

The Problem of Population Growth in Less Developed Countries

Andrew Whitty- Junior Sophister

Many see population growth as the central problem facing less developed countries in the twenty-first century. Andrew Whitty challenges this, asserting that, while population is a problem, it is economic underdevelopment that is the most pressing concern. He then discusses the extent of the problem of population growth and its causes. He brings his discussion to a close with some policy suggestions aimed at alleviating this problem.

Introduction

In the public mind, population growth is seen as the major cause of problems to do with development today. (Furedi, 1997: 1)

The above quotation gives clear evidence to how population growth is seen as a problem in the world today. The purpose of this essay will be to discuss the problem of population. This essay will first of all examine whether population growth is the most central problem facing less developed countries. In other words is there a clear link between the failure to curb population growth and the failure to develop economically? Secondly, the case of India will be explained and the extent of population growth and the main causes will be outlined. Lastly, suggestions will be made on how policy approaches can effectively reduce and stabilise this population growth.

Is population growth the most central problem in LDCs?

It has been argued that population growth is the most central problem facing less developed countries. Indeed the main proponents of this argument are known as neo-Malthusians, who believe that the primary weapon against the population growth explosion is widespread use of contraception. Like Malthus himself, they believe that population growth is the cause of the world's socio-economic problems. As Bandarage (1997: 5) says:

Blaming global environmental destruction, poverty, hunger, and political instability on a massive and unprecedented increase in the human population in the third world neo-Malthusian policymakers look to what they call the 'contraceptive revolution' as the most urgent remedy for these problems.

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However many experts treat this narrow view of the problem with scepticism. According to Buchholz (1999: 43), "misery may have visited the poor, but not for Malthusian reasons." On its own, population control "does not lead to the alleviation of poverty" (Bandarage 1997: 6). It is the thesis of this essay that population growth is not the most central problem facing less developed countries. In fact the assertion that population growth is the central problem serves to distract from the more fundamental problems that do face less developed countries. As Furedi (1997: 51) argues, "moreover a decrease in the size of the population would not solve any of the underlying problems."

Population growth is not the most central problem facing less developed countries, because there are other issues of equal if not more importance. These issues can be broadly defined as economic underdevelopment (Todaro, 2000). However, what exactly does economic underdevelopment mean? Todd Buchholz, in his book *New Ideas from Dead Economists*, in the course of an essay on Malthus outlined the main characteristics of underdeveloped countries:

First, poor countries cannot afford to save and invest in new technology because incomes are low. And incomes are low because production techniques are inefficient. Thus, they are caught in a vicious cycle, which foreign aid attempts to break. Second and much more important, many governments with unstable political roots placate urban consumers by keeping food prices low. But artificially low prices decrease investment by farmers and stunt further output. (Buchholz, 1999: 60)

So in a nutshell, the problems of underdevelopment are a lack of proper investment where it is needed and unstable weak political leadership. The population problem arises from this. How these problems are to be addressed will be discussed in Section IV.

Another factor that must be considered when discussing development and population is the West's exploitation of less developed countries. Does the West have a hidden agenda in asserting population control? Could this be the cause of their problems? There are authors who suggest this is a problem (Bandarage 1997, Furedi 1997) "Communities tend to face crises such as endemic poverty or famine not because of their numbers but because of their relative lack of control over their circumstances" (Furedi, 1997).

The thesis behind this is that the West feels threatened by developing nations and seeks to curb their potential power through lack of development and strong population controls. Is this plausible? Perhaps it was among some powerful individuals. There is evidence to suggest that senior figures in Western governments believed in restricting developing nations. As George Kennan, member of the US state department, noted in 1948, "we have about 50% of the world's wealth, but only 6% of its population. In this situation, we cannot fail to be the object of envy and resentment" (qtd. Bandarage, 1997). This point, however, should not be over emphasised, rather it should be noted as a possible problem.

Thus far it has been stated that population growth is not the most central problem facing less developed countries and the reasons for saying so outlined. However, population growth is still a problem and one that should not be underestimated. "It could be argued that whatever the cause of Africa or any other developing regions problems, lowering the rate of population would at least make the situation better" (Furedi, 1997: 50). Stabilising growth would lead to a better environment in which the socio-economic policy will be implemented. This is certainly the case in most countries, especially India and China. However, there are exceptions, exceptions indeed where population growth is desirable.

Over the last decade, many scholars have re-examined the basic question of whether population growth hurts 3rd world countries and concluded that for some countries, especially those with plenty of arable land, rapid population growth may not be destructive. A denser population may lower the cost of transporting goods to customers and stimulate domestic demand for goods. The World Bank suggests that most developing countries can absorb up to 2% growth without a decline in the standard of living. (Buchholz 1999: 61)

In conclusion, it must be reiterated that population growth is not the main problem affecting less developed countries but that economic underdevelopment is. Population growth is a very serious symptom that must be effectively dealt with. However, it is only a symptom and the causes must be tackled as well. Economic development is a broad area that encompasses many political and socio-economic factors. Population is important in most situations but is secondary to a proper and comprehensive program of economic development. If underdevelopment is not dealt with, then the population crises will never be solved. As Alice Clark said in a lecture, "Economic development is the best contraceptive" (Overpopulation.org).

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The extent of population growth

Measuring from the time of Christ Jesus, it took about 18 centuries for the earth to reach its first one billion inhabitants, one century to reach its second billion, and one decade to get its last billion. (from George Moffett, in Overpopulation.org)

The above quotation puts the present crisis of population growth in context. The population situation is a serious symptom of the world's problems and must be treated effectively, so that the causes and underlying problems can be dealt with efficiently. The problem, however, must be dealt with now. World population growth is equivalent to around three babies every second. (UNPFA, 1999) The estimated population of the world in 2050 will be 9,370 million people (Todaro, 2000). This massive population will be a bigger problem for the developing world more than anyone else. It is suggested that 90% of that population will inhabit the developing world (Todaro, 2000). The question must then be asked how will a developing world be able to cope with such a population with less than 30% of the world's resources. The extent of population growth in the developing world could be extremely harmful for the future.

Although there is a rapid decrease in population growth in Europe (including minus growth in countries like Germany), this is not enough to offset the massive population growth arising out of the less developed world. India adds more people to the world every day than any other country (Overpopulation.org). India's population has now exceeded 1 billion people. For some in India, this popular milestone is cause for celebration. As a current political slogan puts it, "nothing's impossible when 1 billion Indians work together" (Poverty.net). Nonetheless, "the reality of one billion people is something else. It's a cause for very serious concern" (Ashish Bose, Overpopulation.org). Ashish Bose maintains that India has enough food for now, but each birth reduces the economy's capacity to cope.

The rural/urban divide is also an area for concern. India has two cities (Calcutta and Bombay) in the world's top ten of most populated cities. India's cities are severely overcrowded. From the 1991 census it was estimated that 26% of people lived in urban areas. Now in 2001 it is estimated to be 29%. (Overpopulation.org) India's population growth rate per annum is 1.91% (15.5 million a year). This rate is double China's and India could overtake China by 2045 as the world's most populous country (Overpopulation.org).

Cause of Population Growth

Its not because people started breeding like rabbits, it's that they stopped dying like flies. (Nicholas Eberstadt, American Enterprise Institute, rpt. Overpopulation.org)

The extent of population growth now explained, the question must then be asked what are the causes of population growth? As has been said at the start of this essay population growth is a symptom of greater underlying problems broadly defined under the heading of economic underdevelopment? However, the direct causes will be dealt with in this section.

What causes population to grow rather than decline? In a nutshell, the answer is that there are more people being born than dying. The birth rate has increased because fewer babies die, due to improved medical services. For example, in 1950 life expectancy for people in developing countries averaged 35 to 40 years of age, compared with 62 to 65 years today (Todaro, 2000). As a result of the twin effects of the birth rate and death rate, there is a natural increase in population terms.

What are the causes of this high rate of natural increase? What are the factors that cause the changes in the birth rate and death rate? In essence, what are the causes of the present population explosion? One cause of growth is the higher life expectancy (as noted earlier). However, this cause cannot be dealt with, in terms of trying to reduce the population. Measures adopted to restrain and halt population growth must be preventative. Preventative action can only be taken on the birth rate.

What causes the birth rate to be so high in developing countries? There are numerous causes. A summary list is as follows:

1. High infant mortality rate, therefore couples have more children to ensure a greater likelihood of some surviving.
2. Children are security for the future because of the absence of a social welfare system.
3. Lack of knowledge or access to contraception.
4. Desire for a male child.
5. Religious beliefs.
6. Lack of empowerment for women.

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Each of these will now be discussed briefly, in relation to India. According to the UNFPA, all of the above causes exist in India but some are more prevalent than others. Infant mortality rates are becoming less of a problem due to better medical conditions. The rate has halved in ten years in most states (UNFPA). However, this is causing an increase population growth as couples continue to have large families. To combat this, the UNFPA have invested heavily in "Reproductive Health" programs. These along with the government's efforts have been most effective in states like Kerala, which will be discussed in more detail in the next section. Children are also seen as security in India. This viewpoint is changing due to increased incomes and jobs. Children are no longer needed as much to provide extra income. However, due to the absence of a pension system they are still seen as security in old age.

In India the desire for a male child is quite strong, and many couples will continue to have children until such time as a son is produced. "The pressure to produce the son is so predominant that a lot of families have more children than they actually want or afford" (Shobha De, Overpopulation.org: India page). Religious beliefs are strong in India in influencing the size of families. "This is a land still bound by ancient customs and God said 'Go forth and produce'" (*ibid.*).

Lack of empowerment to women is a crucial factor. Women's role in population growth can be seen from the figures. Approximately 37% of women aged between 15 and 19 are already married. They are married and have not completed their education. Women's lack of education in India is very prevalent; 49% of females in India are illiterate compared to 26% in males¹. Women in these circumstances would seem to need children as providing status and esteem (Bandarage 1997). All of these causes are interconnected, however, the important one is empowerment to women. Empowerment to women can largely be attained through economic development, an economic development that can break down some of the causes of the population explosion.

Policy Approaches to reduce Growth

My biggest worry is the population growth, and if it continues at the current rate we will be standing shoulder to shoulder in 2600. Something has to happen and I don't want it to be a disaster (Prof. Stephen Hawking on Larry King live from Overpopulation.org).

¹ All figures above come from Overpopulation.org.

From the outset, it has been the context of this essay that population growth is a symptom of greater ills. Unless these causes and ills are dealt with, any direct action on population growth will be deficient and defective. Therefore, any policies to deal with the issue must be asserted on two fronts. These two fronts are direct population control (e.g. contraception) and economic development projects (e.g. employment projects). The implication of policies affecting these two areas, the causes and symptoms are being tackled. This will have a positive affect on reducing population growth. Suggested policies in these two cited areas will now be summarised and explained briefly.

The truth is that economics befuddles even the sharpest mind (Buchholz, 1999: 293).

To suggest economic policies that will create growth and increase living standards in an economy is not easy. Economics is a very inexact science, however, without it we are totally at sea, to solve the economic issues of a developing nation, we have to know what they are. In the case of this essay, India's economic problems can be identified as low-income levels, lack of investment (massive Gov. deficit is 14% of GDP; FT 1999) and over-regulation of the market and the provision of a proper infrastructure. (*ibid.*) To tackle these issues effectively will produce growth, which will lead to higher living standards. If this happens then there is a high probability that population growth will be affected. (Furedi, 1997) Economic development is the best contraceptive, as already quoted.

How then, in India's present situation, can the country progress economically? According to most experts, a country must create the right conditions in the macro-economic climate for economic development. These conditions have become known as the "New Economic Consensus", which basically entails macro-economic stability through low inflation and fiscal restraint (McAleese, 1999). India has a problem in this area and is not exactly meeting the standards of the "New Economic Consensus."

"But some believe spiralling budget deficits are pushing India into a domestic debt trap. 'Either we resolve the fiscal problem or we're heading for a crisis' says Rakesh Mohan, director general of the NCAER" (FT, 1999).. India in 1999 had a growth rate of 5% and an inflation rate of 6% (FT, 1999). These figures are impressive for a country such as India, however, how does India solve the problem of fiscal restraint, when it needs to spend money in order to invest? This

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investment as already noted will bring higher welfare and this in turn will have an effect on population growth.

The answer to the above query could lie in analysis of the Harrod-Domar Growth model. The Harrod-Domar growth model states that in order to grow economy must save and invest a certain amount of its GNP. The more a country saves and invests the faster its economy will grow. However, countries have a limit to the amount they can save and invest of their own resources. However, India could overcome its spending problems through transfers from the developed world. Transfers from the EU are credited with creating Ireland's present economic boom. This was also the rationale behind the Marshall plan after world war two, which re-invigorated the European economy. (McAleese, 1999; Todaro, 1999) In theory, India would have the best of both worlds. This would enable it to have a stable macroeconomic framework while also having the money to invest in India's development. India could then provide real improvement for its people, which would create the right conditions so that any population control programs would be effective.

The symptoms of population growth must be dealt with directly. The ways of doing this are outlined below:

1. More access to contraception. The UNFPA has put one of its main aims as "strengthening the logistics and management system for distribution of contraceptives and other Reproductive and Child Health supplies."
2. Empowerment to women. Providing women with a longer and more comprehensive education that will give them status and opportunities while at the same time trying to ensure a later marrying age. For example, in Kerala in Southern India, education for women is cited as the biggest cause of their successful campaign against population growth. "Literate women in India's Kerala help hold population growth nearly flat" (Overpopulation.org). Kerala has also provided many firsts like the first woman Supreme Court judge and head of the stock market. "In commercial centres like New Dehli and Bombay, moreover, employers advertise for Kerala women" (*ibid.*).
3. Offer incentives for two-children families. This is heavily tied in with providing proper economic growth so that the desire for children as security is reduced.
4. Through the media educate and create awareness of the population problem. "The media can play a greater role in creating awareness of the benefits of small families" (*ibid.*).

Conclusion

Through the course of this essay, the serious issue of population growth was discussed. This is a problem primarily for less developed countries, a problem that causes these countries considerable hardship. In summary, this essay considered the following:

- The first topic to be addressed was whether population growth is the most central problem affecting LDCs? The answer in short is no, the more important problem is lack of economic growth.
- The second issue to be considered was that of the extent of population growth in LDCs with specific note taken of the situation in India. It was seen in that the population problem in India is particularly acute, straining the countries ability to cope.
- The causes of population growth were then deliberated upon. These causes can be summed up as being that fewer people are dying than being born. People are living longer due to better health care and living conditions. The birth rate remains high due to cultural beliefs, desire for security, and lack of access to contraception.
- Policy approaches to the problem were primarily to do with encouraging economic development. The provision of financial capital without conditions or the need to repay was cited as the primary way of initiating this development. Any direct population control initiatives will be severely retarded without being accompanied with major economic reforms and projects.

Promoting integration of population issues within the wider development context is extremely important. (UNFPA website)

The above quotation gives a summary thrust of the thesis of this essay. The problem of population growth is a serious one but a problem, which must not be exaggerated. Economic development is the major problem, which must be tackled. In short, if the economic stagnation of less developed countries is not dealt with the population problem will persist.

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