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In Defense of Family Planning

Contribution to GTI Forum [The Population Debate Revisited](#)

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In the old fable, people denied the emperor's nakedness because they wanted to be seen as smart. Today, people deny overpopulation because they want to be seen as moral. It is a form of virtue signaling: are you for justice and equity and families and being nice to refugees, or are you one of "The People Who Hate People"?¹ Few look at the data to see whether their position actually favors those goals.

Associating large families with impoverishment is far from being a modern product of global overshoot: Aristotle (384–322 BC) said, *"One would have thought that it was even more necessary to limit population than property. The neglect of this subject, which in existing states is so common, is a never failing cause of poverty among the citizens; and poverty is the parent of revolution and crime."* European literature is full of the plight of divided inheritance, redundant sons, and the desperate underemployment of the rural population overflow. It is self-evident that an oversupplied labor market depresses wages to the benefit of employers. It is self-evident that the subdivision of land erodes whatever rural development can be achieved by increasing agricultural productivity. It is self-evident that a family with ten children will spend less on educating each than a family with one. It is self-evident that a whole community or country composed predominantly of large households will fall ever further behind ones with small families.

The international family planning movement began as a humanitarian response to the very evident threats that population growth posed to economic development and food security in the Global South. When pre-existing family planning organizations were recruited to this new population agenda, for them it was very much about women first and population second. They

encouraged governments to provide and promote voluntary family planning, and provided those services through NGOs. I am unaware of any instance where they advocated targeting any particular race or ethnic group or where they advocated coercive measures.

Most countries that implemented family planning programs used purely voluntary measures, adapted to local context and culture. In all countries that achieved rapid fertility decline, the benefits of small families were actively promoted—they did not merely hope that more wealth or education would cause people to break from pro-natalist cultural norms. There were a few instances of abusive birth control by national governments, or by officials seeking to achieve quotas placed on them by national governments. These measures were opposed by international family planning professionals long before the 1994 Cairo Conference on Population and Development. They were never part of the agenda advocated at the earlier UN population conferences. Although the broadening of the agenda at Cairo—with its more explicit commitment to women’s health and rights and to more client-focused delivery of family planning—was widely welcomed, it was followed by a deletion and delegitimization of all population focus from the subsequent implementation of the Cairo agenda.

According to the new doctrine, all “population control” activities before Cairo had been conducted *“without heed to people’s reproductive aspirations, their health, or the health of their children.”* This particular version of the oft-stated or insinuated accusation appeared in the UN Population Fund’s 2014 review of achievements under the Cairo agenda which, without any democratic process, presumed to set the “framework” for subsequent work, further distancing the ongoing agenda from the Cairo text and its acknowledgement of the need to minimize population growth.²

Displaying a bizarre cognitive dissonance, this discourse insists on one hand that past concern about population growth was misguided (if not a mischievous cover for other agendas—whether racism, eugenics, or blaming the poor for rich-world overconsumption) and led to no good, and simultaneously boasts that eschewing population and focusing only on women’s health, education, and rights would *“also lead to lower population growth”* as if that mattered.³ A hollow claim: all the countries that achieved a rapid fertility transition did so while running family planning programs that actively promoted small families as part of an explicit population

deceleration policy (e.g., South Korea, Thailand, Vietnam, Costa Rica, Iran, and Mauritius). Those that were persuaded by the Cairo agenda to drop their population focus part-way through their transition saw fertility stall or rebound (e.g., Indonesia, Egypt, and Kenya).⁴ Globally, the fertility transition that was so strongly established by family planning efforts before 1994 subsequently slowed to a crawl.

But this story never appears in reviews of the Cairo legacy, because we are officially disinterested in fertility rates. Meeting unmet need for contraception is the new focus, not generating demand for it. If women want eight children apiece, that's just fine—ignoring the stifling patriarchy in which such aspirations are cultivated. Meanwhile, in the rewritten history, successful family planning programs did not exist, and fertility decline is seen as driven variously by infant survival rates, women's education, urbanization, industrialization, or general enrichment. Yet the few studies that compare these factors with the prevailing family planning program effort demonstrate the overwhelmingly greater influence of the latter.⁵ No example exists of a country or study area that achieved a rapid fertility transition without actively promoting smaller families and addressing cultural barriers to uptake.

The delegitimization agenda also rejected the idea that population growth impedes economic development. Ironically, as a result of the demotion of family planning programs from central pillars of development plans to minor activities of health departments, women are worse off post-Cairo. The countries that reduced fertility rates before Cairo have seen a steady improvement in women's status, education, and autonomy, facilitated by relieving the burden of childbearing and by the deliberate reframing of women's roles to break away from seeing childbearing as a woman's only means to gain status and security. All those countries have also taken off economically, achieving a steady and inclusive enrichment.⁶ With the exception of a few Middle East oil states, no high-fertility country has lessened poverty.

Perversely, the people seeking to end population growth are cast as the enemies of just and equitable development. This view has roots in Marxism: the admission of any endogenous cause of poverty diminishes the role of class relations. Never mind that, as Adam Smith explained, it is population growth and underemployment that suppress wages and keep the market from eliminating capital's profit margin.

Population growth plays straight into the hands of global corporatization, polarizing wealth between the ever-more concentrated ownership of assets and those forced to sell their labor cheaply. In whose interests was the 1972 Rockefeller Report (on the disbenefits of further population growth in the US) politically buried for thirty years?⁷ Whose influence was behind the sudden change of US delegation to the 1984 UN population conference in Mexico City, that startled other delegates with the newly minted position that population growth is economically neutral, not a threat to development?⁸ The same interests behind the Mexico City Policy, adopted by that delegation to ban US funding to be in any way associated with abortion, and cunningly linking family planning conceptually with abortion, despite contraception being the most effective anti-abortion measure ever (and criminalization the least effective)?⁹ Strange bedfellows for self-righteous anti-Malthusians.

Endnotes

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4. John Bongaarts, "Fertility Transitions in Developing Countries: Progress or Stagnation?," *Studies in Family Planning* 39, no. 2 (June 2008): 105–110.
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