The Ideology of Population Assistance

by

Maria Sophia Aguirre and Cecilia Hadley

In recent years, increasing attention and support has been devoted to population issues by the international community. The large and growing sums of money funneled into population assistance as well as the motivations for focusing on this aspect of development as often the primary development goal, are cause for scrutiny. This first of two essays evaluating the effectiveness of population assistance for real development will examine the role of the United Nations in the formulation and implementation of modern ‘population assistance’ as a developmental priority. It is important to evaluate the continued justification for money currently being spent on population assistance especially in anticipation of two important upcoming UN events. The Third UN Conference on the Least Developed Countries (LDC-III) and a High-Level Intergovernmental Event on Financing for Development, both scheduled in 2001, directly relate to issues of population funding.

The international community has spent massive amounts of money on ‘population assistance’ in the last decade. In principle, these population policies are people-centered but, in reality, policies have been twisted to the point of control over people and have become the foundation of all development and ‘population activities’ – terms more and more being reduced to population control. Increasing amounts of money are not only spent to provide access to contraception and reproductive health services, but also in an attempt to change cultures to prefer small families. Behind these population control policies lies, among other reasons, a distinct feminist agenda in the name of ‘reproductive rights’. When support for population control is separated from feminist arguments, it is supported on various economic and development grounds. These arguments, however, overlook the fact that, despite large population increases in the twentieth century, no one single relationship has been found between population growth and economic development or population growth and the environment. The international community has poured money into ‘population assistance’ to the detriment and relative neglect of real economic growth and social development.

An analysis of the gradually increasing focus on the population control-centered development must begin with the United Nations, the primary forum for the international population debate. Through the evolving language of the UN population and development related conferences, one can trace an ever-increasing focus on population control and cultural change. Through the evolving language of documents from these conferences, the face of the unchanging underlying population control agenda has been slowly altered.

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Bucharest and Population Control

The first UN conference to develop a plan of action for population and development was at Bucharest in 1974. The document was titled the World Population Plan of Action (WPPA). Delegates to this conference stressed population control to meet the needs of resource problems such as food together with the right of couples to freely determine the number and spacing of their children. Some of the developing countries objected to what they saw as an undue emphasis on population at the cost of economic development. Overall, no demographic goals were set, however, the groundwork was laid for population policy as primarily an international issue rather than within the realm of national sovereignty. Paragraph 99 of the WPPA states, “The effect of national action/inaction in the fields of population may extend boundaries; such international implications are particularly evident with regard to aspects of morbidity, population concentration and international migration, but may also apply to other aspects of population concern.”

Mexico City and the Rhetorical Switch to Reproductive Rights

The 1984 Mexico City conference reflected a bit step back from the push for definitive population goals, but also a turning point in the language of population policy. By the time of this conference, coercive population policy in China had been implemented. The scare caused by this policy was reflected in US delegation’s reversal of roles, which would no longer support force in achieving population goals. Also due to the Chinese policy scare, the Mexico City document did not outline quantitative population goals at the urging of the UNFPA, but it did recommend population policies if population became a hindrance to national goals. The Chinese policy did cause a scare, however, the international community would not publicly denounce it. This could not help but undermine their claim to the commitment to human rights. Instead, it became apparent that the “basic human right of all couples and individuals to decide freely and responsibly the number and spacing of their children” outlined in the WPPA only existed if the government judged these decisions responsible. Essentially, if a government did not deem the decisions of couples responsible, they could be overruled. Nevertheless, the Chinese scare did create a generally negative feeling after Mexico City about target population rates leading to a change in language from ‘population control’ to ‘sustainable development’ and ‘reproductive and sexual rights’.

Rio de Janeiro and Sustainable Development

The concept of sustainable development was expanded at the UN Conference on Environment and Development at Rio de Janeiro in 1992 when a distinct link was made between population growth, development, and the environment. This link was made within the concept that the Earth had an absolute limit to population capacity and that the current population growth rate could not be supported within these environmental constraints. This occurred despite the fact that a previous 1987 report issued by the World Commission on Environment and Development had not included population stabilization among the necessary elements of sustainable development. This report explained that sustainable limits did exist, but these limits were “not absolute limits but limitations
imposed by the present state of technology and social organization on environmental resources and by the ability of the biosphere to absorb the effects of human activities.” The Rio de Janeiro conference spoke in terms of absolute limits and developed policies on this basis. Point 3.2 of Agenda 21 states “an effective strategy for tackling the problems of poverty, development, and environment simultaneously should begin by focusing on resources, production and people.” Point 5.17 of the same agenda goes on to address the implementation of such a strategy. It states, “policies should be designed to address the consequences of population growth built into population momentum, while at the same time incorporating measures to bring about demographic transition.” Thus, the term ‘sustainable development’ could now be used to include the population control agenda without negative connotations.

**Cairo and the Programme of Action for Population Assistance**

The next major step in the UN implementation and formulation of population control policies occurred at the 1994 ICPD in Cairo. This conference did not just produce a set of recommendations, but produced a Programme of Action, which included new arguments for population control and ideas for the resources to implement it. This programme almost never mentions economic development except within the context of ‘sustainable development’ or the population and development relationship. It establishes population stabilization as the required element, without which economic growth, reduction of poverty, environmental protection, and the improvement of other developmental problems cannot occur. Point 3.14 states,

> Slower population growth…has increased…countries’ ability to attack poverty, protect and repair the environment, and build the base for future sustainable development…Sustained economic growth within the context of sustainable development is essential to eradicate poverty…Investment in fields important to the eradication of poverty, such as basic education, sanitation, drinking water, housing, adequate food supply and infrastructure for rapidly growing populations, continue to strain already weak economies and limit development options.

The implementation of actions to achieve this is first listed generally as “appropriate demographic policies” in paragraph 3.19, but Chapter Three unmistakably describes these as policies that control fertility and limit population growth. The Cairo conference also connected population control (and therefore sustainable development) to ‘women’s empowerment’ by linking access to contraception with reproductive health and reproductive rights with women’s empowerment. Reproductive health was recognized as a human right so that access to contraception also came to be considered a human right. This important connection classifying reproductive health as a universal right changed the discussion from national development to an international issue that was no longer advisable but absolutely necessary such that other countries could provide the means for its implementation in developing countries that could not afford it themselves. Paragraph 7.3 of the programme goes on to describe reproductive rights as part of a responsibility to the community as determined by the government. In developing countries this is almost invariably translated into a ‘responsibility’ to limit family size. In this framework, governments not only supply contraceptives, but subtly force a need for them as well as a need for
international population assistance. Generally the Programme of Action places great emphasis on reproductive health at the exclusion of other resources. It paragraph 13.14 it outlines a “costed population package” consisting of family planning services, basic reproductive health services, STD and HIV/AIDS prevention, and research, data, and policy analysis. It calls for $77.7 billion in funds by the year 2015 two-thirds of which it expects to be domestically funded. Overall, the Programme of Action centers international population and development financial assistance solely on the area of reproductive health.

Thus, the UN has firmly planted the language and arguments for population control at the base of all development concerns. This single-sided approach has in turn caused a serious neglect of real economic development aspects.

Bibliography


Population Assistance and the Need for True Development*

by

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The United Nation’s population and development conferences of the past thirty years have served as a forum for the international population debate and have worked primarily to formulate and implement policies in the area of population control. One of the end results of this process has been the promotion of a “reproductive health package” outlined in the 1994 Cairo Programme of Action as the primary means of development often in the midst of neglect for real economic issues. This second essay of a two-part series evaluating the effectiveness of population assistance for real development will discuss the aspects of the reproductive health package as population assistance and the need for real development. These issues will be at the heart of the upcoming Third UN Conference on the Least Developed Countries (LDC-III) and the High-Level Intergovernmental Event on Financing for Development in 2001.

Arguments for the Reproductive Health Package as Population Assistance

The Cairo Programme of Action placed the reproductive health package at the foundation of the means of population assistance and sustainable development based primarily on two arguments. Those who promote this reproductive health package as population assistance argue for either the immediate goal of reproductive health (i.e. the individual good) or the long-term goal of population stabilization (i.e. the common good). The argument for the individual good of reproductive health is inextricably tied up in women’s issues. Many classify this good as a human right and, in this context, supporters are able to call on developing countries to finance and developed countries to subsidize the package as a basic right. The Programme of Action is optimistic about maintaining the compatibility of human freedom with government-instituted demographic goals, but it seems that experience has shown to the contrary in light of the human rights violations of so many family planning programs such as those in China, India, Sweden, and Peru. This attitude certainly does not reflect an empowerment of women. In many cases, the argument for access to reproductive services also overlooks the fact that maternal mortality is not due to an unwanted child, but to poor medical treatment and health before, during and after delivery.

The second argument for the reproductive health care package as population assistance perceives the slowing and eventual halting of population growth as necessary to achieve sustainable development. Assuming a fixed level of resources, it is based on the point of view that the Earth has a certain carrying capacity, which the human population is nearing, as well as the view that population and economic growth are negatively related. Scientific and economic evidence, however, does not support this link. Perhaps, then, a different perspective should be taken into account. Nobel Prize winner Gary Becker introduced the idea of human capital as an economic

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development source arguing that the earth’s resources are not necessarily fixed because man is creative and can increase his production. Greater human capital actually makes better economic development possible together with training and education programs while economic development policies that instead promote low birth rates deprive, especially developing countries, of human resources and eat funds that could be used for other areas such as education.

The Mobilization of Funds for Population Assistance

The large amounts of funds set aside by the Programme of Action for implementing population assistance in the form of reproductive health services flow through a well-organized network. Three forms of assistance are used to distribute the funds. Bilateral aid goes directly from the government of a developed country to the government of a developing country. Multilateral assistance flows through UN organizations and agencies while non-governmental funds flow through international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The primary donors of population assistance funds are mostly developed countries and private sources. Multilateral donors function primarily as intermediate donors channeling the funds and deciding which developing countries benefit from available funds. Recipients of the funds are mostly developing countries and national non-governmental organizations. Development banks play a role in this process, but they provide only loans and not grants. The Cairo conference significantly impacted this system by setting quantitative monetary goals and defining what qualified as ‘population assistance’. Four areas of funding were outlined in the population package. These included family planning services, basic reproductive health, STD and HIV/AIDS prevention programs, and basic research, data and population development policy analysis.

The monetary goals set at Cairo jump-started new growth in the resource flows to the population assistance network. Population assistance rose from constituting 1.34 percent of official development assistance in 1991 to 3.18 percent in 1997. Donor countries contributed seventy-eight percent of population assistance funds in 1997 while NGOs such as the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) have come to manage most of the final expenditures. For example, in 1991, final expenditures were approximately even among bilateral (39%), multilateral (34%), and NGO (27%) channels, but in 1997, final expenditures were managed mostly by NGOs (52%) and much less by bilateral (23%) and multilateral (25%) sources. The UNFPA has become the most important multilateral organization involved. Funds donated through the UNFPA are specifically for population activities and larger and larger amounts of money have been flowing through the UNFPA each year. Expenditures are difficult to track because the classification of funds changes often, but by 1996 the Global Population Assistance Report had classified final expenditures exactly according to the four categories of the population package outlined in the Programme of Action. Recipients of these resources have primarily been sub-Saharan Africa and Asia and the Pacific.

The billions of dollars that appear to have been spent and the billions more that will be spent in the future may cause one to question, from where is all this funded support for population assistance coming? The population assistance network is well established and supported by first-world politicians, the IPPF, and feminist organizations.
Top donor countries include the United States, Japan, Germany, the United Kingdom, The Netherlands, and Sweden.\footnote{Besides being all developed nations, these countries also have the common denominator of housing the world’s nine largest pharmaceutical companies.}

The fact that it is promoted by the women’s lobby while the programs are often detrimental to women’s rights and is promoted by developing countries with low fertility and aging populations suggests that this support does not truly have a concern for women and developing countries at its core. Instead, one of the main motivations for developed nations is an issue of national security. Many first-world countries feel threatened by rapidly growing developing countries. A 1974 US National Security Council memorandum demonstrates this sentiment. The memorandum expresses fear that rapid population growth will foster civil unrest and threaten the supply of resources necessary for the US economy. The authors of the memorandum recommended, “The US can help to minimize charges of an imperialist motivation behind its support of population activities by repeatedly asserting that such support derives from a concern with: (a) the right of the individual to determine freely and responsibly the number and spacing of their children…and (b) the fundamental social and economic development of poor countries.” Feminist’s support of population assistance is primarily motivated by a perception of fertility as the main source of exploitation of women. For this reason, their number one priority of feminists is reproductive and sexual rights, however, they tend to willingly overlook human rights violations in procuring this. Pharmaceuticals that supply contraceptives also have a significant interest in promoting population assistance because contraception is a multi-billion dollar business. These companies normally reside in the prime donor countries. The IPPF, for example, is a known lobbyist for some pharmaceuticals and in fact 180 delegates at Cairo were IPPF employees.

\textit{Towards True Development}

In light of all this information, it seems readily apparent that real investment in government and the economy has been overshadowed in the UN by population issues. The emphasis on ‘sustainable development’ reduced to population control has detracted attention from other important areas of concern mentioned in paragraphs 3.21 and 3.22 of the Programme of Action that include the promotion of a supportive economic environment for developing countries and job creation facilitated by more favorable trade and investment climates within countries. A review of the spending of major UN funds and programs reveals that population funds increased from 1990 to 1997 while funds for industry, transportation, communications, trade and development, employment, and science and technology have fallen since 1990. Investment in human capital has also been largely overlooked in the focus on population. Education is essential to the development of human capital. The amounts of funding for population and education have been fairly similar since 1994. Healthcare is also an important factor in promoting human development by increasing productivity, creating a demand for education, and encouraging domestic saving. The UN, however, has focused on reproductive health while ignoring other health issues. The number of malaria (over one million per year) and tuberculosis (two million/yr.) deaths far exceed maternal deaths (580,000/yr.) and tuberculosis is the leading cause of death in women of reproductive age. Neglecting this issue while focusing on maternal problems is neglecting rather than helping women. Nevertheless, over the last three years, the World Bank has on average lent sixty-two million dollars per year for malaria and fifty-eight million per year for tuberculosis.
while in 1996, 1997, and 1998, $508 million, $234 million, and $426 million dollars respectively have been lent for population assistance. In addition, the 1998-99 total UN budget for communicable disease was only $105,545,000 – paltry in comparison to the sum of funds spent on population assistance. It is evident that real investment in human capital has been overshadowed by population assistance issues.

The ICPD Programme of Action rightly acknowledges people as the center of development and their capacity as a valuable resource, yet, under the title of reproductive and sexual rights, it has directed billions of funds to be spent on reducing fertility. This has been done without granting needed attention to real development issues such as the economy, sanitation or human capital. The UN, with the support of feminists, has continually promoted a double agenda for population control and cultural change. With the monetary support stimulated by the Cairo conference, this agenda has evolved into a well-organized and well-funded ‘population assistance network’. Rather than helping countries and peoples, the continual focus on population assistance has left them desperate for other forms of aid. This focus has actually infringed upon human rights especially upon many women who do not understand the contraceptives they are being given. The large amounts of funds that developing countries are now exhorted to provide for support population measures drain resources better spent elsewhere on such things as reducing malaria and educating women. In short, ‘population assistance’ has usurped a great deal of the energy and funds of the international community without even empirical justification for such an approach to development issues and has resulted in a neglect for other areas of real need.

Bibliography

