

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

What's your consumption factor?

On Tuesday, we wrote about a mission two Pottstown students and their teacher took to Kenya, where they encountered extreme poverty.

Our students are budding innovators, tasked with solving big problems in the coming decades.

The following essay by renowned anthropologist Jared Diamond provides a broad look at what they face:



Commentary by
Thomas Hylton

BY JARED DIAMOND

The average rates at which people consume resources like oil and metals, and produce wastes like plastics and greenhouse gases, are about 32 times higher in North America, Western Europe, Japan and Australia than they are in the developing world. That factor has big consequences.

Consider our concern with world population. Today, there are more than 7 billion people, and that number may grow to around 9 billion within this half-century. Several decades ago, many people considered rising population to be the main challenge facing humanity. Now we realize that it matters only insofar as people consume and produce.

If most of the world's 7 billion people were in cold storage and not metabolizing or consuming, they would create no resource problem. What really matters is total world consumption.

The estimated one billion people who live in developed countries have a relative per capita consumption rate of 32. Most of the world's other 6 billion people constitute the developing world, with relative per capita consumption rates below 32, mostly down toward 1.

The population especially of the developing world is growing, and some people remain fixated on this. They note that populations of countries like Kenya are growing rapidly, and they say that's a big problem. Yes, it is a problem for Kenya's more than 30 million people, but it's not a burden on the whole world, because Kenyans consume so little. Their relative per capita rate is 1.)



JARED DIAMOND

A real problem for the world is that each of us 300 million Americans consumes as much as 32 Kenyans. With 10 times the population, the United States consumes 320 times more resources than Kenya does.

People who consume little want to enjoy the high-consumption lifestyle. Governments of developing countries make an increase in living standards a primary goal of national policy.

Among the developing countries that are seeking to increase per capita consumption rates at home, China stands out. It has the world's fastest growing economy, and there are 1.3 billion Chinese, four times the United States population.

The world is already running out of resources, and it will do so even sooner if China achieves American-level consumption rates.

Per capita consumption rates in China are still about 11 times below ours, but let's suppose they rise to our level. Let's also make things easy by imagining that nothing else happens to increase world consumption. China's catching up alone would roughly double world consumption rates.

If India as well as China were to catch up, world consumption rates would triple. If the whole developing world were suddenly to catch up, world rates would increase elevenfold. It would be as if the world population ballooned to 72 billion people.

Some optimists claim that we could support a world with nine billion people. But I haven't met anyone crazy enough to claim that we could support 72 billion.

We Americans may think of China's growing consumption as a problem. But the Chinese are only reaching for the consumption rate we already have. To tell them not to try would be futile.

The world has serious consumption problems, but we can solve them if we choose to do so.

This column, first printed in the New York Times, is abridged from the original because of space limitations.