

The Population Explosion in LDC's

"The basis for an effective solution of population problems is , above all, socioeconomic development."

First World Population Plan of Action, Bucharest

INTRODUCTION: A REVIEW OF NUMBERS

The explosive acceleration in world population growth is a relatively recent phenomenon, dating back to the beginning of the 1950's, and one which is to be associated almost exclusively with the less developed countries of the world. The annual rate of population growth in the Third World has tripled in thirty years and is currently running at 2.4% per annum with the result that by the year 2025, 8.3 billion people will inhabit this planet-four-fifths of them will reside in the developing nations.

This alarming rate of population growth can be explained primarily in terms of a rapid transition from a long historical era characterised by high birthrates and deathrates, to a new demographic regime in the post-war period, when the introduction of modern medical and public health technologies has led to a dramatic decline in deathrates, while birthrates are only beginning to fall from their historic high levels. In the 1950's the average person in the Third World could not expect to live longer than 35 to 40 years, by 1980 life expectancy had increased to 56 years (a gain of 42%), and only 10 years short of the average lifespan in the developed world. Birthrates, in contrast, are very high—30 to 50 per 1,000 compared with a rate of less than 20 per 1,000 in the developed countries.

THE POPULATIONS DEBATE: SOME CONFLICTING OPINIONS

There is wide room for debate with regard to how serious a problem is population growth in the Third World. According to one line of argument rapid population growth stimulates development. Advocates of this view maintain that more people means a higher level of consumer demand which in turn generates economies of scale to production, and provides sufficient and low-cost labour supply to achieve higher output levels. The American population revisionist of the counter revolution school, Julian Simon (1981), argues more people means more ideas and more geniuses: The ultimate resource is people-skilled, spirited, and hopeful people. Indeed, this is a lesson that many Western nations have had to learn in recent years as population has slowed down. However, there is nothing to suggest that to capture the benefits outlined above, a 2-3% annual rate of population growth is necessary. Hicks in 1939 estimated that the necessary stimulus to the profound economic change at the time of the Industrial Revolution in Europe was provided by a rate of population growth below 1% per annum.

Within the less developed countries themselves, the 'population-growth- is-desirable' viewpoint is often upheld. Demographers tell of an African leader who (supposedly) began a speech warning his people against the dangers of overpopulation: 'My people, our birthrate is so high that our numbers will double in 25 years....' Wild cheering drowned the rest. That population growth should provide such cause for jubilation can be explained primarily in terms of the Third World's perception of additional numbers as a source of military and political strength. Hence Iraq's attempt to increase fertility rates in the war with Iran.

At the other extreme, there are those who identify large population size as the major crisis facing the Third World today. This view of population growth and its implications can be traced back to Thomas Malthus, who predicted that population growth would outstrip food supply resulting in the emergence of world food catastrophes and ecological disaster. Malthus' predictions were, however, never realised since he failed to foresee the power of technological progress in

increasing the productivity of land, and offsetting the growth inhibiting forces of rapid population growth. However, it is now widely felt that we have nearly reached the limit of the world's ability to feed even our present numbers adequately, and it is feared that if agricultural reform does not take place on a large scale within the Third World in the near future, then in the race between population and food supply, population might yet win.

In the 1970's and 1980's, an intermediate position between the two extremist views outlined above seemed to be reached. According to the modern view, population growth is not to be regarded as the underlying cause of low standards of living in the Third World, but rather as a symptom of underdevelopment. Empirical studies have shown, that one of the most important means by which the impoverished majority in the developing countries can secure their survival is by having many children. Children provide an important source of labour and income for their parents in the developing world. Additionally, the provision of financial support by children in parents' old age is highly valued. Weighed against these 'income' and 'security' benefits, the costs of child-rearing appear negligible, not only in terms of maintenance costs but also in terms of the opportunity cost of a mother's time since, having restricted access to educational and employment opportunities, women's income-generating capacity outside the home is limited. Given the high ratio of expected benefits to costs which applies, this theory of high fertility rates postulates that children are regarded as net economic assets by their parents in the Third World.

Large family size must also be explained by reference to the social structures and the traditions and customs in the developing countries. In this regard, it should be noted that there are many ethnic and racial groups whose attitudes favouring large family size have to be protected for both moral and political reasons. The dominating influence of religion is also of crucial significance here, with many faiths (Catholicism, Buddhism, Islam) opposed to the use of contraception.

Although now widely felt that population growth is not the overriding problem in the Third World, development economists today are not so naive as to deny that large populations serve as an intensifier of conditions of underdevelopment in the poor nations. After all, more people means more mouths to feed, more bodies to clothe, more people looking for work, higher youth-dependency ratios, an increased rate of rural-urban migration which in turn exacerbates the problems of urban unemployment and fuels the explosive growth of the cities. Associated with this rapid rate of urbanisation has been the prolific growth of slums and the intractable problems of pollution and waste disposal. At present, metropolitan Cairo is attempting to cope with a population of 10 million people on a water and sanitation system built to service 2 million!

Of utmost importance, however, is that one recognise that the impact of population growth varies significantly from country to country in the developing world, depending on economic, political and social structures. In Hong Kong, Malaysia, Korea, Singapore and Thailand where economic performance is good, and quality and availability of health and educational, as well as other public services has improved, population growth has to a large extent been accommodated. However, for the majority of developing nations where people live in unacceptable conditions, in terms of absolute poverty, malnutrition, unemployment and limited access to public services, population growth places a large burden on society. Hence the desirability of the development of policy solutions to secure a substantial reduction in Third World population growth rates is largely recognised.

SLOWING POPULATION GROWTH:

In over 30 less developed countries a short-run solution to excessive rates of population growth has been sought in the manipulation of economic incentives and disincentives designed to change peoples' decisions regarding marriage and

family size. Incentives aim to encourage the use of birth-control and might include the provision of tax-relief, the payment of subsidies, and preferential treatment in the allocation of housing and school places for small families. Disincentives, typically, involve the withdrawal of social benefits and the imposition of financial penalties where the number of children exceeds a given maximum.

Unfortunately, all too often, such programmes designed to alter the cost to benefit ratio of having children, have been abused both in their execution and their design. India, where a sterilisation scheme in the 1970's evolved into an involuntary, coercive programme, is a case in point. The most infamous incentive/disincentive programme-'The One-Child Scheme'-was introduced in China in 1982. The scheme has proved successful but, as in India, only at the cost of personal freedom, and thus its widespread applicability to most developing nations is questionable. Confidence in such schemes should not, however, be lost at this point. Incentives and disincentives, where carefully designed, can meet the criteria of improving welfare and allowing free choice. Indeed, in Singapore, where such a scheme has been introduced on a fairer and more equitable basis, the results have been impressive.

Traditionally, the developed countries have tried to come to terms with the population problems of the Third World through the introduction of family-planning programmes. This approach to population problems in the Third World has not, however, met with the results that were hoped for. This is because this traditional policy for population control attempts to work on the population variable per se, rather than trying to alleviate the conditions of poverty and underdevelopment which have given people the motivation to have large families in the first place. As pointed out by the health and family-planning minister, Dr. Koran Singh, at the World Population Conference in Bucharest in 1974: 'The best contraceptive is development'.

Development strategies that are going to provide good results must be comprehensive, involving the reorientation of social, economic, and political structures, as well as radical changes in attitudes and popular beliefs. A crucial element of any strategy for development must be the effort to raise the economic and social status of women. This can be achieved by increasing female access to educational and employment opportunities, and economic dependence on men can further be reduced through the guarantee of rights of inheritance, marriage, divorce, litigation, and property to women. The integrated development of the rural sector, involving the reorientation of economic activity and social investments to the rural areas, thereby curbing the rate of rural-urban migration, would also play a central role, in so far as this would achieve a more equitable distribution of population within the developing nations.

As the transition to a richer, more modern society is made, it follows that fertility rates will fall, as the ratio of the expected costs of having children to the benefits increases, and peoples' perception of the economic utility of having children changes. Indeed, in the developed market economies today, where per capita income levels are high, and a social security system is in place, a child's contribution to family income assumes little, if any importance. Similarly the 'security' benefit is largely irrelevant. On the other hand, in the Western world, where children enjoy a high standard of living, compulsory education applies, and women are liberated, the costs of child-rearing, both actual and opportunity, are substantial.

Additionally, it is argued that development will be associated with an increasing flow of new goods and new ways to spend money. In other words, a wider range of consumption possibilities will be available which can substitute for expenditure on children.

That efforts to achieve the goal of socioeconomic development will be associated with fertility decline, is evidenced by the experience of several developing countries. For example, in Sri Lanka and Thailand between 1965-75,

where income gains were distributed evenly, and where radical reform in social organisation took place, birthrates declined at a rapid rate. The experiences of Hong Kong, Brazil, and Venezuela in the 1960's illustrate that an economic dynamic in a country may, in some cases, be enough to bring birthrates down. However, it should be noted that in the former case where development was perceived as a multidimensional process, and not simply in economic terms, the fall in birthrates was significantly more impressive.

The developed world could be of considerable assistance to the poorer countries in the attainment of their development objectives. Such support would not only consist of expanded financial aid, but also of improved trade relations, better international commodity pricing policies, more appropriate technological transfer, and moderation in the developed countries high consumption standards in order to achieve a more equitable sharing of the world's resources. Evidence shows that there still exists a large unmet demand for contraception in the Third World. A survey of married women found that 46% in Peru had not wanted their latest child, 37% in South Korea, 34% in Sri Lanka. An increase in financial assistance from the developed countries for family-planning programmes is thus also seen as desirable in a policy for population control, along with an improvement in the organisation of the distribution of information and birth-control devices. Finally, the rich countries can help by making available to the less developed countries the 'safety-valve' of emigration which helped ease their own population pressures at the time of the Industrial Revolution.

CONCLUSION

Change can, however, only come gradually. Even once the brakes to population growth have been applied, population will continue to grow for a long time before levelling off. This is because the potential parents of the next generation have already been born, and given that these young people vastly outnumber their own parents, population growth has a built in tendency to continue even once the impact of a development strategy has been felt.

Although, undeniably, many difficulties lie ahead, demographers maintain that the population explosion is over, and that birthrates are starting to come down. Studies show that even in poverty-stricken black Africa e.g. Kenya, Botswana, and Zimbabwe, there has been a dramatic increase in the use of contraception and fertility rates are declining.

Population growth trends into the future will depend crucially on the extent of the commitment within the less developed nations, and within the international community as a whole, to population control programmes as part of an effort to improve peoples' lives. As expressed so aptly by A.W. Clausen of the World Bank: "What governments and their people do today to influence our demographic future will set the terms for development strategy well into the next century."

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