

Resources Dialogue Group Some Reflections for Discussion

Luc Soete, Professor of International Economics and Rector Magnificus, Maastricht University

Finding the balance between natural and human resources was the central concern of Thomas Malthus (1766-1834)¹, the prominent economist and demographer who put forward his famous “law” contrasting the short-term tendency for food production to increase arithmetically and the long-term tendency of population to grow naturally at a much faster geometric rate. To quote Malthus: “the power of population is so superior to the power of the earth to produce subsistence for man, that premature death must in some shape or other visit the human race.” In short, food shortage and hunger would remain “nature’s last most dreadful resource.”

Thomas Malthus has been dramatically contradicted over the last century by the combined rapid growth in population and the accompanying growth in world food production keeping well ahead. Furthermore and contrary to Malthus original hypothesis, world population growth has gradually adjusted down over the last 30 years. The impact of improved health and sanitation conditions on life expectancy brought down population growth significantly.

Why then propose to start our discussions on resources and universal responsibility with Malthus?

Broadening the focus on the one hand from food production to the FEW (Food, Energy and Water) and other natural resources, including waste, emissions, environmental degradation, reduction in biodiversity, etc. – and replacing the word population with “human development” or more narrowly with “consumption” – make Malthus insights appear particularly relevant today. Thanks to the Internet and social media, consumption aspirations have converged. This is not just reflected in global access to goods and services, but also in global access to education (MOOCs), global research networks (“open science”) and other forms of global participation in debate.

Second, the old Malthusian concerns about rapid local population growth and limited local opportunities for low-cost agricultural production still exist in many low-income countries of the world.

Third, Malthus pointed to the different time frames involved when dealing with resources. This is reflected in “the tragedy of horizons:” the failure by both policy makers and businesses to include long-term considerations into their decision-making. Measures with respect to sustainability and in particular climate change appear the main victims of such “tragedy of horizons.”

¹ “An essay on the Principle of Population”, 1798.

The current Malthusian challenge requires open access to knowledge and a global perspective on research and innovation. Ensuring that “the power of the earth” remains in line with global consumption aspirations questions how nations organise research and innovation activities. National research policies were designed at a time when strengthening the international competitiveness of a country was considered essential for long-term welfare. Today in many areas crucial to future welfare, sustainable development, health, food safety and security, it is global access to such knowledge, the development of joint global standards and the rapid world-wide diffusion of new technologies to the global world, which is at stake.

In short, Malthus insights call for a more radical, straightforward approach to international research collaboration. Malthus had one solution to the imbalance between natural and human resources: large foreign emigration. War and conflicts today appear as immediate causes for the growth in cross-border migration. In the long term, it will be the imbalance between individual aspirations to a better and more meaningful life, and the lack of local resources and opportunities, which will be the clearest manifestation of the validity of Malthus’ predicament.

Luc Soete