

Forum: Human Rights Committee

Issue: Combating overpopulation as a source of starvation and ethnic conflicts

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Introduction

At a first glance, overpopulation and ethnic conflict may seem like two entirely discrete and unconnected problems, and drawing a connection in between them may seem forced. However, it is widely accepted among scholars that some ethnic conflicts have been caused by the dearth of food in the localities in question (Butler). As overpopulation and a lack of food scourges a community, it tends to bring the formation of “packs” in the community; for an increased chance of survival, these groups tend to stick and act together, as strength is enhanced with numbers. This often brings up divisions along mostly-forgotten lines in the community, such as ethnicity in diverse communities. The most famous example of this occurring in history is the infamous Rwandan Genocide, which will be discussed at greater length below. The issue of why overpopulation may afflict a population group in a region will be discussed, as well as the matter of carrying capacity.

The significance of this issue stems from the sheer humanitarian impact it may have, easily resulting in thousands upon thousands of deaths if the right factors are present. Furthermore, the tackling of the issue by the United Nations would coordinate the detection and prevention of overpopulation-caused ethnic conflicts. The issue stems from a topic within the scope of Human Rights to result in effects on another topic in human rights and despite these two topics being quite different in nature, the HRC can work on both matters, to craft a single, comprehensive response, creating a need for it to be tackled by this forum. The issue pertains to this year’s theme of “Political Innovation” as to be dealt with effectively, it requires the overstepping of conservative and restraining boundaries of classical political response, in order to prevent

calamities that may potentially affect large amounts of lives in substantial ways, to tackle a problem that is hard to detect and can escalate quite rapidly if not dealt with expediently, amounting to political innovation.

Definition of Key Terms

Overpopulation: The population of a specific region becoming so high that the environment in the region cannot support the number of inhabitants within it and enters a state of collapse

Carrying Capacity: The maximum population of a certain species a specific region can sustainably bear without entering ecological collapse

Ecological Collapse: Ecological collapse can occur in one of two ways: Either the ecosystem of a region gets supplanted by another or “*its defining biotic or abiotic features*” may have been lost. While this definition may seem rather vague, studies have been carried out to provide more detailed, quantifiable and measurable definitions. It is also a challenge for ecologists to define the exact point at which an ecosystem enters collapse, to further complicate the problem.

Starvation: The condition of not having food or nutrition for an extended period of time, possibly causing death

Ecosystem: The system constituted by the living (biotic) and non-living (abiotic) elements (factors) in a specific region and the interactions between them

Armed Conflict: A substantial disagreement between two or more groups, at least one of which is a state, leading to 25 battle deaths a year, per the commonly-accepted Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) definition

Ethnic Conflict: A conflict involving two or more groups, with at least one of which having ethnicity-related aims and solution ideas

Ethnicity: A group defined on the basis of shared “*racial, national, tribal, religious, linguistic, or cultural [origins] or [backgrounds]*”

Genocide: Acts conducted with the intention of partially destroy or completely annihilate members of an ethnic group, by either systematically killing members of the group, preventing

births in the group, taking away the children of the group for relocation, causing bodily or mental damage to members of the group, or altering the life conditions of the group in a way ensuring its destruction

General Overview

In this section, the issue will be tackled in two parts: Firstly, human carrying capacity of a locality and the factors affecting this quantity will be discussed. Secondly, what happens when the population exceeds this capacity will be discussed, with an emphasis on ethnic strife as a result. A case study of Rwandan Genocide will be provided to enhance the delegates' understanding of how the process in question works with a concrete example.

The Question of Human Carrying Capacity

While a simple definition for carrying capacity has been provided above, it is a complex quantity dependent on dozens of factors. While we do not know all of these factors, we know some of the more important ones in defining the capacity. These factors concern whether the bare necessities of life are available.

For example, access to freshwater is a critical limiting factor for carrying capacity. Oftentimes, multiple species compete for the same water source, which further complicates calculations regarding the carrying capacity. While this may seem like little more than a minor impediment for previous considerations in this report at first sight, further thought on the matter would allow one to notice that the population sizes of other species should not be taken as random or uniform for the calculation of maximal carrying capacity but must actually be based on the ideal distribution of populations among the species of the region, with regards to the food web (the whole of the relationships of species being consumed and consuming others in an ecosystem) and trophic relationships (the relationships of consumption of other species for nutritional purposes) in the ecosystem. This is especially true in the case of humans, who have power over their surroundings to shape the community of animals in the ecosystem in a way most optimal for their survival and prosperity.

Another critical limiting factor is access to nutrition for people in the region of concern. While importing goods into a locality is possible, it is rarely feasible in impoverished regions such as

the ones in question, except for interspersed and rare food aid; allowing us to ignore the effects of this complicating factor in this case. As humans are able to consume both plants and other animals, the study could have been complicated by the consideration of the form of the nutrition in question; however, the reality that meat and other animal-based food sources are much more inefficient than crops when efficiency is measured in calories per unit farmland area allows us to simply assume that only crops will be grown in the region in question (Rosi et al.).

While some more significant limiting factors do exist for species in natural ecosystems, such remain insignificant to the discussion of human populations in urban ecosystems. One factor that remains particularly important is land, especially arable land available in local areas. As the available land is also needed for use for a wide variety of applications, such as agriculture and construction of dwellings, as well as other buildings, and is being divided into smaller and smaller plots over generations, this factor is made especially relevant, and is considered to be the primary limiting factor that led to the Rwandan Genocide.

Having considered the factors determining the carrying capacity of a region, especially for humans, to get a sense of the factors determining these capacities, the capacity of humans all around the world may be discussed. While there is much debate as to the exact figure or range of figures; most expert opinions on the matter point to the conclusion that humans are either in excess of this capacity presently or will go beyond these limits in the near future (Cohen; Wolchover). It must be noted, however, that advancements in technology, especially agriculture- and nutrition-related technology, stand to increase this carrying capacity, a principle that would also hold true for the cases in question.

Exceeding Carrying Capacity

As demonstrated above with the example of the human population on earth, it should be clear that exceeding carrying capacity, or overpopulation for short, does not mean an instantaneous collapse of the ecosystem. Instead, exceeding the capacity marks the start of the slow degradation of the the ecosystem through excessive use, which brings about a further lowering of the carrying capacity. For example, overpopulation may lead to overfishing, which would cause the fish stocks in the ecosystem to fall under its maximum level of replenishment, bringing about further reductions in quantity in the coming years, which would harm the availability of

nutrition to the population in question, decreasing their carrying capacity. Through such means, overpopulation often brings about malnutrition and subsequently, starvation.

The theories of Thomas Malthus are often cited on this matter, particularly on the matter of dearth of food. Malthus puts forth the facts that human population has exhibited geometric growth over time, while improvements in agricultural technology brought about arithmetic growth for production levels over time. From this information, he concludes that sometime in the future, human population will exceed the Earth's agricultural capacity to provide food resources for the population, resulting in a crash.

This crash would be a global disaster as humans, as a species sought ways to avoid starvation. Of course, the human population has since then ceased to grow geometrically, and currently appears to be increasing at a slower rate, approaching its maximum value. This makes such a crash on the global scale unlikely (but not impossible); however, it leaves the door open for such occurrences to take place on local scales, with the local population and agricultural production of localities in risk of experiencing such a crash. There also is the problem that the effects of such a discrepancy between production and consumption be felt much before reaching the point of the crash, especially on greater scales, bringing about a process and series of smaller problems caused by the discrepancy, rather than a singular, much more drastic crash (MacRae).

When events reach this stage of drastic insufficiency, most often of food, but occasionally of other factors necessary for survival and life, social order takes a toll: crime rates tend to go up, people may take up arms, form factions, or simply wait until some sort of trigger results in conflict. Such conflict often occurs in association with a pre-existing divide in the population. Some event that would otherwise create splits in the population in a non-violent, ideological way, may explode out of proportion to turn into a large-scale, violent conflict, as individuals may seize the opportunity of disorder as means of procuring the goods they were seeking. This is an extreme example, but one that has been previously observed.

This division most often occurs along ethnic lines, as there often is a history of conflict or skirmishes between the two (or more) groups, there exists some sort of feeling of fraternity among the members of the same group, which is often reflected in the formation of families, and individuals who are members of one of these groups, as a consequence, tend to prioritize "their

people” before others. This is the process through which overpopulation may lead and has led to ethnic conflict.

The Case of the Rwandan Genocide

The Rwandan Genocide, one of the two modern cases of genocide agreed to constitute a genocide by states around the globe (alongside the Holocaust), is better known for the ethnic strife that caused its buildup, rather than the scarcities that had as much, if not more, impact on its resulting disasters.

To give a brief overview of the issue, a brief discussion on Rwanda must be held. It is and has long been (even prior to European colonization, without access to Western technology) one of the most densely-populated countries in the world, especially among LEDCs (World Countries). Its population is made up primarily of two ethnicities: The majority Hutu and the minority Tutsi, whose differences along ethnic lines have reflected onto their physical appearances and economic occupations. Tutsis, despite being the majority, were treated better by the white authorities of the region under the League of Nations mandate program, for the simple reason of “*their paler skin*”. The mandates also worked to worsen the division by making it compulsory for the inhabitants of the countries to carry ethnic identity cards. As the states achieved independence, Tutsis retained power, to which the Hutus retaliated with violence, which was met by more violence. The Hutus seized power in an insurrection, triggering mass emigration of Tutsis from Rwanda to its neighbors, who would occasionally try to return to seize power, resulting in even more deaths. However, a change in Hutu governance in 1973 brought an end to state-sanctioned violence against the Tutsis. The 15 subsequent years of peace and prosperity were later disrupted by environmental degradation. Moreover, an invasion attempt on the country collapsed Rwanda's exports. The collapse further intensified the increasing tension to result in billions of internally displaced persons. In 1990, Rwanda collapsed into civil war along ethnic lines, causing the formation of militias. The war was concluded 3 years later, with a peace and power-sharing agreement, which was signed during the same time as the suspicious import of hundreds of thousands of machetes for a businessman close to the government.

Both ethnic groups, especially their extremist members, were dissatisfied with the power-sharing agreement, once again leaving an open door for future conflict. When the presidential plane was

shot down by an unknown party, the underlying tension once again spiraled into a wide-scale conflict. Hutu extremists came to power, and publicly encouraged the killing of all Tutsis, toning down their rhetoric but not their actions after UN warnings. The genocide was organized by the government, but carried out brutally by the civilians. In just six weeks, “an estimated 800,000 Tutsi, representing about three-quarters of the Tutsi then remaining in Rwanda, or 11% of Rwanda’s total population, had been killed.” Three months later, the Tutsis took back power, resulting the combined immigration and emigration of over 2.5 million people (Diamond 313-317).

Post-fact analyses on the conflict highlight how the contrast between the two groups were much less dramatic than how they were often portrayed, with regular interactions between members of the two groups regularly taking place. Mixed-ethnicity individuals constituted over a quarter of the population. Plus, there is the puzzling fact that the third ethnic group, with no claim on power, was also massacred in the proceedings of the genocide, preventing the coverup of the genocide’s underlying causes with only ethnic reasons (Diamond 317-319).

A much more thorough explanation for the killings may be provided by considering the impoverished state the country’s inhabitants, which has maintained its poor state since. Rwanda was very densely populated even prior to the arrival of European colonizers, and the Western medicine and improved crops and crop harvesting technology they brought allowed for the death rate in the population to fall, without a parallel fall in the birth rate. This resulted in a population growth rate above 3% yearly, which is considered to be extremely high, especially for an already densely-populated country. As the surviving children in each family increased, the plots of land of the families were divided up more and more down the generations. Fair division of the land amongst the male children was critically important in the Rwandan community, often creating fraternal and filial tension. Such divisions reached a point where most plots were insufficient to fulfill the nutritional needs of the families they were supposed to support, leaving them dependent on food aid. Some families stopped farming altogether due to the associated expenses and effort, while some resorted to theft as a means of providing sustenance (Diamond 323-324).

Studies into the Genocide offer evidence of the non-ethnic motivating factors behind the conflict. There are many recorded cases of fraternal murder over land disputes, and evidence indicates

that most victims were poorer Tutsis who died not because of direct killings, but of starvation and impoverishment, as well as their inability to pay bribes to escape country. While this does not mean that ethnic conflict did not give rise to the Genocide or that the killing did not constitute genocide, economically-motivated opportunism to, even if temporarily, escape the state of starvation seems to be a major driving force behind the Genocide (Diamond 325).

Possible Solutions

To find effective solution ideas, it is necessary to accurately dissect and understand the nature of the agenda item. The question at hand is the prevention of a process, a connection between two interrelated problems, a cause and a result. It is important to keep in mind that while overpopulation may give rise to starvation and/or ethnic conflicts, this is not necessarily always the case. Realizing this, possible solutions may be categorized into three groups: Those tackling the causes, those mitigating the effects, and those tackling the relationship between the causes and the effects, all of which should work towards the resolution of the issue at hand.

In the first category, to tackle overpopulation, education on family planning may be a possible solution. Allowing couples or single parents to learn how to take deliberate choices on how many children they want, with attention being paid to the finances of the family would allow for conscious decisions made by potential or current parents, and would work to reduce the financial burden of overpopulation. Research has also demonstrated that women's education is also highly effective in reducing population growth rates; thus, increasing women's access education and extending compulsory school attendance for all children, regardless of gender or sex, would work to resolve the matter at hand. Another way of tackling overpopulation may be to increase the availability of contraceptives and other birth control methods in countries that face high population growth rates. Of course, local traditions and religions might conflict with these methods; so, due conduct on not causing offense to and backlash by the local population must be taken. These actions can be coordinated by the United Nations; however, it still remains a duty of the individual Member States to implement the listed ideas, possibly with financing from the World Bank.

In the second category, that is, tackling the results of overpopulation in starvation and ethnic conflict, one possible solution may be to make use of the improvements in agricultural

technology to increase the efficiency of farming per man-hour and per unit land area. The increase in available man-hours may be used to increase the agricultural production even higher and reduce malnutrition, or for workers' additional employment in other areas with more added value, most likely in the industrial sector. To ensure that agriculture remains sustainable, further research in determining the carrying capacity of specific localities, especially in urban zones, may be commissioned and conducted, with the results being applied to ensure that production levels can be sustained into the future. When it comes to tackling ethnic conflict, the only logical way may be to simply educate and increase the awareness, especially that of children, on topics of ethnic diversity. Assistance from the United Nations may be taken by individual Member States in this process, especially in the curriculum preparation stage for this program.

In the third category, the United Nations' system of responding to crises' outbreaks around the world must be improved in order to ensure the protection of human rights in civil wars or coups to the best of the UN's abilities. Another possible solution in this category would be to improve the coordination and delivery of United Nations' food aid to regions suffering from acute malnutrition, famine and common starvation. The UN should also expand its network to receive more food donations, possibly produce donations itself directly, transport that aid to a larger geographic area more rapidly, and distribute it efficiently. All these possible solutions should work to resolve the issue at hand.

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