

3a No magic answer

Reading population growth

- 1 Read the text about the problem of overpopulation. What does the writer think the solution will be found through?
- technology
 - population control
 - sharing of resources



- 2 Read the text and complete the sentences.

- The problem is not just how many people there are, it's how high their _____ is.
- The economic optimists believe that resources _____ as the population increases.
- In the last 60 years, food production _____ has grown _____ population growth.
- Parents in under-developed countries need _____ to look after them in their old age.
- Bill Gates thinks that by improving health in poor countries we can limit population growth by _____.
- For Joel Cohen, there are _____ to help solve the problem of overpopulation.

No magic answer

For every problem we always hope there will be a magic answer that will make it go away. That's human nature. But problems like overpopulation are complex and demand complex solutions. First, let's outline a few basic facts.

Firstly, each person on the planet takes up space, consumes resources and creates waste. So the more people there are, the greater the problems of dwindling resources, overcrowding and pollution are going to be.

Secondly, rising standards of living – a product of economic growth – have exactly the same effects. Rich people have bigger houses, buy more consumer goods and generate more waste. So even if the population remains the same, economic growth will create similar problems.

But economic optimists don't worry about an increasing population because, according to them, people don't deplete resources, they create them. For them, more people mean more human intelligence and more brains to find clever ways to boost resources. One example they give is the 'Green Revolution'. Over the last 60 years, agricultural food production has grown dramatically – faster than the population, in fact. Through the engineering of better seeds and plants, which are more resistant to disease, experts predict that there will be enough food for all of us in the future.

Another example is the Gates Foundation's work in combating disease in poor countries through a programme of vaccination. You would think that saving lives through vaccination would actually increase the population, not decrease it. Parents in under-developed countries want to ensure that at least two children will be around to look after them when they are old. So they raise this probability by having more children. However, research shows that when you improve health in such communities, the population growth rate will fall within half a generation. Bill Gates believes that if we continue this work, the world population will peak at 8.3 billion by 2050 rather than the 9.3 billion currently predicted.

But of course technology alone is not the answer. It will help us to protect current resources and to find new resources, but we will also need to look at how we share these. Joel Cohen, a professor at Rockefeller University, put it nicely. He said that three schools of thought had a role to play in lessening the negative effects of overpopulation:

- 'The bigger pie school', who say that technology will increase resources.
- 'The fewer forks school', who say we need to reduce population growth and consumption.
- 'The better manners school', who say we should all share resources more equally.

The last, and probably the real answer, requires a different kind of faith: not in science, but in human nature.