

Introduction

This essay was originally written for a workshop on population policy and human rights, hosted in Berlin, Germany by the Irmgard Coninx Stiftung Foundation (<http://www.irmgard-coninx-stiftung.de>). Participants (activists and junior academics within five years of their doctoral submission) were selected on the basis of an essay written to discuss the following issue:

Can political intervention to family planning and fertility behaviour be brought into harmony – at the global, national and regional levels – with human rights, including the right to reproductive health, to self-determination, to freedom of movement and residence within and across the borders of the state, to a secure existence and social protection?

About 60 people attended, including entrants from all inhabited continents, though none from Russia, a country with a very serious decline in population, health and human rights. The workshop, which was splendidly organised (except for a blind spot concerning global environmental change) took place February 14-20, 2007.

The right to be human

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Abstract

The emergence of human rights is complex. However, in general, human rights are likely to be better where resource scarcity is not extreme. In many settings, lower fertility can set the stage for processes, especially increased economic growth, which can improve human rights. Improved human rights can then facilitate better management of scarce resources.

On the other hand persistently high fertility is likely in most cases to eventually cause resource scarcity. Where such scarcity is shared by culturally and/or ethnically diverse populations, conflict is likely, and human rights, especially for minorities, will almost inevitably decline.

In recent decades an unfortunate rift has opened between many supporters of human rights and many who advocate lower fertility rates, especially in developing countries. This division has been fanned by vocal and influential minorities in each camp, but can be healed by further dialogue.

This essay explores some of the factors which underpin and obstruct this dialogue, including a brief discussion of the essential differences between Julian Simon (a supporter of laissez faire population growth) and Garret Hardin (a vigorous advocate for fertility control). Both represent extreme positions which are easy to caricature; their views should not be allowed to dominate the debate.

The right to be human

Imagine you are in a queue in heaven, where souls await their turn to occupy the next available womb. As you wait, what sort of womb would you hope for? Few readers of this essay would choose, as their new mother, a woman who is illiterate, impoverished, diseased, or so vulnerable that disease and poverty are ever imminent. But the souls in our imaginary queue have no choice. We know, today, that a vast number of human conceptions occur in women who meet one or more of these criteria. In turn, almost from the moment of conception, fetuses who develop in such women are likely to suffer progressive disadvantage. Usually, the uterine environment in such women is doubly burdened by an under-supply of nutrients, especially of the vitamins and other trace elements needed for optimal development (including long chained fatty acids), but with an over-supply of development-harming contaminants, such as lead, mercury, and a cocktail of persistent organic pollutants (Butler and McMichael, 2006).

By the time of birth – often underweight, to an underweight mother – most infants who have gestated in such an environment are likely to suffer at least subtle cognitive and often physical impairment (Darnton-Hill, 1999; Grantham-McGregor, 2002). Very often, further disadvantage then accrues, as the child learns (or fails to learn) in conditions of scarcity, limited intellectual stimulation, and ongoing and chronic nutritional adversity and environmental pollution. However, the social environment for many young children is not always as bleak. Even where there is little schooling, there are usually large family and other networks, which provide opportunities for mixing and bonding. The disadvantage of groups of such children is more obvious from a distance; most of the peers, playmates and role models of poor children are similarly poor. And for many such children, fatigue, diarrhoea and chronic infections are frequent companions (Editorial, 2004; Dillingham and Guerrant, 2004).

Of course, a few children will escape from severe poverty but they are likely to be exceptional. Far more pass lives burdened by chronic scarcity, insecurity, and servitude. In many places, such as Burundi, Darfur in the Sudan, Sri Lanka's Jaffna Peninsula, or the Chittagong Hills of Bangladesh, human lives are too frequently characterised by intermittent or even constant fear of violence, the perpetration of violence, or both.

Contesting models of development

The issues of human rights, reproductive freedoms and population policies are vexed, contextual, contested, and highly complex. Yet the answer to the question of whether political intervention, family planning and fertility behaviour can be brought into *harmony* with important human rights (on a global scale) is far more straightforward. That answer, clearly, is *no*; at least for this century, and probably the next as well. This does not mean that the task of those who choose to link these fields is worthless. Much can and should be done to improve human rights, human well-being, and human freedom.

It is sometimes presumed that advocacy for regional or even global limits to human fertility cannot co-exist with a genuine concern for universal human rights. This

dichotomy is most clearly seen in analyses of the 1994 Cairo International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), which is often portrayed as a struggle between the “demographic” argument, in one corner, and the rights community (especially of women) in the other (Sinding, 2000; Nair et al, 2004). For example, reviewing this conference, McIntosh and Finkle (1995) wrote:

“the deepening poverty, indebtedness, and political turmoil in much of Africa might suggest that the Coale-Hoover model [author: i.e. the argument that high fertility rates cause substantial harm to economic growth] still has validity on that continent, if not elsewhere. ... The agenda advanced at the ICPD ... reflects a very different type of thinking about the population issue in the developing world. The new model asserts that programs that are demographically driven ... are inherently coercive and abusive of women's rights to choose the number and timing of their children” (They) should be replaced by others that "empower" women” (p. 227).

Describing the build up to the ICPD, the same authors use even blunter language:

“During this period, feminists gradually started to pay lip service to the idea that population growth rates should be lowered and that their differences with other groups were over means, not ends. For example in addressing meetings, feminist leaders often made a ritual bow in the direction of reducing population growth before outlining a course of action that would address the goal marginally and indirectly if at all” (endnote 23, p 254).”

More than a decade has passed since Cairo. The date for the fourth great global population conference, once planned for Japan in 2004, is also past. Despite a few signs of revival (Birdsall et al, 2001; Butler 2004; Cleland and Sinding 2005, Sachs, 2006) the issue of over-population in developing countries, even in Africa, is now mostly seen as irrelevant. Scholarly attention among demographers has largely shifted to concern about underpopulation in developed countries, with its associated problems of distorted age pyramids and migration (Demeny, 2003).

Even the limited success promised to arise from the ICPD has been poorly realised, due to the gap between promises and funding. Sinding (2000) lamented:

“It is entirely possible that the now obvious shortfall in funding the Cairo Programme of Action is a direct consequence of the diminishing salience of the population issue in policy-making circles.”

This perceived “lack of salience” extends well beyond the discipline of demography. Human rights and epidemiological analyses of the ongoing, seemingly intractable conflicts and grotesque human rights abuses particularly common in Africa (Schwab 2001; Power, 2002, 2004; Coghlan et al, 2006) rarely if ever mention the possible contributing role of high fertility, outstripping the growth in provision of human capabilities (Sen 1999) and thus leading to “entrapment” (King, 1990).

The peace studies literature also provides conflicting opinions. An issue of the *Journal of Peace Research* was recently devoted to papers on demography and conflict. Although several authors supported the view that a close relationship between rapid population growth and conflict does exist (Ware, 2005; Midlarsky, 2005), a

systematic analysis of conflicts between 1950-2000 was far more guarded in its conclusion (Urdal, 2005). This paper found:

“some indication that scarcity of potential cropland may have a pacifying effect”, and that “claims that the world has entered a ‘new age of insecurity’ after the end of the Cold War, where demographic and environmental factors threaten security and state stability, appear to be unfounded.”

Contesting freedoms

This essay pleads the case that the effort to advance human rights will be enhanced by greater dialogue between the communities of human rights advocates, anti-globalisation activists, feminists, and development workers who are sympathetic to the case that high fertility rates impede development.

This argument rests on the following main propositions.

Firstly, the social and economic benefits of slowing population growth, especially in countries with high fertility rates, have been substantially underestimated. A Malthusian influence dominated economic and demographic thought particularly in the period from World War II until the Green Revolution became established in the 1970s. This position was intensely attacked during the Reagan administration (Harkavy, 1995; Butler, 2004; Butler unpublished). However, more recently, this “revisionism” has itself been partly revised (Kelley, 2001; Sachs, 2006; Butler, unpublished).

Second, it is not implausible – though not inevitable – that economic growth can generate improved human rights, at least in well governed societies with redistributive economic and social policies. Such transformation is clearly dependent on many other factors. Though counter-examples exist, such as in Singapore, the converse position is far more plausible. Yet, even in Singapore the human capabilities (including, for many, the ability to migrate to freer societies) made possible by good education, good nutrition and material sufficiency seem an acceptable trade off to most, for the loss of freedoms including of speech and association.

Conversely there are numerous populations with high fertility rates where human rights are abysmal, and where a rapid improvement in these rights is very unlikely. Some regions, such as Rwanda, the Congo and parts of North East India have already witnessed violent conflict, chaos, and in the case of Rwanda, genocide. Of course, high fertility rates are only one of many interwoven causes of conflict (Butler and Oluoch-Kosura, 2006). Unless relieved by out-migration or, less acceptably, by high infant and child mortality rates, high fertility rates inevitably lead to “youth bulges”. Concentrations of young, unemployed and aggrieved men in such bulges enhances the risk of collective violence (Mesquida and Wieder, 1996). André and Platteau (1998) provide a compelling analysis of how land scarcity (itself a consequence of high population growth, few alternatives to farming as a livelihood, and limited migration) coalesced with ethnic hatred to generate the devastating Rwandan genocide in 1994.

I am not arguing that curtailing the liberty to choose to have as many children as one might like is without cost to human freedom. Rather, I am arguing that that right

needs to be balanced against other rights and freedoms, including for other people and future generations (McMichael et al, 2003).

This ancient contest between competing freedoms can be assuaged by rules and customs which manage limited resources, preserving essential commons, or public goods (Buck, 1985; Chakraborty, 2001; Kennedy et al, 2006). Although demographers sometime claim that fertility control is comparatively modern (Bogue, 1969) there is growing evidence that contraception is ancient, by means including prolonged lactation, herbs, taboos, and even – possibly – genital surgery (Abernethy, 1993; Potts and Campbell, 2002).

While it is true that in some cases, for some populations, and for some periods, virtually unrestricted human fertility has been possible, such cases are exceptional, and rarely as cost-free as some advocates of *laissez faire* population growth may presume. For example, in the case of nineteenth century America, fertility rates were sustained for some decades at high levels. The average height and living standards of most of this population, fed by grain and cattle in the expanding frontier exceeded that of their otherwise genetically and socially comparable kin living in Europe (Fogel, 2004). However, this population expansion was not without cost to the former inhabitants, the Amerindians (Mann, 2005).

It is also true that many advocates and proponents of family planning, especially in recent decades, have been too willing to trade human rights (especially of poor and marginalised people) in the pursuit of lower fertility. Forced sterilisations in China, sometimes of women in advanced stages of pregnancy, represent an egregious human rights abuse. Many elements of the Indian sterilisation programme were also coercive (Kasun, 1999). Many pioneering twentieth campaigners for contraceptive freedom supported eugenics (Hodgson, 1991).

In 1965 the Danish anthropologist Ester Boserup published *The conditions of agricultural growth: the economics of agrarian change under population pressure*” (Boserup, 1965). This book cogently argued that, in certain cases and in certain circumstances higher and denser populations of humans could work co-operatively in order to improve environmental and other forms of amenity, thus improving average living standards. Other workers have also pointed out cases where this principle holds, though Abernethy (1993) also shows many counter-examples, i.e. where the strategy to cope with high population pressure has been to stimulate fertility control rather technological innovation that might permit higher populations.

More prosaically, Robinson Crusoe is likely to have more than emotional consolation from his sole companion, Man Friday. Together the two are likely to have stood a better chance of survival. Flannery (1994) reports that about 500 Australian aborigines survived for a while on Kangaroo Island, which became separated from the Australian mainland at the start of the Holocene. However, after some time, these people all died, probably not only from inbreeding, but through stochastic factors which gradually reduced the human skills of the population. For example, the accidental death of a wise elder could also mean the loss of valuable information; beyond a threshold such losses could become critical, threatening survival of the entire group.

But these examples do not support extreme and simplistic characterisations of the Boserupian principle, which would lead to the proposition that no cap need be applied to population growth. Julian Simon (and some of his supporters) have argued that additional humans are a net asset, because they possess a brain and a pair of hands (Simon, 1981). Simon's work was frequently published (together with numerous reviews) in the social science literature, but rarely in journals read by the physical science community. Rare counter-examples in that literature were severely criticised.

Simon's argument has two fatal flaws. Firstly, undernourished and grossly disadvantaged populations are often not an "ultimate resource" but vulnerable, exploitable, damaged and suffering. Secondly, even if the environment and its human management can provide ample food and other resources, additional people need to also be socially compatible for development to occur. The limitation of human carrying capacity caused by human territoriality is understudied and rarely considered (Butler, unpublished). Where one group establishes dominance the human rights of the oppressed group suffer, in some cases they are forgotten; in others deliberately understated or suppressed.

However, while the optimism of Simon became, for some, an object of ridicule, some opponents of family planning could also find reasons to dislike some of the most fervent advocates of population control, such as Garret Hardin.

The Tragedy of the Commons

Hardin's fame arose chiefly from his 1968 paper called "The Tragedy of the Commons" (Hardin, 1968). Although its essential thesis – that competitive forces inexorably lead to the over-use of common resources – had previously been published (Gordon, 1954), Hardin's essay became far better known than its predecessor. Hardin achieved notoriety mainly due to his forthright calls to abandon foreign aid, expressed in his analogy of the Earth as a lifeboat, in which he effectively sanctioned the metaphoric drowning of swimmers trying to climb aboard (Hardin, 1974), just as "the custom of the sea" had once allowed (Hanson 1999). Traces of this philosophy persist in the extreme and often cruel reactions to asylum seekers trying to enter the West, such as by crossing the moat which surrounds Fortress Australia (Marr and Wilkinson, 2003).

Conclusion

Although denied by most of the mainstream economic, political and demographic literature, localised and global overpopulation are realities. The former is manifest through means such as poverty traps, violence, poor governance and epidemics. The latter is evident through the twin threats of the loss of ecological wealth and climate change. Although both consequences are mediated by technological and social factors, future human well-being is at serious risk. Climate change is increasingly understood as having agricultural consequences, including of increased inequality of highly productive agricultural land. Combined with climate change, the existence of weapons of mass destruction and high population growth in developing countries is a toxic brew. There is an urgent need for fairer global governance. This will slow population growth, and contribute to a virtuous cycle. Development with human rights is the best contraceptive. Lobbyists for human rights need to re-examine the

economic arguments for slowing population growth; campaigners for slowing fertility need to seek allies from within the human rights community.

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