially iron and beneficial fatty acids) since conception. Many are born into families where nearly everyone is in the same situation. They lack education, and - even if they get education - they often lack the capacity to learn well, due not only to tiredness, but to brain damage because of chronic nutrient deficiency. It is thus unrealistic to expect these people to agitate and to advocate for a fairer deal for themselves. To the contrary, they are very easy to exploit.

Above this "claste" (<http://www.springerlink.com/content/u51uu862p2388133/?p=d28e228cca6b473b8c3430b03091739c&pi=4%20>) of the world's poorest people are people who are slightly better fed, and slightly better educated. Some of them perform functions valued by people within the fortress, such as staffing flag of convenience vessels, or as part of the "floating population" who perform the most menial, monotonous, and dangerous work in China. People in these poorest "clastes" also have the lowest control over their fertility. They have the highest birthrates, and the lowest life expectancy. If global population does reach 9 billion (a highly questionable assumption, it is instead plausible that infectious diseases, violence and starvation will intervene in some of the lawless regions beyond the fortress worlds -- consider Rwanda in 1994, HIV/AIDS affected parts of sub-Saharan Africa, and Zimbabwe today) then it is likely to mean that hundreds of millions of these additional people will remain locked in intractable poverty. An alternative is possible. If the incoming US administration can transfer some of its immense military spending towards a global "campaign of hope" then hope would revive, not only for the poor but for the world as a whole. A "fortress world" might seem superficially attractive, at least for people already within the fortress. But think about this for a minute. Could it not be that the pirates of Somalia, the oil raiders of Ogoniland, and even many suicide bombers are the forerunners of people attacking those within the fortress? See www.bodhi.net.au

— Colin Butler, Canberra Australia