

POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT: A Christian perspective on a global question

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The United Nations International Conference on Population and Development, recently held in Cairo, had a mandate to find ways of curbing continued rapid growth in world population.

In Genesis 9 we read that God commanded Noah and his family to have many children, so that their descendants would fill the Earth. And the human species has been biologically successful, in that the world population is now about 5.7 billion, and 94 million new babies are added each year. This growth is massively skewed to what are currently the poorer parts of the world, with 93% of the births being in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

In the face of such a rapid increase in human numbers, and its effects on world resources and the environment, the proposal of some western nations to curb population growth in these poorer countries through a wider availability of contraceptive services and of abortion may seem reasonable. However, these proposals met stiff resistance, mainly from representatives of Muslim nations and of the Vatican. Why this resistance?

To better understand we need to consider a number of questions.

1. Why do poor people go on having large families?
On average, women in "underdeveloped" countries have six children. Why so many mouths to feed, when they are already poor?

One reason lies in the high infant mortality rates in poorer countries. While the number of infants dying is slowly declining due to improved health care, in many areas only half of those born survive. When parents expect some of their children to die, they tend to have large families. Even when the infant mortality rate starts to decline, it takes a generation or two for people to adjust their family size.

Another reason is that for billions of people there are no old age pensions, superannuation or social security of any kind. Families are poor people's security in times of illness, loss of work and old age. It is only after parents feel reasonably secure that they want to limit the number of children they have. There is a clear correlation between increasing living standards and a decline in the birth rate.

2. Can the world produce enough food to sustain more people?

For at least 200 years (since Malthus) gloomy predictions have been made that geometric increases in population would outstrip arithmetic increases in

food production. So far, technological advances in agriculture have helped the world's farmers to make enough food for all. Obviously we have been much less clever at distributing the loaves and fishes to all.

However, it can be argued that what causes poverty and famine is not population growth but 'man's continuing inhumanity to man'. Power struggles between nations mean that money is spent on armaments rather than agriculture. As in Rwanda, tribal hatreds and civil war can turn fertile fields into wasteland. Even where peace seems to reign, political corruption and exploitation by rich landlords can keep the poor barely surviving.

3. Will more people mean more environmental damage?

Globally, we are now seeing changes in our atmosphere, the degradation of fertile lands, forests, and ocean fisheries, the depletion of fresh water, and a loss of some plant and animal species. We must accept that the world's resources are not unlimited and that more people means more pressure on the environment. Part of the problem is "urbanisation". When many of our ancestors came to Australia 150 years ago, the world population was less than 1 billion, of whom about 5% lived in cities. By 1998 there will be 6 billion, half of whom will live in cities.

Again, the consumption of resources and the pressure on the environment are not simply due to more people, especially poor people. The 300 million who live in the United States are only 6% of the world's population, but they use more than a third of the resources consumed each year, while the poorest 50% of the world's people use only 12% of the world's energy. The poor can contribute to environmental degradation, especially when they cut down trees for firewood. However, the major impact on resources and the environment is due to the system which supports the rich minority, which in this context includes us. While we ask 'Can we afford to have more people?', those who are less blessed are asking 'Can we afford to have so few consuming so much?'. Given this perspective, the slogan 'Live simply that others may simply live' makes a lot of sense.

4. Why were there strong objections to the contraception proposals by the Muslim and Vatican representatives ?

These representatives saw the suggestions put forward by the American delegation about how to curb population growth as cultural imperialism, as an attempt to impose western values on the rest of the world. Muslim and Catholic delegates formed a natural alliance because they saw the proposals regarding sex education and contraception as a way of promoting promiscuity and a path to family disintegration. Given what has occurred in the last thirty years in the west, it's hard to argue with that. Abortion as a family planning method was rejected outright. It involves the intended destruction of unborn human life. (Like Lutherans, Muslims do not object to responsible planned parenthood within marriage by non-abortive means).

Furthermore, the leaders of the poorer countries are inclined to suspect the motives behind the proposals regarding wider use of contraceptives. Some women in these countries have been coerced into using drugs which are not approved in western nations because of concerns about their long-term effects.

Naturally these leaders are asking: Are these latest proposals actually a way for large drug companies to trial their products on the bodies and fertility of women in poorer nations so that eventually these companies can market a better and proven product in the affluent west?

5. Why was "women's empowerment" a theme at the Cairo conference?

In many of the poorer countries, existing patriarchal systems tend to devalue women. The birth of a boy brings congratulations, and of a girl condolences. Boys receive schooling and job training, while girls stay at home. Around our globe at least 650 million women are illiterate, and people who cannot read have trouble making well-informed choices. Further, these women are likely to have inadequate health care. Each year over half a million women die from problems in pregnancy and childbirth, with 99% of such deaths concentrated in the poorer nations.

Again, in the Two Thirds world even being conceived female can be hazardous. Taking China as an example, the government there takes firm control over the 1.2 billion population and its 14 million growth each year. Family planning controllers enforce coercive policies including forced abortion to prevent "overbirth". For a fee, couples may be permitted to have a second child if the first is "female or disabled". Sex testing is widely used in pregnancy so that female fetuses can be aborted. Those who cannot afford the testing may resort to quiet female infanticide. In 1992 in urban China, 18 male births were registered for every female.

Representatives of nations attending the Cairo conference have been urged to become parties to the Women's Convention, derived from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and adopted by the United Nations in 1980. This Convention obliges countries "to pursue by all appropriate means and without delay a policy of eliminating discrimination against women" and in particular "to eliminate discrimination against women in the field of health care in order to ensure ... access to health care services, including those related to family planning."

Multiculturalism in Australia enjoys our government policy of preserving diverse ethnic cultures and promoting tolerance. A problem can arise when the culture being preserved is rigidly male-dominant, with the husband regarding the wife and children as his property. Our well-meaning desire for tolerance and harmony should not extend to condoning domestic violence and child abuse. Australia needs to draw a firm line in insisting on equal human rights for all its residents regardless of gender and age.

6. What is meant by development?

Development is a term that means different things to different people. We call ourselves "developed" nations because we have technological sophistication. We have tried to help other nations to become developed by introducing large scale industrial or agricultural projects, but this kind of development has all too often resulted in wealth for a few and continuing poverty for many.

Two Thirds world countries now tend to see development in human and social as well as economic terms. They want to know not only that those changes we call development will improve their Gross National Product, but also how they will impact on the lives of ordinary people. For them real development

means escaping from poverty: it means education, literacy, job training and employment, food and clean water, health and peace. The kind of development that results in social destruction, family breakdown and moral decay is something they feel they can do without.

7. A Christian perspective begins with the recognition that the burgeoning number of people in the world is not simply someone else's problem, nor a problem for which contraception and abortion provide a simple solution. It recognises that the question of population cannot be isolated from the question of social and economic justice, particularly for women in poorer countries. A Christian perspective involves looking at the issue through the eyes of those directly affected by these proposals, to 'walk a mile in my shoes.'