American Global Population Policy: an Ethical Analysis

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This brief essay will not attempt to give a detailed description of the many policy statements and programs that the United States carries on in the name of population assistance. For that, one needs to look at official position papers and reports, particularly those issued by the Office of Population with the U.S. Agency for International Development (hereafter referred to as AID).1 What the essay will do is focus on the dominant themes in U.S. government statements and actions concerned with global population policy, particularly statements and actions issuing from AID and its Office of Population. I realize that the term “policy” can be used in many ways and thus the expression “population policy” varies in use even more. For purposes of this analysis, I am restricting the term “policy” to governmental activities in which recommendations are being made or promulgated that specify a responsible agency, a goal and appropriate means for its realization.2

I will examine and evaluate U.S. thinking and acting in global population policy under the following three headings: I. The nature of population problems; II. The nature of population policy; and III. Ethical priorities in population policy.

The Nature of Population Problems

An examination of presidential statements by Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, and of AID and other State Department position papers, reveals a dominant assumption that population growth is a problem because it has adverse effects on human welfare.3 These U.S. government officials and agencies most commonly argue that population growth retards economic development, leads to scarcity of resources, especially food, and is accompanied by unwanted and unplanned pregnancies.

I. Economic Development

Through AID, the U.S. has a program of stimulating and assisting economic development around the world. Given this basic commitment to global economic development, any major impediment to the realization of this goal bids fare to become a central policy concern. If a case can be made that population growth seriously frustrates U.S. efforts to assist economic development in other countries, then a policy to deal with population growth is bound to be developed. This is what has happened.4 Presidents Johnson and Nixon, the U.S. Congress, and certain officials in AID did and do take the view that present population growth rates in many of the countries to which the U.S. is giving aid have the effect of greatly thwarting, if not utterly rendering futile, U.S. economic aid. A policy to help developing countries to reduce rapid population growth continues to be justified as a necessary or at least worthwhile ingredient in bringing about and securing economic gains in such countries.5

It comes as no surprise, therefore, to see the resistance in AID circles to the suggestion that rapid population growth is much more the effect than the cause of failures in economic development and that only where economic development is sufficiently increased will high birth rates be reduced. If AID would accept that argument, it would have no need, at least on economic grounds, for a separate and additional effort to lower fertility. Increased efforts at economic assistance would be the order of the day.

Whatever its loyalties to currently well-financed programs of family planning and contraceptive research for the purpose of reducing birth rates, the U.S. government and AID officials do not feel they can entirely ignore the weight of the argument that high growth rates are much more the effect of, rather than the cause of, a relatively undeveloped economy and situations of relative poverty. Historically, the shift from high birth rates and high death rates to low birth rates and low death rates is very much associated with economic development and the modernization accompanying it. Even in affluent countries, the poor tend to have larger families than the well to do.6

U.S. government and AID officials are not unmindful of the humanness of the appeal to deal with poverty directly. Hence, repeatedly, official U.S. position papers stress that assistance for economic development must accompany population assistance and must not be jeopardized by it. Understandably, developmen-
talists, who argue that a certain level of economic development is essential to human welfare and to reducing population growth, question the wisdom of U.S. AID policy as its funds for economic assistance in general decline and its funds earmarked for family planning and contraceptive research increase. Faced with the displeasure of developmentalists in many quarters, U.S. policy statements stress two further claims for the relevance of AID population assistance: It is justified as a step to cope with the inevitable strain that population growth places on resources; and as a fulfillment of the obligations of governments to enhance the right of couples to live with their children.

2. Availability of Resources. The development of AID population assistance was greatly augmented by arguments that linked population growth to food shortages that occurred in the mid ’60s. In 1966, Congress passed new legislation that, as the House Committee on Agriculture noted, recognizes for the first time, as a matter of U.S. policy, the world population explosion relationship to the world food crisis, providing that the new food-for-freedom program shall make available resources to promote voluntary activities in other countries dealing with the problem of population growth and family planning.

As President Johnson signed the bill on November 12, 1966, he commented that the sound population program, encouraged in this measure, free and voluntarily undertaken, are vital to meeting the food crisis, and to the broader efforts of the development nations to attain higher standards of living for their people.

Position papers by AID and other State Department officials continue to link population growth and food shortages. At the same time, it is fair to note that the Department of State, in its official response to the United Nations Second Inquiry Among Governments on Population Growth and Development, acknowledged that recent improvements in agricultural methods have brought about trends, which, if they continue, mean that the availability of food will increase throughout the world. However, this paper did express some concern about the limitation over time of these increases.

It is important to question a simple relationship between population growth and per capita food supplies. There are data that indicate that per capita food supplies most likely increased between the mid 1930s and the mid 1960s, and throughout large areas there has been a sharp upward trend in the last few years. Surveying some of the best data available, Roger Revelle has concluded that the proportion of the world’s population which is seriously malnourished is probably less today than at any time in the Paleolithic. Bhatia’s study of famines in India argues that, whereas in the nineteenth century famines were due to a genuine shortage of food, famines in the twentieth century occur because transportation is not adequate to get food quickly enough to the people who need it and/or people who need food cannot pay the high prices in a period of relative scarcity when their own crops fail. Although there would seem to be a limit to the production of food, and so of the number of people the earth can sustain, population growth as such is not, so far, linked to the creation of food shortages but rather to increased food production.

The relationship of population growth to environmental problems is extremely complex. There is a tendency for U.S. policy statements to claim that population growth is one of the major factors affecting the deterioration of the environment in a country like the United States. If, however, one is looking for major causes of pollution and resource use, it is essential to examine the factors of growing affluence and changes in consumption patterns that occur in a country like the United States. A major source of pollution, for example, is the growth of electric power generation from the burning of sulphur-containing coal and oil. This source of pollution increased fivefold between 1940 and 1965 while the population grew by 47 percent. With the per capita power consumption of 1970, our population would have to be reduced to 20 million people to arrive at the same total power consumption that obtained in 1940. Roger Revelle has calculated that more than half the environmental deterioration in the United States since 1940 has resulted from our growing affluence and changes in production patterns.

If affluence is a major cause of environmental deterioration, given certain habits of consumption, it would seem foolishly hard to argue that we should decrease birth rates in order to increase affluence. In the short run, increased affluence would most certainly be a more devastating source of environmental deterioration than increased numbers of people, provided, of course, that pollution and consumption habits remain roughly what they are. It would appear that the conservation of our environment will depend upon efforts to recycle resources and increase pollution abatement.

In any event, no simple case can be made that the curtailment of population growth or the achievement of zero population growth will greatly ameliorate current environmental problems. In the immediate years ahead, the most effective reductions in birth rates imaginable would still necessitate vigorous programs to increase food production and environmental protection.

3. Family Planning. But even if AID and other government officials acknowledge in some of their policy statements the complexities of the relationships between population growth on the one hand, and economic develop-
ment and environmental deterioration on the other, this does not shake their essential commitment to assisting family planning programs around the world. The availability of birth control methods is considered to be a human right that governments should help people to actualize. There is a strong assumption in U.S. government circles that the use of contraceptives will help to reduce maternal and infant deaths, alleviate poverty for individual families, and provide the means for increasing the freedom of couples to have only the number of children that they desire.

These humane reasons for making birth control methods available to the poor, who without government assistance would be deprived of them, are strong arguments on their behalf. However, some may well ask whether there are not more direct means for alleviating poverty, deaths, and increasing fertility rates? This leads us to a consideration as to whether the provision of family planning services, increasing the availability of birth control methods, and the development of new birth control techniques constitute a population policy of any great weight if by population policy we mean a policy to influence birth rates.

The Nature of Population Policy

U.S. government global population policy is thoroughly imbued with the ideology of the family planners. This is true as judged by what is said and what is done. The great bulk of money spent on population assistance is spent for research to develop birth control techniques, for making family planning services available, and for supporting numerous private organizations which have long provided family planning services in the United States and countries around the world. The aim of these expenditures is precisely to reduce fertility. The assumption of family planners is that given the very best means available, people who have not previously had access to such methods will want to reduce the size of their family. Indeed, it is widely assumed by the family planners that if there are few impediments to the widest possible choices of birth control methods, couples will on the average have significantly fewer children.

An important question about family planning still remains, namely does government provision of family planning services significantly reduce population growth rates? This leads us to a consideration as to whether the provision of family planning services, increasing the availability of birth control methods, and the development of new birth control techniques constitute a population policy of any great weight, if by population policy we mean a policy to influence birth rates.

With data like this in hand, crisis environmentalists like Paul Ehrlich and Garrett Hardin, who equate overpopulation with environmental deterioration, have argued for a wide variety of coercive governmental policies to reduce fertility. Their assumption is that adding children to one's family is profitable and therefore it is necessary for governments to intervene to make it less profitable to have families greater than the size required for zero population growth. There is no evidence to assume that the crisis environmentalists are correct. Indeed, the United States itself achieved an average family size in 1972, which, if maintained, will lead to zero population growth in about 70 years. Interestingly enough, government spokesmen and others note that the United States still does not have an explicit domestic population policy.

Developmentalists take as their fundamental assumption that where there is a reasonable standard of welfare widely distributed in the population, low birth rates are uniformly to be expected. This is the lesson to be drawn from the demographic transition. Marxists have long argued that in a society with reasonable standards of equity and the capacity for technological innovation, birth rates consonant with social welfare will be rationally and voluntarily achieved.

Short of achieving a high level of overall economic development comparable to affluent western countries, there are factors that seem to be very highly correlated with low birth rates. Low infant mortality rates, high rates of literacy, relatively high status for women, and reasonable availability of health care for families, particularly mothers and infants, all appear to be highly correlated with low birth rates. In revisiting India in the late '60s, John Wyon found that in areas touched by the Green Revolution, the increase in affluence that helped procure some of these circumstances for families contributed to lower birth rates, achieved not by greater use of birth control clinics but by increases in delayed marriage and continued resort to traditional birth control methods. New opportunities for children and new prospects for keeping them alive seemed to be important factors in motivating couples to have fewer children.
I cannot see that the conflicting and imperfect data presently available to us allows us, on purely empirical grounds, to choose among the population policies suggested by family planners or by crisis environmentalists or by developmentalists. The U.S. government and others do, however, make such choices. The grounds on which these are made are much more ethical than they are empirical. Decisions as to what is the best governmental policy in response to population growth are largely determined in any case by what governments think is best for people and what they think presently most injures them. These are ethical considerations.

**Ethical Priorities in Population Policy**

It is my contention that achieving a higher level of social and racial justice in this country and countries around the world is of the highest priority. Governments will need to bend every effort to increase justice and the United States has a vital role to play on a national and a global scale. I find it difficult to see how justice is served by putting a higher priority on the provision of birth control methods than on the provision of the wherewithal to purchase not only the birth control methods of one's choice but also many other of the amenities of life, such as education consonant with one's ability, housing commensurate with human dignity, and health services of the quality that current medical art and technology are capable of providing. For all the stress on voluntarism, and it's a value I certainly share, family planners do not sufficiently take into account the futurity of sharply reducing family size and the promise of each new child for those who are utterly destitute and dependent on others. A man articulates black mother eloquently put it, "Even without children, my life would still be bad—they're not going to give us what they have, the birth control people. They just want us to be a poor version of them only without our children, our faith in God, our tasty fried food, or anything." Surely it is unjust to ask the families in the Indian villages that John Woyo studied sharply to curtail their family size when more than 50 percent of the women in those villages had three deaths among their live births. It is extremely risky to have small families where children provide security for their parents in old age and are a source of labor, and where a high proportion of them die in infancy.

It is heartening to see in AID policy statements a new emphasis upon evaluating and promoting family planning services that are integrated into health services. New expenditures back these words with actions. At the same time, it is discouraging to see continued large expenditures for birth control technology while the total funds for economic assistance of all kinds steadily diminish. I cannot help but wonder whether national security and human survival are not much more assured by just and humane policies than by the currently high expenditures for new weaponry and defense generally. U.S. intervention in Vietnam would seem to teach the futurity, as well as the immorality, of fighting a war that is so widely considered unjust.

U.S. global population policy is rightly concerned with enhancing the freedom to plan one's family. (There is no clear case for the necessity let alone the justice of coercing procreation.) If freedom is the concern, however, family planning should not be considered a policy to reduce the number of one's children, but rather to plan how many there will be. Furthermore, in conditions of poverty one is still not free to plan where infant and maternal death rates remain relatively high. Nutritional information and broader health care are minimal requisites of justly providing family planning services for the sake of enhancing procreative choices.

U.S. population policy has another emphasis that promises freedom but which, under conditions of inequity and discrimination provide occasions for coercion. I refer here to the recommendation to remove all barriers to using a full range of birth control techniques. The courts have been especially active in this area. A recent study reveals that a significantly higher proportion of black women as compared with white women are receiving sterilization after induced abortions. This difference persists even when age and parity are held constant. Furthermore, we know how an illiterate woman in Alabama unwittingly signed to have her two daughters aged 12 and 14 sterilized in a government subsidized clinic. The most recent issue of the black magazine *Ebony* reports other incidents, including the case of a 30 year old white mother of four on welfare who sought a physician to deliver her fifth baby. All three physicians in her town refused to assist her unless she consented to be sterilized. Where people are relatively powerless, economically dependent, or otherwise an easy target for discrimination, governments do not serve them well simply by removing impediments to certain services unless there are also constraints upon the misuse of these services by those who have the power to give or withhold them.

Justice, freedom, human welfare, and survival would be better served if U.S. global population policy would strive to increase the overall expenditures for assisting economic development around the globe, would insist on integrating birth control services with wider health care, would develop inexpensive ways, using local personnel, to educate families how to make better use of the food they have, especially for infants, would develop literacy programs, and better education for minorities and women, and would turn their imagination to developing and implementing effective programs against poverty and racial and
sexual discrimination, programs that would be worthy of export to other countries. I venture the guess that these measures would also reduce population growth rates but they are, in any event, just and noble goals, worth struggling for.

REFERENCES


5. See references in footnote 6.


7. Piotrow, op. cit., p. 117.

8. Ibid., p. 117.


11. Actually no one knows for certain whether the resources necessary to sustain human life are infinite and totally renewable, finite and partially renewable, finite and totally renewable, or finally non-renewable. These possibilities have all had their champions in religious debates over the centuries, about whether the earth or life as we know it will last infinitely or if not, how long that will take. It seems now that scientists are playing theologians, but most often without knowing or acknowledging it. Most of the scientific discussions do not explicitly take into account the full range of possibilities, especially excluding the possibility of infinite resources, or that resources are finite and totally or ultimately non-renewable.

12. Revelle, op. cit.


17. See, for example, the two volume work edited by the National Academy of Sciences, Rapid Population Growth: Consequential Policy Implications (Johns Hopkins Press, 1971).

18. Personal communication. See also the last chapter in Wyon and Gordon, op. cit.


20. Wyon and Gordon, op. cit.


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