

# editorial:

## *‘A step further than Sodom?’*

Is six billion people too many? At one extreme are those who see human population growth as the planet’s major problem - through exacerbating starvation, environmental destruction and slaughter. At the other are those who see advancing technology and international collaboration producing a world where everyone reaches the consumption levels of California.<sup>1</sup>

In this issue of *Triple Helix* John Guillebaud and Greg Gardner represent neither pole of opinion and agree that there is a huge difference between coercive population control on the one hand and responsible family planning on the other. But there is less meeting of minds on the environmental impact of increased numbers and on who should do what.

Whether the world is overpopulated is debatable. All the world’s buildings would fit in Scotland or Ireland alone and the world’s population could currently stand shoulder to shoulder on the Isle of Wight. World per capita food production has more than kept pace with population and Europe’s own past demonstrates that fertility can be managed effectively - even without contraceptives - as living standards improve. Furthermore citizens of the developing world choose large families for good reasons, as insurance against an uncertain future in circumstances of high infant mortality, low and insecure income and labour intensive farming.<sup>2</sup>

Family planning combined with economic development allows couples to plan the number and spacing of their children in the light of their own circumstances and beliefs. But imposed population control, with all that involves, coupled with mounting developing world debt and economic austerity measures which slash health and education budgets, is nothing short of brutal exploitation.<sup>3</sup> Our stewardship of the earth is not a licence to exploit but to govern wisely. We cannot impose solutions on the world’s poor without addressing our complicity in unjust economic structures, environmentally destructive technologies, and consumptive lifestyles.

Sodom came under God’s judgment, at least in part, because she was ‘arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; (she) did not help the poor and needy’ (Ezekiel 16:49). This description fits our Western World well - but if we actively exploit and manipulate the developing world we are in real danger of going a step further even than Sodom.

*‘Do not exploit the poor... and do not crush the needy... for the Lord will take up their case and will plunder those who plunder them’ (Proverbs 22:22-23).*

**Peter Saunders**

### References

1. McMichael T, Guillebaud J, King M. Population - the two ‘wisdoms’. *BMJ* 1999; 319:931-932
2. Bunn A. Contraceptive Commotion. *Nucleus* 1995; July:8-16
3. Paul J, Saunders P. Taking an Interest in Debt? *Nucleus* 1998; October:12-20

