

## LESSON 8: IS HUNGER CAUSED BY OVERPOPULATION?

Many myths surround the subject of world hunger. Myths block a clear understanding of the **real** causes of hunger. In this lesson students analyze a popular hunger myth which blames overpopulation for widespread hunger. Students compare the population density and infant mortality rates (a measure of hunger) in different countries to discover that some densely populated countries experience very low levels of hunger, while other countries with low population density experience severe hunger problems. Students explore other forces behind hunger in these countries and discuss the role myths play in perpetuating hunger.

### TEACHER BACKGROUND READING

The world's population **is** increasing and this increase certainly compounds all the crises with which the world is trying to cope --- hunger, environmental degradation and poverty, etc. Slowing population growth will, no doubt, ease those pressures, but before we blame overpopulation for the growing hunger problem, let's consider: (1) why needy people in developing countries **want** so many children? (2) how potential farmland is used around the world, and (3) who consumes most of the world's resources?

(1) **WHY DO NEEDY PEOPLE IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES WANT MANY CHILDREN:**

The majority of people in developing countries spend their lives working the land --- their survival depends on it. **The more helping hands a family has, the more food it can produce for consumption or for sale.** Many urban families also depend on the labor of children who earn small wages as street vendors, domestic and factory workers.

In impoverished regions where infant mortality rates are high, parents lose many of their children to disease and hunger before the children are five years old. This prompts parents to have **more** children with the hope that a few will survive to care for the parents when they are old and unable to work.

The two reasons above indicate that economic insecurity causes parents to have more children. In societies where women have little or no access to education or paid job opportunities, producing children is a woman's primary source of social identity and self-esteem. Fertility is a status symbol.

These facts suggest that **hunger and poverty cause overpopulation** - not the other way around! Recent studies carried out by the UN in forty countries indicate that educating girls is a crucial strategy for reducing population growth and ending poverty and hunger. Women who have

access to education and jobs outside the home have fewer and healthier children. The reasons: school delays marriage and children; educated women are more apt to plan for their babies according to how well they will be able to care for them --- these women have options in life other than child rearing, and their earnings make them more valuable outside the home. Families who are assured of access to basic necessities have fewer children.

(2) NOT ENOUGH LAND FOR ALL OF US? THINK AGAIN!

Before we blame too many people for taking up too much potential farmland, we must consider how the world's farmable land is currently being used. In both the developing and industrial worlds, arable land that could be used to grow food staples is lost every year to industrial development and cash-crop agriculture. How is the land used where you live?

(3) NOT ENOUGH RESOURCES FOR ALL OF US? DON'T BLAME OVERPOPULATION, BLAME OVERCONSUMPTION.

At current rates world population is projected to rise 48% (to 8.3 billion) by the year 2025 --- mostly in developing countries. While we should focus on empowering women as a means of lowering fertility rates, it is important to remember that even though developing countries have most of the world's people, people in industrial countries use up most of the world's resources. For instance, every new inhabitant of the U.S. makes a sixty-fold greater contribution to global warming than does an additional Mexican. Lowering consumption of the world's limited resources by industrial countries and distributing resources more equitably are crucial elements in eliminating poverty and hunger, **and** reducing population growth.

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\* From *Global Warming in an Unequal World - A Case of Environmental Colonialism*, by Avil Agarwal and Sunita Narain, Center for Science and Environment, New Delhi 1991.

**PROCEDURE:**

1. Tell students that many people believe that overpopulation is a root cause of hunger. What do they think?
2. If this were really true it would mean that crowded countries are the hungriest countries of all. Right? Let's examine two countries and see. Place the following **hectares** on the board:



3. Students need to know:

A **hectare** is 2.5 acres of farmable land.

**POPULATION DENSITY** is the number of people for every hectare of farmland in a particular country. If a country has a population density of 2 it means there are only 2 people for every hectare. A population density of 7 or above is considered high.

4. Which country above is most crowded?  
Which country is more likely to be having a severe hunger problem?  
Why?
5. Place the following information under the appropriate hectare:

**THE NETHERLANDS**

Enough grain grown to provide every person with 114% of the daily calories required.

\* Infant Mortality Rate - 6

**AFGHANISTAN**

Enough grain grown to provide every person with only 72% of the calories needed to function healthily.

\* Infant Mortality Rate - 165.

6. Is overpopulation causing hunger in the Netherlands?

\* Remind students that an infant mortality rate above 25 means serious hunger. **To review the Infant Mortality Rate, see Lesson 4: "How Hunger is Measured - The Infant Mortality Rate".**

### Is overpopulation causing hunger in Afghanistan?

If time allows, have students research Afghanistan to find out what might be behind its severe hunger problem. (By 1994 Afghanistan had experienced 14 years of uninterrupted violence that displaced more than a million people. Armed groups still controlled access to food in major cities. The fighting left farms abandoned and irrigation systems destroyed. Because of the food shortages, food prices sky-rocketed.)

Students should also research the Netherlands, a colonizing power. Have groups of students compare the two countries' histories and determine what factors contribute to hunger in Afghanistan, and which factors help prevent hunger in The Netherlands.

7. Remind students that in certain crowded areas of our cities everyone has access to food and is healthy and well-fed. (In other crowded areas of our cities there is a high degree of hunger.) In certain rural areas of our country where population density is very low, people are hungry. What do students think - does overpopulation cause hunger?
8. Tell students that studies show that hunger and poverty cause people to have more children. Can they explain this? (Explore with them the three reasons explained in the Teacher Background Reading of this lesson.)
9. Have students consider if land is being taken up by too many people in their communities. What takes up most of the land? Is the land used fairly and wisely to provide for everyone? Who benefits from the way land in your area is used?
10. Tell students that most of the world's people live in developing countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Most of the world's resources are consumed by industrial countries. Have students brainstorm how overconsumption, not overpopulation, might affect the hunger problem. (Unequal distribution of resources is explored in depth in the following lesson.)

**ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES:**

1. Tell students that one reason the hunger problem continues is that there are a number of myths (such as the overpopulation one) clouding the truth. What is a myth? On the surface a myth appears to be true, but once we investigate it, a myth falls apart. Can students think of any other hunger myths? Have them write about the role myths play in perpetuating hunger and why it is important to dispel them. (Another example of a myth is: Boys are better athletes than girls.)
2. Provide small groups of students with the following information and ask them to prepare a presentation to teach other classes about overpopulation and hunger.

| <b>JAPAN</b>                                   | <b>ETHIOPIA</b>                               |
|--|---|
| Population Density - 23                        | Population Density - 2                        |
| Infant Mortality Rate - 5                      | Infant Mortality Rate - 122                   |
| % of required calorie supply per person - 125% | % of required calorie supply per person - 73% |

3. Take a class walk around your school's neighborhood. Make a list of the different ways in which land is used. Is it used mainly for industrial development or for growing food?
4. Have students create posters dispelling the overpopulation myth, the "not enough food" myth, and others. Exhibit these or present to other classes.
5. The statistics used in this lesson are from the Population Reference Bureau which puts out a Population Data Sheet for \$4 which contains statistics on population density, land area, fertility rates, life expectancy, infant mortality rates, etc., for each of the world's countries. This is an excellent tool for math, social studies and geography projects in your classroom. To order contact:

THE POPULATION REFERENCE BUREAU  
 1875 Connecticut Avenue NW  
 Suite 520  
 Washington, D.C. 20009