

# FACTS *against* MYTHS

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## Over-population as Underdevelopment: The Myths behind "Population Control" — II

### COMMENT

**T**he 2001 State of the World's Population report, published by the UNFPA states that the world population will grow by 50%, from 5.1 b. in mid-2001 to 9.3 by 2050, with all the projected growth taking place in the South. Undoubtedly, population growth is a serious concern but a bugbear especially among population "experts" in the North. The seemingly intractable problems of poverty and under-development of the region invariably ends up in the conclusion that virtually all of its problems are rooted in "population explosion", "over-population", etc. The underlying themes of these problems are that the poor are poor because they have too many children. To illustrate: India is backward "because it has too many people" and similarly other countries of the South are what and where they are because they "are not doing enough to control their exploding populations" and having failed "in meeting population targets". To that extent the only "solution", therefore, is family planning.



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This victim-blaming syndrome has been increasingly evident not only at the national level but also in the global discourse on the future of the planet. The South, with their large populations, are blamed for all manner of social and environmental ills giving rise to a number of assumptions on controlling population growth in the region. The three main ones being

- Rapid population growth is the primary cause of the problems of underdevelopment and threatens the entire natural world;
- The poor of the South must be persuaded to have fewer children whether or not their conditions of poverty change;
- Like other western development schemes, birth control technology can be delivered to women in the South in a top-down, technocratic manner with the right combination of media advocacy. The goal is not to improve health care services but to prevent pregnancy (viewing women as objects of reproduction rather than as subjects of their own decision-making goals and in defining their own life);

This philosophy has since shaped the activities of most population “experts” and organisations and international aid agencies in the South as well as among ethnic minorities and poor communities in many parts of the North itself. In 1958 Sweden became the first government to provide international aid for population control, first to Sri Lanka and then to Pakistan. In 1966 the UN General Assembly reached a consensus about “population assistance” a label that eschewed control and limitation. The label has since become a euphemism for all global funding of condoms, IUDs, the pill and Karman tubes, as well as US university demography department, international bureaucracies and local workshops. These

“experts” have also appropriated the language that appears reasonable, progressive and even sensitive – some of it is even co-opted from the women’s movement. To illustrate: a 1989 declassified US National Security Study<sup>3</sup> states that the US support derives from a concern and spacing of children. Thus, it smuggles and fits into its population control policy the language of ‘choice’ that global financial institutions including institutions like the Vatican also find it convenient to introduce in their rhetoric.

Further, the obsession with the thesis of “over-population” (the Demographic Trap) is one of the biggest global red herrings in the development discourse. Sustainable energy and relative scarce resources, practised in the South, but used within a framework confuses cause and effect. While this confusion is basically ideological, it reveals how ideologies mask reality and determine perspectives. Moreover, it soon becomes clear that the obsession with population is a substitute for a proper concern with social justice: this must be avoided at all costs, for it also calls into question the dominant ideology in the world and mimicked by the ruling bloc in the country. Is it any wonder, then, population growth in India continues to be a seemingly intractable problem with crores having already been invested on its “control”. Taking a closer look at the rhetoric of population planning therefore becomes an essential prerequisite in dismantling some long-standing myths that has accompanied it.

**MYTH:** *The major causes of hunger and poverty in the world today are uncontrolled population growth and density.*

**FACT:** Not so!

Western Europe has an average population density of about 98 people per square kilometre (with Holland having over 1,000 per sq.km.); Africa as a whole has an average of only 18 people per sq.km.



Yet, the Europeans are among the best-fed people in the world and Africa suffers the highest levels of malnutrition. So, there is little relationship between hunger and land-availability. The South undoubtedly great shortages of food, but it is not due to a lack of land. Less than one-third of its potential arable land is being cultivated. The fact is that the rich North has enough money to support its population unlike countries of the South.

World hunger does not keep the population down; it actually keeps it up. Africa, again, has also one of the fastest population growth rates; yet, this itself is an indication of prevailing poverty. Individual families will remain large as long as they lack the economic security that the North takes for granted. In rural areas of the South, children are needed as workers to assure the survival of their families and to support parents in their old age. And, since nearly one in five such children dies before the age of 5, fertility rates remain high as a safeguard.

**MYTH:** *Unchecked population growth, after all, adversely impacts the carrying capacity of the earth making the planet unable to provide food for all.*

**FACT:** There is no physical shortage of food today, least of all in India! For the

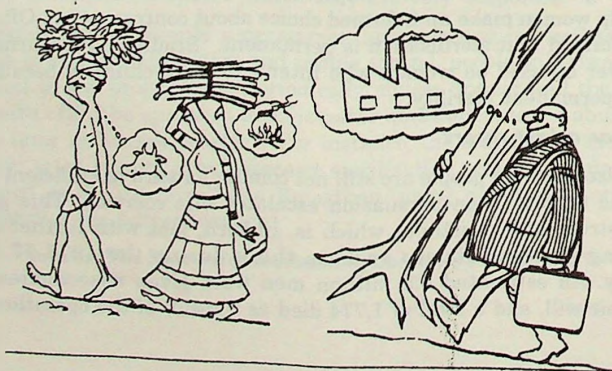
large masses of people who have no food, the surpluses exist right in front of them! India has massive reserve stock of over 20 m. tons of food grains but not distributed to the needy with much of it rotting in godowns.

At any rate this claim is a non-issue today. The problem is not food scarcity but mainly over consumption by the rich in the North as well as by a tiny section of the rich in the South including their capricious waste and affluent life-style.

**MYTH:** *Population Growth is also responsible for global environmental degradation.*

**FACT:** This spurious claim along with the others is linked in the chain of causes to become the first and final cause of environmental degradation.

Undoubtedly, pressure of people does damage the environment. Women who trudge miles and miles each day to collect firewood to cook the family meal, the depletion of groundwater by tube wells, the sheer weight of humanity on the limited landmass are indeed formidable factors in environmental degradation. But this is nothing in comparison to the massive extractive project of the global economy; millions of people displaced since Independence by the so-called development projects; the status of forests



## ***Two Ways to Plan a Population Programme***

### ***1st Method***

- ***In Theory:*** Start With the Population – “Progress should be measured in the only terms which ultimately matter – births averted” – Dr. Ravenholt, ex-head of Population, USAID

***In Practice:*** 6 Steps to Coercion!

#### ***#1. Set Up a Target***

- Setting definite population targets often means that more wide-ranging efforts to improve health and wellbeing are neglected. Majority of women know about Family planning but a negligible few have heard of immunisation or oral rehydration, both vital aids to preventing child deaths

#### ***#2. Choose your weapon***

- Target-oriented programmes tend to focus on a small number of permanent or semi-permanent methods (*sterilisation or IUD*) to *minimise dropout rates*. Some IUDs cannot be removed by the woman. It has to be extracted by a trained person with a metal hook.

#### ***#3. Cut Down Costs***

- Providing proper counselling and screening costs money. When reduction of birth rates is the main aim, these ‘luxuries’ are often dispensed with.
- ‘Family planning programmes are less costly than conventional development projects. Successful projects of this kind will yield very high economic returns’ – R. McNamara, ex-President of the World Bank

#### ***#4. Educate! Motivate!***

- Informing people of the availability of services is essential. But trying to persuade (educate, ‘motivate’) them to use family planning demonstrates an unwillingness to understand why people have children in the first place. This means that those underlying factors are unlikely ever to be tackled and people will come to distrust a government that disregards their needs.

#### ***#5. Downplay difficulties***

- Possible complications and side-effects are ignored or minimised in a target-oriented programme as it is *more important to add to the numbers of acceptors* than to help women make an informed choice about contraception. Often people are not informed that sterilisation is permanent. Studies have warned that it should never be used on women who intend to have children because of the danger of permanent sterility.

#### ***#6. Force as a last resort***

- When all else fails and people are still not coming forward in sufficient numbers to meet the targets, then persuasion escalates into coercion. This generates further distrust and resistance which is, in turn, met with further coercion, culminating in gross abuses such as those during the 1975-77 State of Emergency. An estimated 6.5 million men were given vasectomies, mostly against their will, and a total of 1,774 died as a result of the operations.



## 2<sup>nd</sup> Method

***In Theory:*** Begin with the People

"A woman who wants family planning can have it.

But we don't think it is a 'Top Priority'.

We don't think poverty will end by ending the poor".

***In Practice:*** 5 billion population plans

Every person is different and each has her or his optimal strategy for survival. For some the best strategy is 9 children; for others it may be one or two. The only humane population programme is one that expands people's opportunities so that large families are no longer necessary for survival. And that means *understanding and respecting the reasons why people have children.*

### ***Why People Have Children***

- **Low status of women:** Where husband and in-laws want many children, a wife may not dare to object;
- **Need of Today:** Children help with work and provide status and affection for their parents;
- **Fear of Tomorrow:** Children are many parents' only source of security in old age;
- **Lack of contraception:** The family planning clinic may be too far away, the service too costly or scarce, or even prohibited;
- **Fear of infertility:** Where children are needed fear of infertility can lead to early, frequent childbearing;
- **Fear of children dying:** In some very poor countries a woman must have 10 children to be certain of a surviving adult son;
- **Contraceptive side effects:** Unless these are clearly explained women may avoid contraception unless they are very desperate.

Tell-tale Signs: Not all family programmes, however, end in sterilisation. But if the focus is on population first and people second, people will always tend to be sacrificed to the programme. Periodically abuses appear and the system is tinkered with. But the approach itself is never questioned, so the abuses merely re-surface later in its new 'avatar'. For instance, the scandals of the infamous Emergency; later reports of widespread sterilisation abuse in Gujarat (using famine relief as an 'incentive') and Rajasthan (using promises of employment as an 'incentive' for Adivasi women)

Source: The New Internationalist, London, October 1987.

transformed into ranches or monocultures for export, the declining yield of the so-called miracle seeds of the 'Green Revolution', the end of self-reliance among subsistence farmers globally. Even so, if a child born in the US consumes 25 times more than a child born in India, India could support a population of 4 b. before it overtook the resource-use of the richest country on earth. The population debate obscures the consumption problem, and serves to wipe from the agenda of a more just distribution, which alone will provide the security people need to lower their fertility rates.

Over forty years ago, the richest 20% of the world's population commanded 30 times more wealth than the poorest 20%. That differential has now doubted. Not only is there little sign that the rich will moderate their use of resources but this same model is now being promoted globally as the only way forward for every country on the planet. No wonder there is such agitation in the presence of population growth, first is both destiny and duty – if current orthodoxy is not radically modified – of all these people to aim at the levels of consumption attained by the West. Indeed, such is the goal and objective of the global economy.<sup>9</sup>

The above will make it clear that people in the South have fewer children when they acquire a measure of social security. Indeed, the rise in life expectancy, the ability to cure formerly fatal diseases, has had a clear impact on the birth rate. Their need today is enhance security, not yet more lessons on birth control; that security and economic growth are not necessarily synonymous has been the object of almost conspiratorial evasion. At present the only safety nets for the poor are those of flesh and blood, which support people in illness and old age. When they lose the terror of dereliction in old age, of abandonment in ill health, they will reduce the size of their families just as it occurred in Europe. But

this inevitably leads to the taboo question of redistribution, of a fairer allocation of resources.

This model of development, in which the relief of poverty is more or less by-product of wealth – creation, involves such massive abuse of the resource-base of the earth that the very basis of global industrial society is now being challenged.

Population as resource not as a threat, a re-dedication to social justice, a retrieval of human well being from economic indicators, a reclamation of internationalism from globalisation – the millennial imperative defines itself clearly<sup>9</sup>.

**MYTH: *Controlling population growth will lead to alleviating hunger and poverty in the south including environmental degradation.***

**FACT: not so!**

Consider India or Thailand or any other country in the South that have succeeded in reducing birth rates without significantly redistributing access to survival resources – land, jobs and health care.

India's fertility rates – which are still comparatively high – have declined significantly since Independence. Yet are the citizens of the country any better fed? Despite the dramatic industrial development, military and nuclear power, space technology, the vast majority of the population has not benefited economically. Over half the population lacks the income necessary to buy a nutritious diet and starvation deaths continue to abound day after day among the farming community. And despite food exports and bulging stocks of foodgrains in godowns mass hunger persists.

The related claim that without reduction in population growth even more people would go hungry and die has deeper implications – that all that can be done is



to reduce the rate of population growth today so that the situation will not be worse for even more people tomorrow – leads to an untenable moral stance.

This raises the question of whether an ethical claim to success can be made if it is held that the number of hungry people in the world to be over 800 m.? Clearly not. The moral imperative is clear. The undemocratic power structures that lie at the root to the problems of poverty and underdevelopment, and population growth by “solution” which at best can only limit the numbers hurt. To illustrate:

Someone is afflicted with a disease, which is slowly getting worse. A doctor is approached for help. On examining the person, she/e offers some not-very-comforting news. “I can offer a treatment that will stop the spread of disease, but I cannot prescribe the cure” Sh/e openly admits that the cure is well known, but unfortunately it is only approved for use in certain countries and India is not among them. Besides, sh/e is not licensed to give it to you anyway—it is not his or her speciality.

Given the seriousness of the issue, dispensing a less effective medicine in the presence of a known cure can in no way be rationalised. Yet, such a course is in effect what is promoted by those who peddle spurious claims e.g. that in certain countries there is no hope for social and economic transformation.

**MYTH: Family planning is thus the only hope in controlling population growth.**

**FACT:** Having many children is part of a survival strategy of the poor in the South. (Cf. Box pg.5)

Most population “experts”, however, are unwilling to address the roots of these problems that lie largely in the socio-economic order. Thus, when it comes to action towards a solution, they focus willy-nilly narrows down to “family planning” so

as to “...establish a balance between number of people and available resources...”

Defending family planning as virtually the only feasible line of attack on high birth rates also imply directly or by their silence that global forces in a fast-growing country cannot address the deeper, social roots of its population problem. They cannot reform the socio-economic structures of other societies, it is assumed. The position ignores the many channels – diplomatic, military, commercial, and financial – through which global forces already greatly influence the structures of decision-making power, affecting fertility within many countries of the South.

This narrow approach is ethically questionable and self-defeating. Once the social roots of high fertility are deemed impossible to address and fewer birth becomes the goal, noble ends get sacrificed to dubious means. Many women are injured in the process, and ultimately the very end itself – stemming population growth – is unattainable.

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