

# THE POLITICS OF POPULATION GROWTH

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## INTRODUCTION

With the exception of the spread of nuclear weaponry and threats to global ecological systems (although these are problems enough!), population growth is the most pressing and urgent issue currently faced by humanity (Giddens, 1994).

The population explosion, a problem in its own right, underlies and exaggerates all other problems (Hartley, 1972).

There is no pure population problem: the problem is one of population and resources. The well being of a population depends on the ratio of the size of the population to the magnitude of available resources' (Hardin, 1993).

These quotations from Giddens, Hartley and Hardin present that rapid population growth represents a major obstacle to development, as valuable resources are diverted from productive expenditure to the feeding of a growing population. On the contrary, some believe that the growth of population has the potential to stimulate economic growth and innovation (see Furedi, 1997). From this perspective, more people mean more problem solvers, since human creativity has the potential to overcome the limits of nature (Simon, 1981; Boserup, 1993, 1981). This paper is an attempt to contribute to the discussion whether population growth is a problem or not?

Throughout most of human history population grew very slowly. In the twentieth century the world has experienced an unprecedented increase in population. Prior to this century, mortality rates were generally much higher than they are today, and the fertility rates of the population tended to be correspondingly high. In the last few decades, this equilibrium has been disturbed, mainly due to a dramatic decline in mortality and gains in life expectancy. Explanations of this decline include the success of public health measures in controlling infectious diseases, advances in medicine, better nutrition, and the general improvement of economic conditions (Preston, 1980; Gille, 1985; Kuznets, 1980; McKeown, 1976). In any event, it is a universal phenomenon that mortality rates have declined. In most industrialized countries, the decline in mortality rates was eventually offset by parallel declines in the birth rate, so that population growth began to stabilize in what is called the 'demographic transition'. Many of these countries have now reached the 'replacement level' of fertility (Giddens, 1994) and in some - such as Italy, Germany and Hungary - the population is actually declining. Fertility remains at very high levels in much of the Third World, with a concomitant acceleration of population in such countries (Freedman, 1979).

Population experts believe that up to 1750, global population growth averaged considerably less than 0.1 percent per year and average life expectancy was only 27 years. Between 1750 and 1900, population grew at about 0.5 percent per year, with average life expectancy in Europe standing at about 35 years. From 1900 to 1950, population grew at about 1.0 percent per year. At that time average life expectancy was about 50 years. Today it is around 75 years in the developed world. In developing countries, life expectancy was about 40 years in 1950 and today has risen to over 60 (Understanding Global Issues, 1994). Between 1950 and 1960, the world population grew at about 1.7 per cent per year (Hartley, 1972) and the increase was 2.1 per cent per year by 1961. It remained steady for a while, and then began falling slowly, reaching 1.7 percent in the year 1979, where it seems to have

(Hardin, 1993). This aggregate percentage masks considerable diversity among and within different regions of the world. The rate of natural increase varies from one country and time period to another, depending on the combination of fertility and mortality levels. The well-off 'developed' countries have a rate of population growth much lower than that of poorer nations. Wealthy countries tend to grow at less than 1 per cent per year and poorer countries at more than 2 per cent per year. Moreover, among the poorer nations, population growth rates vary between 1.5 per cent to more than 3.5 per cent per year (Giddens, 1994). Even a small difference between birth rates and death rates can make a large difference to population growth. For example, if the natural increase (i.e., the difference between birth and death rates) is 0.1%, as it is in Europe, it takes over a thousand years for the population to double. If the annual rate of natural increase is 1%, the population doubles in about 67 years. At 2 percent per year, the number doubles every 35 years. If the rate is 2.9%, as in Africa and many Asian countries, the doubling time is only 24 years (Understanding Global Issues, 1994).

## CONSEQUENCES OF HIGH POPULATION GROWTH

In 1900 the global population was 1.7 billion, by 1950 it had reached 2.5 billion, and in 1995 nearly 5.5 billion (Hartman, 1995) and in 1999 **6 billion** people inhabit the earth. Three quarters of them live in the Third World. The United Nations predicts that world population will reach 6 billion by the end of the century. Ehrlich (1968) calculated that, if the rate of population growth (at that period) continued, nine hundred years from now there would be 60,000,000,000,000,000 people on the earth. For every square yard of the earth's surface (including both sea and land) there would be a hundred people. Fremlin (1964) worked out that housing such a population would need a continuous 2,000-story building covering the complete planet. Even in such a stupendous structure there would only be three or four yards of floor-space per person. Such a picture of course is designed to drive attention to

the consequences of continued high population growth. The real issue is what will happen over the next thirty or forty years, because the earth is already seen to be burdened with two and half times as many people as it can support (Lean, 1994).

The causes and consequences of population growth and its relationship to available resources has been a matter for continuous debate since the onset of modern mortality control in the eighteenth century (Gould and Lawton, 1986). The debate has been pursued with renewed intensity over the past thirty years, particularly in the context of a feared depletion of resources as a result of accelerating population growth. Some favour population growth and argue that the productive capacity of people as creators of wealth has been underestimated (Simon, 1981). Indeed, Boserup suggested that population pressure may, in certain cases, promote economic growth and social change (Boserup, 1981, 1993). However, in the view of many pessimists, population growth threatens the very future of mankind and interacts with the economic development process in a number of ways.

For example, high population growth rate has been considered (McNamara, 1974) as a hindrance to the economic development of poor Third World countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. In a population with zero growth (as in most Western countries) between 3 to 5 per cent of national income has to be invested to produce a 1 per cent increase in income per head. Where a population grows by 3 per cent per year (as in most Third World countries), up to 20 per cent of national income has to be invested in order to create a similar increase in living standards (Giddens, 1994). Internal investment is basic to the growth of a national economy. However, the poorer the nation, the more difficult it is to obtain investment capital internally - by savings, confiscation, or taxation. Population growth greatly exaggerates the problem by eating up potential investment funds merely to keep people alive (Hartley, 1972). As the regions where population is growing rapidly include most of the poorest countries in the world, sufficient levels of investment cannot possibly be achieved

Inevitably these countries fall further and further behind the industrialized sectors of the globe, which exacerbates existing inequalities between countries (Giddens, 1994). All this reduces a nation's capability to feed itself and leads to underdevelopment, and the general lowering of standards of living.

The social implications of rapid population growth are profound. The rapid drop in mortality, with little or no decline in fertility, has produced a completely different age structure in Third World countries compared to industrialized ones. It creates an unbalanced age structure with a high dependency ratio. In the developing world, 36 % of the population is under 15 (Understanding Global Issues, 1994). In Mexico and Pakistan, 45 per cent of the population is under fifteen years old. In the industrialized countries, on the other hand, only about a quarter of the population is in this age group. The 'elongated pyramid' age distribution in the non-industrialized countries adds to their social and economic difficulties. For example, a disproportionate number of young or old people in the population may put an intolerable burden on those who are in work and who have to pay for education, health care and pensions. A youthful population needs support and education, and during that time its members are not economically productive. However, in many Third World countries large numbers of children are either employed or scratch a living as 'street children', begging for whatever they can get. When such children grow up, they become unemployed, homeless, or sometimes both (Ennew, 1986). A population that includes a large number of young people approaching reproductive age has a built-in momentum towards growth and will continue to grow even if the birth rate suddenly falls. If fertility declined to 'replacement level' - one birth for every living person in a population - it would still take seventy-five years before that population stopped increasing (Giddens, 1994). In agriculture, the effect among small farmers is often land fragmentation and growing landlessness.

Overpopulation is also considered an important cause of income inequality. The gap between richest and poorest is widening with

the world's richest 20% getting 82.7% of global income and the poorest 20% only 1.4% (UN, 1992). The inhabitants of the affluent countries are, on average, 13 times richer than those of the poor capitalist countries (Bondestam, 1980). Where social services or job creation facilities are inadequate, lower income groups have less access to public services such as education and health, and being generally less skilled, suffer most from low wages and high unemployment.

Two solutions to cope with burgeoning populations have been suggested (Understanding Global Issues, 1994): a rapid technological fix and voluntary redistribution of wealth. Technological advance is unpredictable, so no one can be sure how large a population the world might eventually be able to support. Yet even at current population levels, global resources may already be well below those required to create living standards in the Third World comparable to those of the industrialized countries. Expansion of the global food supply is being made more difficult by water scarcity and soil degradation. The need to force the soil to produce even higher yields in the future is likely to accelerate the process of environmental damage. Genetic engineering may help with food supplies but probably not within the time frame needed. Unless there are major changes in patterns of world energy consumption - such as the large-scale harnessing of solar energy or wind power - there is no possibility of extending this level of energy consumption to every one in the world. There are simply not enough energy resources to go round.

The second solution for overpopulation suggested was the voluntary redistribution of wealth. The developed countries show little inclination to distribute their wealth among the poor or to curb their own affluent lifestyles. It is often stressed that the increase in population in the Third World is the result of unplanned and irrational behaviour and portrayed as the main cause of poverty in these countries. A reduction in fertility is suggested as a contribution to the eradication of the most serious manifestations

that this attitude of blaming the poor for their own poverty by attributing it to over-fertility reflects parochial and ethnocentric Western attitudes, which are aimed at diverting attention away from the real political problems. Attempts to control the growth of the Third World population have been seen by some as one of many components of an upper class strategy to divert attention from the actual causes of poverty (Bondestam, 1980). As Hartman (1987) argues:

It is the consumption explosion in the industrialized world rather than the population explosion in the Third World which is putting the most pressure on natural resources.... A small rate of population increase in the industrialized countries thus puts much more pressure on resources than a rapid population increase in the Third World (Hartman, 1987:21).

Population growth in the United States in the next 30 years will have more effect on the environment than the increase in numbers in China and India combined (Lean, 1994). The main drain on the earth's resources and threat to the environment comes from the rich. Ehrlich writes in 'Our Planet' (1994) 'The relatively small population of rich people accounts for roughly two-thirds of global environmental destruction. From this perspective, the most important population problem is overpopulation in the industrialized nations. The consumption of energy, raw materials and other goods is vastly higher in the western countries than in other areas of the world (Giddens, 1994). These levels partly depend on resources transferred from less developed regions. A baby born in Europe or America will consume about 40 to 50 times as many resources during its lifetime (especially if it becomes 'gainfully employed') as its counterpart in Asia or Africa.

Moreover, those who live in the industrialized countries might feel Third World population expansion is not 'their' problem, and that the societies concerned should be left to deal

with their swelling populations as best they can. Europe's population is expected to grow by less than 4 million by 2025 while the population of North Africa is forecast to grow by 123 million and in Western Asia by 169 million. The pressure to migrate from poor and over populated nations to richer and less populated nations will be immense (Understanding Global Issues, 1994; Hardin, 1993). If world population growth continues at the present rate, it carries the risk of global catastrophe. The pressure on the world's resources may lead to bitter conflict, which could end in major wars. At this point, the three great issues humanity must deal with over the next few decades - the possibility of nuclear conflict, ecological dangers and population growth - merge with one another (Giddens, 1994). In this situation it is hard to expect any help from developed countries to those in the Third World and the only practical solution left will be to control population growth rate.

It has been recognized (Hardin, 1993) that if a society fails to control the size of its population, nature ultimately will. Nature's two great tools for population control are starvation and disease. Ehrlich (1968), nearly three decades ago was alarmed by the consequences of high population growth and wrote:

No changes in behaviour or technology can save us unless we can achieve control over the size of the human population. The birth rate must be brought into balance with the death rate or mankind will breed itself into oblivion. We can no longer afford merely to treat the symptoms of the cancer of population growth; the cancer itself must be cut out' (Ehrlich, 1968, p.166).

Perhaps partly because governments and other agencies heeded the warnings of Ehrlich and others more than twenty years ago, a variety of government and private interventions to influence population growth in the Third World have been attempted. During the past three decades, population programs have received



considerable funding. National and international population policies have been developed to counteract the negative effects of continued rapid growth rates. However, family planning campaigns up to now have had a relatively small influence on the birth rate in the developing world.

## THE DEBATE ABOUT SOLUTION

Population growth and fertility have been researched, subjected to theoretical speculation and targeted by various kinds of social and economic policies for 30 years or more. Despite all this attention, there exists relatively little consensus on the underlying determinants of fertility behaviour or the policy measures that may affect population growth (Simmons and Farooq, 1985). The level of disagreement that still exists concerning fertility and its determinants can be illustrated by reference to the heated discussions that have ensued during the past few decades over alternative policy interventions in the area. In some measure, this controversy is part of a larger debate about the best means of achieving goals of material well-being and social justice for people living in the Third World. Even among those who support efforts to reduce fertility, there is disagreement about the most effective approach. The heated debate at the Bucharest World Population Conference in 1974 between the governments of the developed and developing world reflected this. The developed world argued that population control was a necessary prelude to economic growth, and specific interventions aimed toward regulating fertility could and would have a large impact on population change even before the onset of substantial development in other areas. The writings of Tsui and Bogue (1978), and Freedman (1979), represent this optimistic view, claiming that family planning programs have been a major factor in the recent decline in fertility experienced by a number of developing countries. On the other hand, governments of the developing world, argued that 'development is the best contraceptive' and that no form of intervention is likely to bring about fertility reductions unless there is immediate progress toward

the goal of general development and toward a fundamental revolution in living conditions. Demeny (1979a, 1979b) argued that the observed reductions in fertility were more logically attributable to fundamental social and economic forces rather than to family planning 'per se'. Subsequently the idea that 'development itself is the best contraceptive' has been discredited (Ahmad, 1998). Substantial falls in birth rates have been recorded even in very poor countries, such as Bangladesh and Sri Lanka (Understanding Global Issues, 1994).

Though birth control may well be a necessary part of population policy, it is not, in itself, sufficient to bring about a reduction in fertility (Lawton, 1986). However, it is difficult to improve living standards without some corresponding reduction in population growth (Brandt, 1980). At the Cairo Population Conference 1994, however, it was stressed by Pope (as mentioned in 'Independent', 28 August, 1994) that successful population policies result from economic development, education and health care - not from family planning programmes. He argued that family planning alone, without economic and social development will not reduce the very high birth rate of many developing areas. He suggested that the evidence indicated that social factors were indeed the most powerful factors in controlling population. Lean (1994) suggested that formal family planning programmes are also important, and that the most effective progress is made when both these elements are combined.

## CONCLUSION

The causes and consequences of population growth and its relationship to available resources has been a matter of continuous debate since the onset of modern mortality control in the twentieth century. Some favour population growth and argue that the productive capacity of people as creators of wealth has been underestimated. In the view of pessimists, population growth threatens the very future of mankind. The pessimists view seems

stronger as the social implications of rapid population growth are profound. The rapid population growth is currently occurring in developing countries, and to utilize the manpower for productive purposes they require resources. For developing countries it is difficult to generate resources required for utilization of surplus labour. The only solution is left to control their population growth. However, different strategies should be adopted to control the population in different countries. Though birth control may well be a necessary part of population policy, it is not sufficient to bring about a reduction in fertility. A general prevalence of a desire to limit family size is essential for fertility decline with an acceptance of the idea that the practice of family limitation is socially legitimate.

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