POPULATION GROWTH IN AFRICA

Whose problem is it?

Speeches by:

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A conference organised by Africa Direct and the Africa Centre, at the School of Oriental and African Studies
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Foreword

On Saturday 9th March 1996 over a hundred people attended a conference entitled: 'Population Growth in Africa - Whose Problem is it?' at the School of Oriental and African Studies in central London. The conference was organised jointly by the Africa Centre and Africa Direct.

Population is a big issue. The accepted view is that unchecked population growth poses serious problems for humanity in general and the Third World in particular. Population growth is held to account for the depletion of resources, increases in poverty and social inequality, and environmental damage.

We could not record the conference in its entirety. What we have reproduced here are the keynote speeches given.

Our thanks go to the speakers:

Elizabeth Liagin is an investigative reporter for Baobab Press, and author of *Excessive Force: Power, Politics and Population Control*. Published by the Information Project For Africa Inc., Washington DC 1995.

Irene Banda-Beer is a lecturer and International Liaison Officer at the Sir David Owen Population Centre, University of Wales, Cardiff. She has published material on Gender Perspectives on STDs/HIV/AIDS.

Frank Füredi is chair of development studies, University of Kent, and author of Demographic Consensus After Cairo, presently with his publisher.

John Gillott works at the Genetic Interest Group, London, and is co-author with Manjit Kumar of *Science and the Retreat from Reason*, Merlin Press, London 1995.

Elizabeth Liagin and John Gillot provided us with their texts, Irene Banda-Beer provided us with a paper from which her speech was drawn. Frank Füredi's speech is a tape-transcription. Responsibility for accuracy of representation is ours entirely.

The conference organisers

Africa Direct is a network of people who promote critical debate and journalism on African issues. It was set up by the Campaign Against Militarism. The aim of the group is to situate African issues within the wider context of post-Cold War international relations, and to support individuals and organisations who are reclaiming African sovereignty.

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The Africa Centre is a long established venue which is both a resource centre and a venue for meetings on African issues. It is currently embarking on an expansion programme in line with its aim of becoming a 'Flagship for Africa in Europe'.

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Elizabeth Liagin

Population control: centrepiece of imperialism

The United States government has been the world leader in conducting population control activities in the southern hemisphere for approximately half a century. But the bureaucrats have been somewhat evasive about the purpose of the programme. Perhaps the mission is best summed up in the story of the official who tried to explain the policy this way:

"Every thirty seconds a woman gives birth. Our job is to find that woman and stop her."

In reality, stopping births is no joke to the American government. The importance of this issue to western policy-makers can hardly be exaggerated. And it is only when we understand the sense of urgency given to population control that we can understand what is at stake in this debate.

Social & Psychological Research: Leaving Nothing To Chance

A substantial part of the population programme has involved work that has little to do with making family planning services available to people who want them. In fact, it is these outcome-based activities that most aptly illustrate the level of interest that exists among policy-makers in the industrial world.

These non-family planning operations come in several categories:

Demographic Assessment Studies:

Several hundreds of millions of dollars has gone into surveys of reproductive intentions. These involve efforts to analyse and project fertility trends, often using evidence accumulated from years of block-by-block canvassing of households in target countries. The information sought by interviewers concerns intended fertility, knowledge about birth control methods, and the like. Indeed, fertility research in some parts of Africa has been so conspicuous and intrusive since the 1970s that survey work among the Yoruba of south-western Nigeria became the subject of a recently-published book called Science that Colonises. (Science that Colonises: a Critique of Fertility Studies in Africa by Agnes Riedmann, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1993). The demographic survey process is meant to project birth-rates into the future and to evaluate the "need" for intervention.

Attitude Studies:

Many surveys have gone beyond examining reproductive preferences to seeking possible ways in which these preferences might be changed. Reidmann, for example, lists several questions posed to Nigerian respondents that illustrate this motive. In one Nigerian door-to-door canvassing project people were asked: "Some people would

rather have four children then eight? Why do you think they feel that way?" In another, household members were told to select their preference from the following list of items, assuming that only one was possible:

"(a) a new car?
(b) a second-hand lorry?
(c) a new house?
(d) another child?
(e) a lot of new furniture?
(f) a university education for one of your children?
(g) a trip to England?
(h) more education for yourself?
(i) a lot of new clothes?"

Other participants were asked to respond to this one: "What do you think you would have to do without if you had another child this year?" In these cases, the goal is not so much to gather data about desired family size as to experiment with ways in which alternative values can be introduced.

Context Research:

Still more research has been conducted on a large scale to identify social and cultural factors that produce an impact on reproductive behaviour. These studies look at institutions thought to support pronatalist attitudes and, even more so, at ideological influences that might be useful to the spread of new beliefs and opinions. In this context, survey respondents may be asked about their spiritual or religious beliefs and how these relate to fertility, about local political views, about their reactions to specific contraceptive promotional messages, and the like. This type of research will also look into the radio listening habits and programming tastes of the target communities, their special interests, expectations, and worries. These studies are in essence a form of propaganda-oriented intelligence, designed to support massive "communications" campaigns to erode resistance to western birth control.

Economic Environment Studies:

Yet another type of study is done to estimate how policies not directly related to procreation might impact upon reproductive choices. This research is motivated by the "rational response" theory, which holds that large families are the result of rational adaptation to prevailing or perceived economic needs - i.e., the "costs" and "benefits" of children in African society. Here the point is for researchers to understand the economic and "psychic" rewards of large families as well as the social and cultural impediments to large-scale adoption of western fertility management services. This kind of analysis does not involve survey-taking, but rather is based on material compiled in earlier demographic studies, the use of consultants from target groups, and expertise in the behavioural sciences. The intended outcome of research in this category ("fertility determinants" studies) is to learn how policy changes not specifically tied to population can be deliberately used to increase the costs of raising families and thereby lessen existing inhibitions against birth prevention.

Threat Assessment Analysis:

This is a science that is mainly relegated the US. military establishment. The purpose is to look at demographic trends - both in the developed and developing regions - and to relate these trends to American "vital" interests. For example, studies in this field have noted that extremely low fertility in western nations will have a negative outcome on western military preparedness because of the dwindling numbers of youth available for military service, the need to concentrate more national resources on domestic programmes at the expense of massive military spending (i.e., services for large numbers of elderly persons), and shrinking economies that result from a smaller work force. At the same time, researchers look at potential "manpower-intensive regional conflicts" and their probable impact on the global political landscape. Here, they are particularly concerned with the future capacity of western nations to intervene to protect their own interests in so-called "low-intensity conflict" situations. The military researchers attempt to gauge the extent to which states in the developing world will grow in regional and even international influence as their populations increase.

Political Research:

This is done extensively by the Central Intelligence Agency, the State Department, and other "secret" agencies within the US government. The goal is to measure political opposition to fertility management and to estimate the impact of population change in the geopolitical arena. Not only do these agencies see numerical strength as a precursor to political strength in the general sense. They also attempt to project how the relatively youthful populations that are characteristic of high-fertility societies may be "radicalised" by the failure of development schemes and the extent to which western hegemony will be challenged by growing numbers of Africans, Arabs, Asians, and Latin Americans.

Policy Development Research: This is an area of study undertaken within virtually all sectors of the US government. It's purpose is to identify he ways in which national leaders in developing countries can be persuaded to embrace policy "reforms" desired by western nations. For instance, data collected under the multitude of demographic and social surveys might be presented to policy-makers in developing countries with an interpretation that excludes the "threat" to western interests and in a way that stresses factors which would suggest an opposite outcome. Analysis of "fertility determinants" might also be used to pursue policy change outside the population field - including "privatisation," ending free public education, cost-cutting in health care, fees for water and electricity, currency devaluation, export promotion, structural adjustment, and other interventions that are known the make large families more burdensome. Policies may be imposed through a variety of tactics, including diplomatic pressures and the repeated presentation of advice, compulsory conditions attached to credit and economic aid, and the like. An essential part of policy development research is the co-ordination of objectives and programmes with other industrialised nations. For instance, a special section within the US. Treasury Department is charged with monitoring the level of US. investments in the international financial institutions, keeping the government advised as to the level of support for US policies among other donor-investors, and recommending increases in investments as needed to assure US. control. Another aspect of this type of research involves the escalation of policy

change in target nations. Combined with political analysis, this component determines just how much change should be attempted at certain stages of the policy development process, and sets time-tables for pursuing further "reforms."

Impact Evaluation:

No intervention would be complete without ongoing research into the effects produced by various activities. Impact studies are designed to measure changes that occur throughout the course of an engagement (and are sometimes known as "operations research"). In the field of propaganda, for example, this type of research is called "audience evaluation." It is done on a small scale (the "focus group") prior to the dissemination of a propaganda message, thereby enabling sponsors to refine that message until it evokes just the right response. Following a specific propaganda campaign, it will be carried out audience-wide to measure changing perceptions. This kind of evaluation is also done with regard to economic policies to determine whether or not they encourage a fall in birth rates or contribute to other objectives. It is likewise useful in finding suitable tactics to minimise resistance to western impositions of every sort. The monitoring of host country institutions and their compliance with policy agreements can also be included in this category of research. While there has been much debate about the manner in which fertility control programmes violate free choice and jeopardise the health and safety of clients, little has been said about the background work - that aspect of the population control effort that most clearly reveals the remarkable determination of the donors to accomplish ends that are seldom publicly disclosed.

The Money Maze

It is virtually impossible to track US. funding for population control. Much of it (particularly analysis and political research) comes from "secret" budgets. Some is appropriated by Congress specifically for "family planning" projects. Other activities are joined with development programmes in other sectors, such as education, health and environment. Still other financing is allocated by administrative discretion out of a variety of budgets, including regional development projects, food aid grants, import-export programmes, the Agency for International Development's Economic Support Fund, the Commodity Import Programme, etc. Still more is accomplished through diplomatic initiatives and through the operations of multilateral institutions, upon which no firm price tag can be put. And one might even count as a "government" contribution funds provided by global corporations to the overseas "family planning" effort when companies are offered tax breaks by the US. government for doing so.

Further complicating matters is the fact that many projects carried out under government contract by "non-government" organisations involve the shifting of funds from one contractor to another so that the paper trail virtually disappears. Then there is the "buy-in" option by which a programme receiving, say, $60 million in USAID "central" funds from Washington, will get an additional $20 million from USAID national or regional offices overseas for additional activities in a particular country. These funds, in turn, are often mixed with World Bank funds for what is called "multi-donor" activities. Furthermore, the complex structure of projects and sub

projects in any given area of fertility management makes it all but impossible to say with any certainty where the money goes, how it is spent, or any particular budget.

Nonetheless, it is abundantly clear that demographic evaluation and research far outweighs, in terms of expense and effort, what is thought to make up the "family planning" programme - namely the provision of services, the training of providers, and the introduction of contraceptive supplies. In fact, intelligence gathering, planning, and analysis probably consumes several times the money that goes into family planning. This alone tells us that the outcome of the population control effort - and not "free choice" in childbearing - is of paramount importance to policy-makers in the industrial world. It also suggests that the future debate should turn to population management as a central factor in imperialism.

Framing The Debate

It is legitimate and important to raise the issue of rights - and to discuss the overwhelming evidence that women and societies are harmed more than they are helped by western family planning projects. But if this were the main question, the debate would be about whether certain methods are appropriate for certain societies, about the safety of methods under prevailing conditions, whether coercion is involved, the programme s overall impact on health, the existence of abuses, and that sort of thing. But a vast and almost-unending array of evidence reveals that population programmes are not about women s health or about choices. They are about maintaining the dominance of the north in world affairs. So, if we limit the debate to rights, we fall into the trap of trying to reform what is essentially unjust aggression. And a "kinder, gentler" imperialism is hardly a goal worth pursuing.

Discussion of population in the context of development shifts the focus from the impact on individuals to outcomes in terms of national economies and social institutions. This concept raises an entirely different debate that involves economics, social justice concerns, and the north-south relationship in general. But again, we cannot debate the issue as if reproductive intervention were merely a misguided attempt to improve the lot of the so-called "third world." It is ludicrous to assume that the rich countries of the world favour the kind of rational development policies that would bring them into confrontation with a whole hemisphere full of competitors for power and privilege. Thus the development debate misses the point entirely.

So what really is the issue? The abundance of research available in the US. reveals that the essential and over-riding concern is the demographic marginalisation of the west - a situation brought about by "differential fertility," or high rates of population growth in the southern hemisphere occurring simultaneously with below-replacement level fertility throughout the industrial world.

A Double Standard

Birth-rates have fallen to historically-unprecedented levels in the west. The average "total fertility rate" across Europe was recorded a few years ago as 1.6. That means that for every couple, on the average, only 1.6 children will be present in the next generation. This implies a 20 percent drop in the size of the working-age population

from one generation to the next. Continued over several generations, the impact can be quite dramatic. Policy-makers understand that the task of reversing a century-long process of fertility decline is nearly impossible. Nonetheless, in 1984, the European Parliament passed its resolution C 127/78 which called on all members of the European Community to take steps to increase births, or, in the words of the declaration itself, to embrace "measures to combat this marked trend towards population decline."

It is interesting to note that the proposal was preceded by text noting that "Europe s standing and influence in the world depend largely on the vitality of its population" and that "population trends in Europe will have a decisive effect on the development of Europe and will determine the significance of the role which Europe will play in the world in future decades."

It is also important to point out that several countries have adopted such measures and virtually all have considered them. In 1984, the same year that the European Parliament proposal was approved, West Germany launched a pronatalist policy and bankrolled a $20-million dollar Mother and Child Foundation. The purpose was to pay bonuses to new mothers and to provide other incentives for larger families. The stated goal of the policy was to increase the number of German births by 200,000 a year. France, in a similar move, has adopted an explicit goal of increasing the national fertility rate to replacement level, and likewise offers incentives to birth. Comparable programmes are in effect in several other countries.

But the evidence has shown that such measures are likely to do little to increase fertility. A system of non-coercive family allowances and other incentives certainly will not cause birth rates to grow to levels comparable to those in much of the developing world. In fact, even coercive measures - like Romania's ban on contraception and abortion, enforced through extraordinarily intrusive police action - failed to prevent the birth rate from falling below replacement level. Because of the futility of pro-natalist policies, the main emphasis is on containing population growth in the southern hemisphere.

'Population Pressures' And The Theory Of Demographic Upheaval'

Now the foreign policy community in Washington has a theory about "critical mass." It is entirely possible for a minority to govern a majority. But the larger the majority becomes in relation to the ruling minority, the more difficult it will be to retain control. Hanging on to power becomes more costly, it requires greater effort and more sophisticated technology, and the measures used to put down dissent will have to be more ruthless. And the greater the force used to keep the majority in place, the more intense will be resistance to the regime, so rulers have to fight even harder to stay on top. It is like a vicious circle. And if the majority group continues to grow in proportion to the ruling class, there comes a point at which a "critical mass" is reached- that point at which the social and economic costs of maintaining power become too great to sustain the system.

The relative demographic growth of one group in relation to another can shift the political equilibrium in two ways. First, it can result in an abrupt transfer of power, as in the case of popular revolution. Or, on the other hand, it can "compromise" ruling

institutions through the gradual replacement of the leadership class with persons from the emerging majority who have basically different loyalties. The latter is obviously the case in South Africa. But even in cases like this, the older power elite can be predicted to continue losing control over time.

In fact, the fall of formal apartheid in South Africa was cited as an example of the "critical mass" or "population pressure" theory in a study prepared for the US. Army Conference on Long Range Planning in 1991. That report said....

"In 1951, as the laws and practices of 'Grand Apartheid' were being formalised, South Africa's whites accounted for slightly more than one-fifth of the country's enumerated population. By the early 1980s whites accounted for less than a seventh of the population within the country s 1951 boundaries. By 2020, according to official government projections, the white population would amount to no more than a ninth of the total population, barring massive net migration of whites from abroad. Adjusting the projections to 1951 borders, whites might comprise less than one-eleventh of the country's total. South Africa's ... liberalisations may not have been motivated by these trends, but they are surely informed by them."

Regardless of whether one considers the "new" South Africa to be the result of meaningful reform, it is clear that the old ruling class found it necessary to create the impression of major change. And it is also clear that "population pressures" played a key role.

On a global scale, it goes without saying that the top priority for today's powerful states is to hold onto their position of "leadership" over the rest of the world, with as little compromise as possible. And economics is fundamental to preserving that edge. But the experts tell us that only large populations are capable of supporting large economies. And only large-scale economies have the resources to maintain a competitive industrial base, to develop and acquire modern technology, to build intelligence systems capable of monitoring global events, and to field large, modern military forces.

The same 1991 US. Army Conference document provides important insights into the global aspects of population change:

"...virtually all current population projections anticipate comparatively slow population growth in today's more developed regions .... and comparatively rapid growth for the less developed regions... [T]hese projections point to a continuation of trends evident since the end of World War II. If these trends continue for another generation or two, the implications for the international political order and the balance of world power could be enormous."

It continues:

"Such trends speak to pressures for a systematically diminished role and status for today's industrial democracies. Even with relatively unfavourable assumptions about Third World economic growth, the share of global economic output of today's industrial democracies could decline. With a generalised and progressive

industrialisation of current low-income areas, the Western diminution would be all the more rapid. Thus, one can easily envision a world more unreceptive, and ultimately more threatening, to the interests of the United States and its allies. The population and economic-growth trends described could create an international environment even more menacing to the security prospects of the Western alliance than was the Cold War for the past generation.

Another published report expresses the anxieties of developed country economists about the impact of population changes currently underway throughout the world:

"... the demographic trends of the next few decades will lead to a reshaping of world political geography whose general outline can already be foreseen. Young powers will emerge, basing their strength in large part on their population size and the stimulus it creates, and old powers will fade as their populations decline. (Demographer Jean-Claude Chesnais in The American Enterprise, May-June 1990).

It is this kind of prediction, and nothing less, that explains the willingness of western leaders to engage in something so costly and difficult as their long-term analysis of population trends. What these quotes make clear is the fact that, despite all the advantages that the wealthy nations enjoy - modern, well equipped armies, sophisticated technology, and a monopoly of control over the major international political and economic institutions of the world - Pentagon analysts are convinced that the southern hemisphere is moving quickly toward that "critical mass," the point at which western nations will have to give in to pressures from the "have-nots" and meet their demands, one demand after another. Essentially, American military planners insist, western dominance is on the verge of unravelling.

And what, precisely, does the western foreign policy establishment propose to do about these events which are called "more menacing ... than was the Cold War for the past generation"...? A series of papers prepared for the Commission on Integrated Long-Term Strategy, under the Office of the Director of Net Assessment at the US. Department of Defence, recommended that population control programmes be elevated to the same level as new weapons systems. A published summary of those reports, which appeared in the journal of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in 1989, advises:

"As difficult and uncertain as the task may be, policy makers and strategic planners in this country have little choice in the coming decades but to pay serious attention to population trends, their causes, and their effects. Already the United States has embarked on an era of constrained resources. It thus becomes more important than ever to do those things that will provide more bang for every buck spent on national security. To claim that decreased defence spending must lead to strategic debilitation is fatuous. Rather, policy makers must anticipate events and conditions before they occur. They must employ all the instruments of statecraft at their disposal (development assistance and population planning every bit as much as new weapon systems). Furthermore, instead of relying on the canard that the threat dictates one's posture, they must attempt to influence the form that threat assumes."

The landscape is littered with quotations like these. And it is only in the context of "competitive fertility" and world-wide power structures that we can make sense of the enormous expenditures that have gone into projecting demographic trends and developing multiple, inter-locking strategies for reversing those trends. Indeed, this will inevitably become the focus of a critical debate that is sure to intensify as we go into the next century.

Irene Banda-Beer

Differing perspectives on fertility

I teach policy, both policy as policy and programme policy, as well as issues that ought to be covered in designing or writing of a policy of any given country.

I'll cover only one of the major policies that I teach, i.e. fertility regulation of family planning programming. I am one of the few people that does not think that the word population control is useful as the word "control" is rather ambiguous. I am always asked by my students from developing countries 'who is controlling whom and who is controlling what, when and where are we controlling?' So you can see the word itself is very contentious and I in particular don't use it because it smacks of paternalism and the rich versus the poor, in other words the knowledgeable against the non-knowledgeable, so-called. You can put a lot of issues in one word therefore I avoid it.

In fertility regulation as in terms of low fertility as well as high fertility, family planning is important both ways. Contrary to what you hear, that family planning is for the poor African countries and the reason is that they have so many children. According to *whose* criteria are we grading many children? And for what reasons are we terming many children as a factor?

Let us look at the role of family planning in fertility regulation, either low fertility or high fertility. It was at the 1974 Bucharest conference that the developing countries governments made it very very clear that were not going to participate in the demographic reasoning of saying you have to bring the numbers down by any means in order to achieve world-wide demographic numbers. The African, sub-Saharan African, the poor developing countries looked at it more critically than the developed countries. They felt that family planning would be more beneficial to their people for health reasons so they put in family planning programmes for health reasons. So people would say what has family planning got to do with health?

In developing countries, family planning has a lot to do with health. Look at the high number of mortality rates, at the moment: The World Health Organisation quotes that 500 000 women die every year from complicated deliveries, complicated pregnancies, from improperly procured abortions and other things that happen to women in developing countries. To put it in perspective a colleague of mine, Dr John Gilbert says 500 000 equals one jumbo jet crashing every day. So think of one jumbo jet of women crashing everyday because they can't get proper health care, they don't have access to family planning, they don't have access to good health care services. Suppose it was men crashing everyday? Do you know what would happen they'll change the rules, they'll make things better.

Take reasons of health - if you put in family planning, if a woman spaces children there are two benefits in that alone. Firstly her health improves, because frequent pregnancies every year, as is well documented, depletes the woman and a child also

suffers from what is known as depletion syndrome. In other words the woman is not capable of carrying a second pregnancy adequately, nutritionally or physically. Secondly, she is likely to continue her work gardening or in the field and therefore producing good food improving the nutrition of the household and the children that are living. So a healthy woman is more of an asset than a breeding cow. You make her produce children every year according to the rules that say I want 10 children because it brings status to a man then you are killing the cow that produces the food. The health of the mother is of great value and secondly so is the health of the child.

The health of the child is difficult to quantify because it is not a direct benefit but the indirect benefits are so huge that you cannot fail to notice. If the children are spaced the child is born healthy. There is a great percentage of children that are born underweight because of malnutrition in the woman and also because she has no energy to care for that child when its born. Also, nutritionally in utero, if the woman is not having a healthy diet the child is not likely to be healthy. Of course if you look at the whole family, if the family has fewer children they are much healthier.

Most of all the reason for putting family planning in place is a basic human right. Family planning is considered, and should be considered, a basic human right for both women and men. Just like schools and being employed, family planning has been clearly put forward by the United Nations, and this was re-emphasised at the Cairo Conference, as a basic human right. Yet we see a lot of countries providing family planning as if it was the government's own generosity. Take Ireland for example, women there are being deprived of their basic human rights. When we are talking about a woman's right to use contraceptives then there has to be access to abortion. We normally say 'menstrual regulation'. I don't advocate abortion, but within the human rights of family planning you must provide treatment or rectifying methods should there be a failure. If I choose to start contraceptives because I don't want a child, why should I be saddled with a child because of failure of method and my own government can't bail me out. Does it mean that I am in favour of abortion? No. I am in favour of choice. If a woman needs it then they should have access.

You may say that family planning has been put in so everything should be all right. There are major problems in developing countries: we have to go beyond family planning. In other words, for women, we must go beyond family planning. You have to provide education. You have to provide health care. You have to provide employment. And if you have put in family planning services you must institute quality of care. Half the time family planning programmes are simply dumped there, no qualified personnel to deliver it, inadequate services in terms of infrequent types of contraception coming and going, poor logistics. The list is numerous therefore we cannot say that because we have put in family planning, women will find contraceptives, it does not happen that way. You have to include education for both men and women to change behaviour, in other words to make them understand why they can choose family planning as opposed to having more children.

So you have to educate the population, provide services, quality services and choice. If I wanted to have family planning programme, I should be able to choose and say I want this as opposed to the other that is available but in many African countries they have one or two. One of those is Depo Provera - that is promoted to kingdom come.

But there are so many other contraceptives that a woman has the right to choose according to her needs. These are not available but the arguments are how are we going to pay for it? The previous speaker may have already addressed that - this is a contentious issue.

The US has withdrawn a lot of funding from agencies that organise programmes in developing countries. My question is, how are these programmes going to be funded.? There have been two answers :

Not only international systems but the government itself must budget to provide enough money to get the programmes running, quality programmes. There have been two programmes that have been quite successful in some areas. These are social marketing and community-based distribution. In social marketing the onus is put on the individual to buy the item. There is no reason why a small portion of money cannot be saved to buy oral contraceptives. But these must be tailored to the particular country. Some countries are extremely poor and cannot afford social marketing and yet in some countries social marketing has been very successful. With community-based distribution, the onus is on the community to deliver the programme. So there are many ways of instituting these programmes. It is not just the government that is charged to do it but the community also must participate in order to call that programme their own. If not we are going back to seventies where everyone says it was a Western invention that African should take contraceptives. It is not so anymore. You have to make the community participate for their own health and their own needs.

Frank Füredi

The Population Agenda

I became interested in population and particularly population in Africa when I was asked to do a lecture arguing for family policies in Africa. I suppose the reason I was asked was because in University circles I am well-known for my support for abortion rights, I am well-known for my support for people having access to contraception and also because I'm an Africanist, that probably meant that I'm into population control as well.

It occurred to me then that this was a bizarre request. If you ever go to Africa and travel around Africa the one thing you would notice immediately that it's a big continent but there are very few people there. When I was there last summer I thought I wish I was living here because you can spend almost the whole day without bumping into anybody.

If you travel around and talk to people, especially ordinary people in the villages it's almost impossible to encounter a woman who would say "Hi Frank have you got a contraceptive pill in your pocket" or "have you got a condom for my boyfriend." It's very difficult to encounter any real demand for these services. In the urban areas it's different but in the countryside where most people live that doesn't actually exist.

Why is there so much discussion about population? Why is it that every single policy that the ODA and Britain puts forward always has a population component? The thing about population is that it is like our genitals: we never refer to it by its real name, but always have a different name for it - 'my little flower' or 'my little petal'.

Nobody talks about population or population control, they talk about health services, they talk about unmet needs, they talk about more education for women, they talk about empowering people, never population. In my area of work it is impossible to meet anyone who would argue for population control at least publicly.

Privately it's a different matter, after a couple of beers, when you relax and talk about things, then it actually come out in the open what is being said and what is being discussed. The real problem with population is a very simple problem, is that population growth is differential.

In Europe we are getting older, much older. We can barely manage to get it up anymore and children are not being born in very large numbers. Whereas in Africa people still make babies. That is the basic problem for population people. In Europe the average woman has 1.6 children, in Africa it is 6.5 children that is the difference and that is what everybody is concerned about.

If you don't believe me, perhaps you think I'm exaggerating or making it up or think that something else is going on, then you should have listened to the discussion that took place in Barcelona in November last year.

The European Union had a debate on the problem of the Mediterranean. Again it was not called the problem of population, always more euphemistic than that, it was called the problem of the Mediterranean. What was the problem of the Mediterranean? Well the big problem was that the Arab countries and the North African countries are growing very fast while the Spaniards, the Portuguese, the Greeks, and the Italians are doing other things, they're not having babies. The argument is that, look at these countries and you will find that in twenty years there will be 300 million people in countries like Lebanon, Egypt while there is going to be very few of 'us'.

In the discussion in the newspapers around the Barcelona conference of the European nations, which was not meant to be about population, they made the point that the basic purpose of Euromed was clearly to secure Europe's southern flank against the troublesome persons of its Muslim neighbours. Above all the aim of the European Union is to hold back the millions in North Africa - a presumed tide of illegal immigrants waiting to percolate through thousands of kilometres of frontiers of the Mediterranean coast. That is really what the debate was about.

Just a couple of nights ago one of the biggest organisations to do with population control, the IPPF, and others had a conference in the Russian embassy of all places. The main speaker at the conference, Sarah Parkin (who used to be the leader of the Green Party), was making this point: the problem is that it is very easy to imagine all these muscular, African, young men rowing across the Mediterranean to Europe.

So the problem is the fear of immigration. The problem is that 'they' are going to come here and what is going to happen to poor little 'white Europe'. How is that going to be resolved? I would prefer that we talked about the real issues rather than dressing it up in all this fancy language that the population lobby has been going on and on about.

One thing about population is that the arguments always change. Every five or six years the population lobby realises that yesterday's arguments are no longer convincing and then they come up with a new argument. So, for example, in the old days the arguments were purely racial. In those days the Europeans were openly racist - not like now when we're all no longer supposed to be racist so we don't use that kind of language. We use a more sanitised, academic language to get our points across.

When I went to university, this university as it happens, I was told that the real problem of population growth in Africa was that it caused underdevelopment. The reason Africa is so poor is because there were so many people there. If only we could curb the rate of fertility then Africa would be like London, Los Angeles, or Paris. That was the basic argument.

The trouble with that argument was that even the economists could not argue for it convincingly. It was a very difficult point of view to sustain. If you look at some of the highest growth rate areas in the world, like south-east Asia, they all have high fertility - much higher rates of fertility than some of the European countries which are at the point of stagnating economically.

The economists spent billions of pounds trying to prove that there was a correlation between poverty and population growth, only to conclude that it was not on. The

population lobby realised that, in the realm of economics, you can't win the argument. There are too many holes in it.

The population lobby had to come up with another argument. The environment, which is very fashionable in the West, was invoked. They argued that the real problem was all these Indians. They would pollute and destroy the rain forest. The environment is going to get damaged by these Africans trampling on the grass. So if we want to save the environment, and the environment is the most important thing in the world, then we have got to get these people to practise some Protestant ethic and defer from having babies. But now of course, the environmental argument is proving to be unsustainable as well. Just the other day I had a chat with someone from the Rockerfeller Institute which is financing all these projects - and they make the point that you can't really sell this argument. It doesn't work that well.

Then of course they had a very good idea. It was an idea they ripped off from the missionaries in the nineteenth century. The idea is 'why don't we celebrate women? Why don't we say we're doing it because the poor little women from Africa and Latin America need us Europeans to protect them from their men? Why don't we somehow talk about women's rights?'

And all of a sudden everybody from the World Bank downwards is talking about gender. If you go to Washington and talk to the International Monetary Fund they all sound like feminists, hardened feminists. And they remind you to be gender-sensitive. The ODA, run by the Tory government (and you know what the government has done for women in this country) has got a policy that every aid programme across the world has 'gender-sensitivity' put into it.

For some reason they all love women. All these aid agencies have this thing about women's rights and how we need to educate women. It's like what the missionaries did in the nineteenth century. They realised that it was not that easy to convert Africans to Christianity or the Chinese to Christianity. But if you get at the women and show them a bit of medicine, educate them, get them to think the way we do then slowly but surely our ideas can percolate through and they will become converted to Christianity and other Western ideas that we have. So all of a sudden we have the concepts of women's rights and human rights.

The whole discourse of human rights is really the discourse of population. You will not meet anybody to do with the Institutes to do with population who does not talk in any other language except the discourse of human rights. It sounds really good because - after all, who can be against human rights? It is like being against babies. Nobody says "I hate human rights lets bring back Fascism". It is a completely incontrovertible point.

Human rights are based upon a concept, my favourite concept of all, a very delicate concept, which is the concept of unmet needs. I love that concept. It is based on the fact that women all over the Third World from Latin America to Asia and Africa have got this unmet need. The unmet need is for contraception and family services.

You may be excused for being a bit naïve in thinking that if there is an unmet need then maybe it is for food. In Africa there certainly is an unmet need for clean water. There is an unmet need for good housing and for proper industry and agriculture. There are a lot of unmet needs around, but for some reason the only unmet need that gets recognised is the unmet need for condoms and contraceptive pills. Why is this?

Why is it that this is the only unmet need recognised? There are all these statistics that you read that claim that 80% of the women in Latin America say that they need contraceptive pills. Somewhere else they say every year thousands and thousands of people die in Asia because of abortions. All these figures that are brought out look very good on paper. But one is entitled to ask the question where do these figures come from?

If you go into the real world and ask a typical Nigerian or a typical Peruvian person, 'What are your unmet needs?' They will tell you about the housing, the lack of clothes, the fact that they have cholera, not enough medication and all the rest of it. All these things are real unmet needs but the only unmet need that we care about is to keep people down to reduce the rate of fertility. I feel a bit suspicious.

I also get a bit suspicious when people say:

'You are so masculine, Frank. You don't realise that women need to be educated. You don't realise that women need to have more access to this service or that service.'

I say:

'I am quite happy for everybody to be educated, but in that case why don't you give lots of money to school programmes. Let's just build a lot of schools there. Let's build a lot of universities there. If you're really interested in education, let's have an education programme'.

But why link an education programme to a population programme? What's the connection? When I went to school when I was seven years old, I was not given a condom by my teacher. On the contrary. I was told very different things. All of a sudden education and contraception have become inextricably linked. If you are committed to the health of women then you should build hospitals. But why are they only certain types of hospitals?

To me that is quite degrading because population policy is riding piggy-back on the back of health, on the back of education. It is riding piggy-back on the back of social services because it is too ashamed to say what it is really all about.

Finally on the language of rights. I have become very, very suspicious of the language of rights. When you look at the language of human rights and examine how it has come about it's very simple and straight forward. The way so-called rights come about is this: a group of individuals in Europe decide that having access to condoms or contraceptives should become a human right. So then they lobby the UN and then lobby a little more. And then the UN declares this year we decided that having access to contraception is a human right.

They don't say that having access to proper housing and a good job is a human right but they decide that this is a human right. If you look at the list of human rights that the UN has enunciated in the last 10-12 years they are all about Western concerns which are then recycled as if they were universal ones.

Where does the demand for human rights come from? Does it come from Western Nigeria? Does it come from North Africa? No. It comes from universities in Paris. It comes from universities in New York. It comes from universities in London. It comes from lobby groups within these societies. And these societies have the ability to invent human rights for the rest of the other societies. The more the West wants to make something into a human right, the more it happens. One day it's children's rights the next day the UN decides that female genital mutilation is wrong.

For societies to determine themselves - what cultural practises they have, what types of sexual relations, what kind of family life they have, what they really wish to have - that is the one human right, the right to self determination, that will not be recognised. People like ourselves should say to them. 'I am happy to accept your human rights only in so far as you recognise that the key right above all is the right to self determination and the right to autonomy.'

We should realise what's taking place and should engage in a critique of the whole discourse of rights. Take it up and expose it for what it is and counterpose to that - not rights, but needs. We have got to begin with the needs of society, the needs of people, the needs of the societies in Africa rather than the rights which come from here in London, Paris or New York. These 'rights' carry with them an agenda which is heavily loaded in the favour of the North.

Ultimately the language about rights is very much about a fear that Europeans and Americans have about the fact that Africans are still having children in large numbers. This fear and obsession is then dressed up in the language of health, education and social services.

We should have nothing to do with it.

John Gillot

Are there environmental limits to population growth?

A recent discussion of the 'population problem' in the *Times Higher Education Supplement*, titled 'Harried by the mob', carried the opinion of six experts on the matter. The question was asked: 'Is population growth in the Third World a Problem?' Paul Harrison was in no doubt that it was, and this was his reason why: 'I think the environmental issue is the one reason why western countries should be concerned about population growth in the third world.'[1]

The environmental argument for population control is now an influential one. Indeed, over the past 10 years the environmental case has gained in influence. For example, back in 1986, the American National Academy of Sciences only hinted at environmental reasons to restrain population growth. But in 1993, it put its name to the statement issued from the 'Science Summit on World Population' (1993), 'A Joint Statement by 58 of the World's Scientific Academies' that warned of environmental disaster if nothing was done to stop population growth.

What is the argument? By contrast with older Malthusian points of view[2],the modern argument is distinctly environmental: rather than stressing resource depletion the warning is of threats to environmental stability; of the loss of renewable resources and more. The 1993 statement by the scientific academies was typical in this regard. It is worth quoting it at length:

> As human numbers increase, the potential for irreversible changes of far reaching magnitude also increases. Indicators of severe environmental stress include the growing loss of biodiversity, increasing greenhouse gas emissions, increasing deforestation world-wide, stratospheric ozone depletion, acid rain, loss of topsoil, and shortages of water, food, and fuel-wood in many parts of the world...
>
> The area of agricultural land has shrunk, both through soil erosion and restricted possibilities of irrigation. The availability of water is already a constraint in some countries. These are warnings that the earth is finite, and that natural systems are being pushed ever closer to their limits...
>
> In our judgement, humanity's ability to deal successfully with its social, economic, and environmental problems will require the achievement of zero population growth within the lifetime of our children.[3]

Writing in apocalyptic mode, the environmentalist Norman Myers believes that population growth has caused problems on such a scale that it is no exaggeration to say that 'the future of the planet is in the balance'.[4]

The terms of debate

The new environmental-Malthusians are winning the argument by setting the terms of debate: the only argument is over how near we are to causing irreversible damage; over whether we are merely approaching limits or are already so far through them that 'the future of the planet is in the balance'. Even those who think Myers goes too far share his basic concern.

I do not merely dispute the seriousness of the problem, I also reject the entire framework established by Myers and others. By contrast with the above warnings of disaster I will make the argument that the idea of environmental limits to population growth is a myth. The mental image we need to have is not one of humanity pushing up against limits, undermining natural balances as it does so, putting off the day of reckoning with technological innovations which only make things worse in the longer term. Rather, our vision should be one of a world of potential plenty; a world in constant flux as well, but not disturbed from some mythical balance. The problems which do face us arise from limitations thrown-up by current social arrangements.

The usual debate, such as the one between Norman Myers and Julian Simon, tends to focus on the facts of the matter. I will do this as well, but I will also do more: I will unearth the Malthusian assumptions which, in a self-justificatory way, 'prove' the environmental case against population growth. To anticipate my conclusion: the new Malthusian arguments are as invalid as older ones.

The example of food production

The environmental-Malthusians have written extensively on food production. There is an old Malthusian argument in their writings - the idea that we are running up against an absolute limit to food production. But there is also a new Malthusian argument - the idea that the world can feed itself, that it could in fact feed many more people than it currently does, but that doing so will lead to large-scale soil erosion and water poisoning and will therefore undermine the natural systems upon which our future depends.

Lester Brown, President of the Worldwatch Institute and editor of the annual *State of the World*, combines old and new Malthusian arguments in his extensive writings on the subject. Brown argues that the stagnation in global food production levels evident since the mid 1980s indicates the scale of the problem to come: for we are nudging natural limits, with no new innovations in food production methods of the required character in sight. He also argues that in straining to meet current need, never mind future need, we are already causing soil erosion on an unprecedented scale.

In his recent book, *Who Will Feed China?*, Brown aims to put across the message in dramatic fashion. China should be, as he puts it in the subtitle, a 'Wake-up Call for a Small Planet'. His argument is that China cannot feed itself in the longer term, and that if the world attempts to do so, it will lead to an acceleration of soil erosion and other problems. All in all, such is our condition, he argues, that achieving sustainability 'is now more in the hands of family planners than farmers'.[5]

However, a close look at Brown's own data casts doubt on his diagnosis and conclusions. The old Malthusian argument that food production is levelling off because we are pushing against some natural limit is very dubious. Currently, at a global level, humanity only uses 11% of the world's land for farming. This could increase to 25% as this is the amount of land that is suitable. Overall, food production has remained relatively stagnant since the mid 1980s, but this has nothing to do with any approach to a natural limit. The *variation* in rates of growth in different regions gives the lie to this idea, and in particular, the fact that output has grown most rapidly in those areas with the highest existing rates of productivity, namely Western Europe. The issue to be investigated ought rather to be: why aren't others using the same level of technology?, and what impact have economic trends and policies had on food production?

China does not illustrate the point in the way that Brown would like it to do. China feeds approximately 20 per cent of the world's population from about seven percent of the world's land. And within that, there is plenty of slack - rice yields per acre are 80 percent of Japan's, wheat yields are 50 percent of Britain's.

This combination of facts would seem to indicate that, globally, there is no problem at all with available land - we are far from pushing up against any natural limits. Indeed, it has been estimated that the Third World alone, if it used Western levels of technology, could feed 32 billion people to Western standards of living.

The image we are given then of the demand for food placing unsustainable stresses on the land bears no relationship to reality. As far as food production is concerned, the basic facts are that we do live in a land of potential plenty. The world is not the small place described by Brown.

The smallness of the world as depicted by Malthusians is a reflection of *their own assumptions*. They set limits and then ascribe them to nature.

One key assumption is *localism*. In his book *The Third Revolution*, Paul Harrison notes the data suggesting the third world alone could feed 32 billion people. But he ignores it. Why? Because he insists that every region must feed itself. Having insisted on localism, he then suggests that population growth is unsustainable because it threatens to outstrip the ability of people to feed themselves in *each region*.

Another key assumption is that in assessing productive capacities levels of technology are *relatively fixed*. This view dominates thinking on the problem in the third world. It is also prevalent in reflections on the *future*: it is assumed that population growth and the resulting increased demand for food will outstrip our capacity for technological innovation. As Brown puts it: 'there will be no dramatic technological breakthroughs that will lead to quantum jumps in world food output comparable to those associated with the discovery of fertiliser, the hybridisation of corn, or the development of the high-yielding dwarf wheats and rices.'[6] Hence, as Brown goes on to argue, the need to look to family planners to solve the problem of food.

The way in which population growth is projected into the future but not technical advances flies in the face of *past* experience in which technology has compensated for increased numbers. But can we be sure that this pattern will work in the future? I could

get all futuristic, but it isn't necessary. The main point has already been made: if we generalised from best available *current practice*, we could feed the world many times over - keep that 32 billion figure in mind. In other words, we do not have to champion Professor Pangloss against the Malthusian Cassandras as it is often said we must. Nor do we have to climb aboard our space-ships and head off to terra-form Mars as the caricature of the technological enthusiast has it.

So far, the argument has been directed at old Malthusian arguments, those that emphasise absolute constraints. But the points are relevant to the newer environmentally based Malthusian arguments - for the idea that population growth places stresses on the environment is premised upon the view that we are pushing up against limits, only offsetting them by adopting practices which are unsustainable in the longer term.

The new Malthusian arguments do not differ from the old ones in the way in which they conjure up an image of a cramped world suffering under human impact. The arguments lack substance accordingly. There are some further problems. Crucially, the whole idea that increased human demands on the environment leads to stresses to the environment and its ultimate deterioration is fundamentally wrong.

The idea that more people, more consumption, higher levels of technology leads to greater stresses to the land has the feel of common-sense. But it is wrong. A recent major study of soil deterioration pointed to 'deforestation, overgrazing and poor agricultural management' as the causes. This is not doubt correct, but what needs to be stressed is that 'poor management' is something totally separate from population growth.

As a matter of fact, studies of land management in Africa, where erosion is a serious issue in some places, have pointed to the need for *more people* to effectively manage land. Whether this is true or not, it should come as no surprise that the African Academy of Sciences dissociated itself from the 1993 statement by the world's scientific academies, observing instead that: 'for Africa, population remains an important resource for development, without which the continent's natural resources will remain latent and unexplored.'

The American experience this century also counts against the new Malthusians. It indicates that more can be got out of the land without any increase in soil erosion - the recent increase in erosion is due to economic problems and cuts in agricultural subsidies.

Taken separately, Africa and America can be used to counter the simple arguments of environmental-Malthusians. But the point is reinforced if we compare America and Africa. American land is farmed five times as productively as African land. And yet, it is less eroded. Erosion in Africa is caused by economic and social pressures, not by population growth.

The myths of IPAT

Environmentalists have used a formula to express their concerns:

It says that Impact = Population x Affluence x Technology.

The idea is that more people, more consumption, more technology all lead to a greater impact on the environment. It has broad appeal because different interest groups can focus on different aspects of the formula. Many in the North target the population term and call for curbs on Southern population growth. Many in the south focus rather on the consumption term or the technology term and suggest that the North should put its own house in order before it starts lecturing others.

However, the fact is that the formula, and the whole framework that lies behind it, is fundamentally wrong. Let us start by thinking about what 'Impact' means. It seems commonsensical to assume that more people consuming more using higher levels of technology will have a greater physical impact on the environment. But so what if it is true? The trick that environmentalists pull is to equate greater impact with a greater pressure on the environment; that is, they assume the process is destructive.

However, this is not the case. This can be shown by taking Impact to mean what the environmentalists want it to mean -that stresses that are problematic in the long term - then showing that the formula is a nonsense with this assumption.

The environmental reading assumes that higher levels of technology and higher levels of consumption lead to a greater Impact, environmentally understood. But they do not - the comparison of Africa and America already shows this. And does a rise in population lead to a rise in I? No it does not, as Tiffen et al's study of Kenya, *More People, Less Erosion*, has shown.

In fact, if we look at the formula in a little more detail, we see that it is a simple tautology that tells us nothing about Impact. Consider the second term, 'Affluence'. What does it mean? More precisely, Affluence is defined as consumption per unit of population. So, multiplying the first two terms together, Population and consumption per unit of population, we get consumption, or more precisely, the total consumption of the population base which interests us. This must now be multiplied by the Technology term. But what does this mean? Harrison tells us that we must think of this term as being equal to Impact per unit of consumption. So, multiplying the product of the first two terms, consumption, by Technology (= Impact per unit of consumption), we get Impact. All in all then, P x A x T simplifies to I, and the formula I = P x A x T becomes I = I, a tautology which actually tells us nothing about I!

Human development and the environment

I have concentrated on one example - that of land and food production - in order to illustrate a general failure of the environmental argument against population growth. Briefly, other issues need to be discussed in outline.

The 1993 statement from the world's scientific academies linked population growth to other problems: global warming; biodiversity loss; and ozone depletion among others. In this document and in others the idea of a 'revenge of nature' is never far below the surface - the idea that we might pay the price for changes and imbalances in nature that we have created. Richard Leakey puts the point strongly in his book *The Sixth Extinction*. Referring to the threat of a sixth mass species extinction, he writes: 'Homo Sapiens might not only be the agent of the sixth extinction, but also risks being one of its victims.'[7]

Humanity as victims of its own actions is the theme; and the idea is that all the changes outlined are at least exacerbated by rapid population growth. This is not the place to discuss the specific issues in detail. But two points need to be emphasised in opposition to the common environmentalist reading of these developments. First, as Leakey himself points out, even if humanity is causing a sixth extinction and/or bringing about other large-scale changes to nature, this cannot be condemned from an 'environmental' point of view. The reason is simple: if humanity is helping to bring about such large-scale changes, it is not doing to nature anything nature has not done to itself at other times. Change, even mass extinctions, are a part of the natural way of things. And what is more, as Leakey suggests, it seems that mass extinctions play a central role in facilitating diversity in the longer term. There is therefore no 'environmental' argument against mass species extinction.

The only issue that can and should concern us is the likely impact of large-scale changes on our own, that is distinctly human, well-being. This leads to the second point: the view that humanity may be a victim of changes it has itself helped to cause is an unjustifiably pessimistic one. Often, it rests on an anti-humanist viewpoint: that humanity's relationship to nature resembles that of other species, and that, like them, its survival depends to a large extent on the continuation of a given state of nature. This view is not credible. It ignores the creative potential of human action in the face of change. It ignores our capacity to manage change for our benefit. In short, it turns us into victims by assuming that we are powerless in the first place.

In conclusion, the point to note is the way in which the environmentalists' argument on these subjects as on issues relating to food production carry with them assumptions that lead to an easy 'proof' of their warnings against population growth.

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[1] The *Times Higher Education Supplement*, February 16

[2] In *An Essay on the Principle of Population As it Affects the Future Improvement of Society*, first printed in 1798, The Rev Thomas Robert Malthus first put the argument that population growth unchecked would outstrip growth in productivity.

[3] The document has been printed in many forms. I take this from Paul Demeny (ed), *Population and Development Review*, Volume 20, Number 1, 1994, pp235-6.

[4] Norman Myers and Julian Simon, *Scarcity or Abundance : A Debate on the Environment*, New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1994, p162.

[5] Lester Brown, *Who Will Feed China?: Wake-up Call for a Small Planet*, London: Earthscan, 1995, p141.

[6] Lester Brown and Hal Kane, *Full House: Reassessing the Earth's Population Carrying Capacity*, London: Earthscan, 1995, p162.

[7] Richard Leakey and Roger Lewin, *The Sixth Extinction: Biodiversity and its Survival*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1996, p249.