

Optimism and Overpopulation

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Well, yes, the West must pay attention to the population problems of the Third World. But what sort of attention? The conventional wisdom holds that economic development -- and thus economic aid from the West -- is the key to curbing population growth in poor nations. Not true, says the author

by Virginia Abernethy

Overpopulation afflicts most countries but remains primarily a local problem -- an idea that this article will seek to explain. Reproductive restraint, the solution, is also primarily local; it grows out of a sense that resources are shrinking. Under these circumstances individuals and couples often see limitation of family size as the most likely path to success.

Many scholars, ancient and modern, have known that actual family size is very closely linked to the number of children people want. Paul Demeny, of The Population Council, is exceptionally clear on this, and the World Bank economist Lant Pritchett asserts that 85-95 percent of actual fertility rates are explained by parents' desires--not by mere availability of contraceptives. Pritchett writes that "the impressive declines in fertility observed in the contemporary world are due almost entirely to equally impressive declines in desired fertility." Of Paul Kennedy's contention, in his book *Preparing for the Twenty-first Century*, that "the only practical way to ensure a decrease in fertility rates, and thus in population growth, is to introduce cheap and reliable forms of birth control," Pritchett says, "We could not have invented a clearer and more articulate statement of the view we argue is wrong."

PROGRESS AND POPULATION

CROSS-CULTURAL and historical data suggest that people have usually limited their families to a size consistent with living comfortably in stable communities. If left undisturbed, traditional societies survive over long periods in balance with local resources. A society lasts in part because it maintains itself within the carrying capacity of its environment.

However, the perception of limits that derive from the local environment is easily neutralized by signals that promise prosperity. Quoting the late Georg Borgstrom, a renowned food scientist and a much-decorated specialist in Third World economies who died five years ago, a 1971 Population Reference Bureau publication explains,

A number of civilizations, including India and Indonesia, "had a clear picture of the limitations of their villages or communities" before foreign intervention disrupted the traditional patterns. Technical aid programs . . . "made them believe that the adoption of certain technical advances [was] going to free them of this bondage and of dependence on such restrictions."

Economic expansion, especially if it is introduced from outside the society and is also broad-based, encourages the belief that formerly recognized limits can be discounted, that everyone can look forward to prosperity, and, as in recent instances, that the West can be counted upon to provide assistance, rescue, and an escape valve for excess population.

The perception of new opportunity, whether due to technological advance, expanded trade, political change,

foreign aid, moving to a richer land, or the disappearance of competitors (who move away or die), encourages larger family size. Families eagerly fill any apparently larger niche, and the extra births and consequent population growth often overshoot actual opportunity.

Increase beyond a sustainable number is an ever-present threat, because human beings take their cue from the opportunity that is apparent *today*, and are easily fooled by change. Relying on what is near in space or time, we calculate with difficulty the long-term momentum of population growth, the limits to future technological advance, and the inexorable progression of resource depletion.

The appearance (and short-term reality) of expanding opportunity takes various guises. In the 1950s land redistribution in Turkey led formerly landless peasants to increase significantly the size of their families. Among African Sahel pastoralists, deep-water wells drilled by donor countries in the 1950s and 1960s prompted larger herds of cattle and goats, earlier marriage (because bride-prices are paid in animals and the required number became easier to accumulate), and higher fertility. Similarly, Ireland's widespread cultivation of the potato in the early eighteenth century increased agricultural productivity and encouraged peasants to subdivide portions of their farms into plots for their sons, which in turn promoted younger marriage and a baby boom. Still earlier, between the sixth and ninth centuries, the introduction in Europe of the stirrup, the rigid-collar harness, and nailed horseshoes greatly enhanced the agricultural output of Europe's northern plains. Better nutrition helped lead Europe out of the Dark Ages to economic recovery and thence, from about 1050 to 1350, to a tripling of population size in countries such as England and France.

India offers another example. Its population was nearly stable from 400 B.C. to about A.D. 1600. After the end of the Mogul invasions, and with the advent of new trade opportunities, the population began to grow (at about half the European rate). Later, European trade offered India further opportunity, and population growth accelerated. It took off for the skies shortly after the country shed its colonial status, in 1947; assistance from the USSR, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund bolstered perceptions of a prosperous future, and the rate of population growth accelerated up until about 1980.

Successful independence movements and populist coups are prominent among the kinds of changes that carry the message that times are good and getting better. China commenced its euphoric interlude with the expulsion of the Nationalists, in 1949. Communism triumphed, and its philosophy held that a greater nation required more people. The fertility rate and population size rocketed upward. A mainland-China population that was estimated to be 559 million in 1949 grew to 654 million in 1959, whereas in the preceding 100 years of political turmoil and war the average growth rate of the Chinese population had been just 0.3 percent a year. Both lower mortality and higher fertility contributed to the increase. Judith Banister writes in *China's Changing Population*, "Fertility began rising in the late 1940s, and was near or above 6 births per woman during the years 1952-57, higher fertility than had been customary" in prior decades. Banister attributes China's baby boom to war's end and to government policy: "Land reform of 1950-51 redistributed land to landless peasants and tenant farmers."

Cuba experienced a baby boom when Fidel Castro displaced Fulgencio Batista, in 1959. Castro explicitly promised a redistribution of wealth, and according to the demographers S. Díaz-Briquets and L. Pérez, fertility rose in response. Díaz-Briquets and Pérez write, "The main factor was the real income rise among the most disadvantaged groups brought about by the redistribution measures of the revolutionary government. The fertility rises in almost every age group suggest that couples viewed the future as more promising and felt they could now afford more children."

The populations of Algeria, Zimbabwe, and Rwanda grew rapidly around the time colonial powers left. Algeria, for example, achieved independence in 1962, and thirty years later 70 percent of its population was under thirty years of age. Zimbabwe gained independence in 1980, and soon achieved one of the highest population-growth rates in the world; the growth was encouraged by the Health Minister, who attacked family planning as a "white colonialist plot" to limit black power.

Because of their effect on family size, development programs entailing large transfers of technology and funds to the Third World have been especially pernicious. This kind of aid is inappropriate because it sends the signal that wealth and opportunity can grow without effort and without limit. That rapid population growth ensues should surprise no one. Africa, which in recent decades has received three times as much foreign aid per capita as any other continent, now also has the highest fertility rates. During the 1950s and 1960s the African fertility rate rose -- to almost seven children per woman -- at the same time that infant mortality was dramatically reduced, health-care availability grew, literacy for women and men became more widespread, and economic optimism pervaded more and more sectors of society. Extraordinarily high rates of population growth were new to Africa; during the 1950s the Latin American rate had been higher.

Even immigration can affect total world population. Studies of nineteenth-century England and Wales and

modern Caribbean societies show that in communities already in the throes of rapid population growth, fertility stays high as long as the option to emigrate exists, whereas fertility falls rapidly in communities that lack such an escape valve. And while fertility rates are falling in most African countries, the rate remains high in Ghana (6.2 births per woman in 1993), perhaps because an established pattern of emigration (one per 1,000 in the population) provides a safety valve for excess numbers. This effect on fertility is consistent with independent reports that emigration raises incomes both among emigrants and among those they leave behind.

In sum, it is true, if awkward, that efforts to alleviate poverty often spur population growth, as does leaving open the door to immigration. Subsidies, windfalls, and the prospect of economic opportunity remove the immediacy of needing to conserve. The mantras of democracy, redistribution, and economic development raise expectations and fertility rates, fostering population growth and thereby steepening a downward environmental and economic spiral.

Despite this fact, certain experts and the public they inform nevertheless wish to believe that fertility rates have traditionally been high worldwide and have declined only in industrialized countries or in countries where modern contraception is available, and that the post-Second World War population explosion is explained mostly by better health and nutrition, which led to rapidly declining mortality rates and slight, involuntary increases in fertility. The possibility that larger family size resulted from wanting more children continues to be denied.

Experts in population studies were the first to be fooled. In the 1930s many demographers predicted a steady decline in population, because the low fertility of Western industrialized countries was attributed to development and modernization rather than to the endemic pessimism brought on by the Great Depression. Still missing the point, many failed to see that the high fertility after the Second World War was a response to the perception of expanding economic opportunity. The U.S. Baby Boom (1947-1961) and the slightly later booms in Western Europe took most demographers by surprise.

THE MESSAGE OF SCARCITY

AS it happens, the encounters with scarcity that are currently being forced upon literally billions of people by the natural limits of their environment are beginning to correct the consequences of decades of misperception. The rhetoric of modernization, international development, and egalitarianism is losing its power to mislead. As Europe is revealed to be incapable of alleviating the suffering of the former Yugoslavia, as rich countries in general prove nearly powerless to help the countless distant multitudes, it becomes difficult to believe in rescue. Now, as it has done many times in human history, the rediscovery of limits is awakening the motivation to limit family size.

In Ireland land became scarce relative to the rapidly growing population in the early nineteenth century, whereupon fertility began a retreat to its low, pre-potato level. By 1830 only about two thirds of women married before age twenty-five. Ten percent married this young in 1851 -- a drastic postponement of marriage in response to the 1846-1851 potato famine. Following a brief recovery, as few as 12 percent married before age twenty-five. The pattern of late marriage persisted from about 1890 through the Second World War. In the United States the Baby Boom ended at about the time the jobs pipeline began to fill; the fertility rate dropped below replacement level after the 1973 oil shock occurred and many Americans' real income stopped rising. In post-revolutionary China population momentum built until famine, unrelieved by Western aid, forced a confrontation with limits. In 1979, mindful of severe food shortages, the government instituted a one-child-per-family policy, thus completing the evolution of incentives and controls that returned the country to the pre-Communist pattern of marital and reproductive restraint. In Cuba the Castro-inspired baby boom gave way to below-replacement-level fertility when communism's inability to deliver prosperity became manifest. In Eastern-bloc countries, including Russia, economic restructuring, the dissipation of government consumption subsidies, and the public perception of rising infant mortality have promoted lower fertility rates and created demand for the avoidance of pregnancy.

In Zimbabwe, prodded by the international economic retrenchment of the late 1980s, the government began to support family planning. According to *The Economist*, "The hefty cost of supporting a large family has helped persuade some men of the value of limiting its size." The fertility rate is falling among the Yoruba in Nigeria, owing to a combination of delayed marriage and increasing acceptance of modern contraception. Two thirds of the women who responded to a recent survey said that "the major force behind marriage postponement and the use of contraception to achieve it was the present hard economic conditions."

Elsewhere the demand for modern contraception is also rising, and again the reason seems to be that couples view early marriage and large families as unaffordable. In his new book, *Critical Masses*, the journalist George

D. Moffett reports that a mother of two in Mexico defended her use of contraception before a village priest by explaining, "Things are difficult here. A majority of people are having hard times. Jobs are hard to come by." Similarly, a day laborer in Thailand, in the words of Moffett, "would like to have one more child, but he understands that that is beyond his means."

Without the motivation to limit family size, access to modern contraception is nearly irrelevant. For six years in the 1950s a project directed by the British researcher John Wyon provided several villages in northern India with family-planning education, access to contraception, and medical care. The villagers had positive attitudes toward the health-care providers and toward family planning, and infant mortality had fallen way down. But the fertility rate stayed way up.

Wyon's group soon figured out why: the villagers liked large families. They were delighted that now, with lower infant mortality, they could have the six surviving children they had always wanted. The well-funded Wyon project may even have reinforced the preference for large families, by playing a part in making extra children affordable.

THINK LOCALLY

MISCALCULATION about the *cause* of the population explosion has led to irrelevant and even counterproductive strategies for helping the Third World to balance its population size and its resources. In the late 1940s and the heady decades that followed, trade, independence movements, populist revolutions, foreign aid, and new technology made people in all walks of life believe in abundance and an end to the natural limits imposed by the environments with which they were familiar.

Now it is a step forward for industrial nations, their wealth much diminished, to be retrenching and targeting aid more narrowly. Their remaining wealth must not be squandered on arming opposing factions, reckless foreign assistance, or support for international migrations that rob and ultimately enrage -- to the point of violence and possibly civil war -- resident populations. This retrenchment saddens many, but the former liberality did a disservice to every country targeted for development.

With a new, informed understanding of human responses, certain kinds of aid remain appropriate: microloans that foster grassroots enterprise, where success is substantially related to effort; and assistance with family-planning services, not because contraception is a solution in and of itself but because modern contraception is a humane way of achieving small family size when small family size is desired. This modest agenda remains within the means of industrialized countries even as they look to the needs of the growing ranks of their own poor. And it does not mislead and unintentionally harm intended beneficiaries.

The idea that economic development is the key to curbing world population growth rests on assumptions and assertions that have influenced international aid policy for some fifty years. These assumptions do not stand up to historical or anthropological scrutiny, however, and the policies they have spawned have contributed to runaway population growth.

The human capacity for adaptive response evolved in face-to-face interactions. Humanity's strong suit is quick response to environmental cues -- a response more likely to be appropriate when the relevant environment is immediate and local. The mind's horizon is here and now. Our ancestors evolved and had to succeed in small groups that moved around relatively small territories. They had to succeed one day at a time -- or not be anyone's ancestors. So, unsurprisingly, signals that come from the local environment are powerfully motivating.

Let the globalists step aside. One-world solutions do not work. Local solutions will. Everywhere people act in accord with their perception of their best interests. People are adept at interpreting *local* signs to find the *next* move needed. In many countries and communities today, where social, economic, and environmental conditions are indubitably worsening, the demand for modern contraception is rising, marriage and sexual initiation are delayed, and family size is contracting. Individuals responding with low fertility to signs of limits are the local solution. One prays that the hucksters of inappropriate development do not mess this up.

