



COMMENT

Overpopulated and impoverished nations: Can and should the West intervene and if so how? A Comment on Weld 2012

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Madeline Weld, President of the Population Institute of Canada, has summarized brilliantly the resistance of third world nations to facing the fatal imbalance between their very high birth rates and resources (Weld 2012). Much can be learned from Weld's descriptions of escalating poverty, cruelty and loss of life, caused by a motley consortium of 'social justice' and Catholic groups, engaged in a power play that rejects appropriate solutions. Opposition to making modern contraceptives available is puzzling when no requirement or pressure to use them is present, but when their provision simply gives families, and particularly women, a choice.

For extremists of the left, winning a political battle with wealthier countries by labeling logic as 'racist and sexist' can doom untold billions in a vast swath of the world. It also puts ever more pressure on the humanitarian proclivities of the West to accept the heaviest refugee burden we have ever endured. So why does this resistance exist and what can and should we do about it?

First, interest groups that have any kind of political or religious interest in whether or not contraceptive assistance is welcome need to be excluded from the discussion about this kind of aid. That includes 'social justice' advocates and religious organizations. Size of family has always been, and rightly so, the province of couples, but is also related to the ability of women to have a say in the number of births.

There is a long history of evidence suggesting that virtually every kind of aid to the third world, when intermediaries are involved—whether food, money, health care or birth control advice—is likely to be misused or manipulated for the benefit of interest

groups with different agendas. So why does the West include them in this discussion?

We know that when pressure from political and/or religious groups is absent and, without overwhelming male dominance over women, the number of children is decided by families themselves. Family size is a response to what is going on in the place where they live and how they assess, what most experts call, 'their life chances.'

In the middle to late 19th century in the West there was a sharp fall in birth rates because of changes in the way people lived and in their circumstances (see Houlbrooke 1986), not because of modern contraceptives or sex education. At the beginning of the century the average family size was between 7 and 10 children; at the end, the average number was 3 births per family. Families made these decisions themselves and without the help of medical advances to block pregnancy.

However, selecting family size is less likely to take place where women are oppressed or where the culture permits multiple wives, few of whom will have any influence on the number of children they bear. Under these circumstances, the suffering of women is of little interest to those who hold power, and we are limited in how we can intervene in this kind of traditional family structure in either the under-developed world or the theocracies of the Muslim East.

If irrational and ultimately self-destructive politics rule, what can we do when reason is irrelevant? It is likely that supporters of the 'feminist-environmental justice movement', who are apparently leading the pack to resist population limitation, are not themselves part of the suffering poor; no matter, they sup-

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posedly speak on their behalf. Further, the 'social justice movement' can likely put up such a fight against birth control information because followers are members of the better-off and better educated classes, who only claim to speak for the unschooled.

Political and religious zealots, both Catholic and Muslim, object to education about birth control because they are committed to a course that keeps their own population high. As a practical matter, winning for them is getting what they want—western money for more development, without any commitment to address overpopulation concerns. This strategy has an element of extortion about it, based on the assumption that the poor population either will not or cannot adjust their fertility without help. However, much evidence indicates that this is not always the case and that this idea may be overblown. We need to address the target population directly and not work through governments or other intermediaries.

Our own situation in the United States shows how life circumstances do affect family size. In the 'nanny state' that the United States has become, the more children you have the less tax you pay. For the poor, each child brings all of the costs of their birth plus a permanent subsidy. In the United States, these rescue operations and the additional income they provide are a major factor that discourages small families by defeating their economic advantages.

In nations with exhausted natural resources and on the brink of collapse, the leaders who speak for them are resistant to lowering the birth rate because more people can mean more bargaining power overall and can reduce the power gap with the West.

In the poorest parts of the world the wealthier nations already offer cash for development and installation of basic amenities. This process is ongoing, but only a tiny part of the solution that might bring lower fertility.

Our message to government entities who reject population reduction must be clear: If you want help with economic development, population reduction policies come first, and up front and center; that is the price you must pay for it. While we should give wanted help with contraceptive devices when asked for, it is important to remember that lowered fertility has been accomplished quite well in other times and places with other means and without pills, inserted barriers or condoms. We must go directly to the women involved or those who actually represent their wishes and not try to make this a government policy that can be accepted or rejected.

Nevertheless, we can recognize that we are at least indirectly involved in what happens across the globe and the fallout of failure will hurt us, but to a lesser extent than it cancels hope for the future of very poor nations. We have decades of experience dealing with third world government entities or other alleged spokespersons for the suffering poor, and too much of our aid has been squandered and never used for its intended purposes.

Even if we cannot get a foothold in certain third world countries to distribute modern birth control methods, this does not mean that smaller families will never happen there.

The anthropologist, Virginia Abernathy, has written extensively on this subject (Abernathy 1993). Abernathy dissects the paradigm responsible for what she calls the 'counterproductive efforts of nations and international agencies in limiting births'. Many of Abernathy's observations are about where and how family size limitations have been initiated. She says, 'success was not due to superior contraceptive technology, but to individual motivation to keep family size low.' She concludes that western demographic history demonstrates that compared to micro-level interest in limiting fertility, suitable technology was of secondary importance in determining birth rates.

The first thing I learned in rudimentary demography is that long before the pill or modern contraception, families in economically challenged or resource-deprived nations found a number of simple ways to delay or avoid child bearing. With few exceptions, they set family size preferences in accordance with what was demanded by their circumstances or a life-style choice.

Ask yourself: why are the majority of families in western Europe now reproducing at far below replacement level? How did it happen that so many of them reached the same conclusion at the very same time? Will outside encouragement to achieve replacement level fertility work in impoverished countries? Yes, it will likely work if there are social and economic changes we cannot predict and do not now anticipate, like the disincentives that made this happen in other times and places.

To summarize, our interference in trying so hard to limit third-world fertility is not likely to have a big impact without other factors in play because demographic momentum in either direction is likely a conundrum-type problem that we do not and cannot understand fully at this time.

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