

The right to be fully human

The following is adapted from an essay Colin wrote for a global competition on population policy and human rights. Selected essayists were invited to a workshop in Berlin in February, 2007, which was organised by the Irmgard Coninx Stiftung Foundation (<http://www.irmgard-coninx-stiftung.de>). The human rights activists and junior academics who attended came from all inhabited continents, though none were from Russia, a country with a very serious decline in population, health and human rights. See website for full text and references.

TWO COMMUNITIES AND PROPOSITIONS

This essay pleads for greater co-operation and dialogue between two mutually suspicious communities. On one side are human rights advocates, anti-globalisation activists and feminists. On the other are a small number of academics, activists and development workers who argue that fertility and population growth rates are crucial determinants of progress towards greater prosperity, freedom and human rights.

My argument rests on two main propositions. **First**, the social, economic and developmental benefits of slower population growth rates have been substantially underestimated in recent decades. Because of the sustained effort of a handful of activists, the importance of this principle is being belatedly rediscovered. For example, an enquiry into this question by the British Parliament (whose report was released in January, 2007, www.appg-popdevrh.org.uk) emphatically agreed with this point. [Ed: Colin provided a written submission to this enquiry on behalf of BODHI]. Summarising this evidence, Dr Martha Campbell, Professor John Cleland and two co-authors published a paper in the prestigious journal *Science*, called 'Return of the Population Growth Factor,' in March, 2007.

In the post-WWII period, there was widespread economic and political understanding of this

principle. The Green Revolution, which started in the late 1960s, won a temporary reprieve in the ancient race between the stork and the plough. Within fifteen years of Norman Borlaug's warning that the Green Revolution should be regarded as a precious opportunity to slow population growth, the view that high population growth is harmful for human development came under vigorous attack from a coalition of forces led by the government of US President Ronald Reagan. Representing vested interests such as the oil industry, and intensely threatened by the implications of the 'Limits to Growth' arguments the Reagan administration called for free markets, including for population size. Gullible supporters claimed that since no limits to growth actually exist, and since the invisible hand of the market would maximise public goods, any attempt to regulate population growth would not only be pointless but also would harm human rights.

My **second** major proposition is that it is more likely that inclusive economic growth will generate improved human rights than the converse. (Leave aside, for the time being, the vexed definition of what economic growth measures and constitutes.) That is, while the relationship between economic growth and freedom is far from straightforward, in the main freedom is more likely to flourish in a rich society than in a poor society. This is likely even if existing wealth is distributed fairly evenly in both societies.

(The following argument also ignores the fact that much wealth in rich societies is stolen, appropriated or otherwise kept from the poor so that their comparatively high freedom is likely to have a narrow scope.) For a start, people in rich societies are more likely to be educated and have the tools to develop their human potential than are people in poor societies. Though people in Singapore are neither democratic nor free, I would much rather be born there than in a terribly poor

country like Burundi. Poverty is no guarantor of human rights, as the current situation in Zimbabwe clearly shows.

CONTESTING FREEDOMS AND RIGHTS

Obviously, choosing one's family size is a human freedom. In calling for a lower population growth rate in order to accelerate development (in countries such as Pakistan, Uganda or East Timor where the total fertility rate is much greater than replacement levels), I am not arguing for an **enforced** reduction in family size, nor even for explicit economic or social penalties (such as restricted promotion) tied to family size. Instead, I am calling for a greater recognition of the role of high population growth in undermining development, including by academic and political leadership. I am also calling for the implementation of social policies which will accelerate the demographic transition. The most important of these factors are well known. They include universal primary school education, the lifting of taboos concerning discussion of this topic, and the availability of cheap contraceptives, especially condoms.

Feminists, human rights activists and the many development workers who remain ignorant about or silent on this issue need to engage in this debate. One response from this community is to argue that the open discussion of this topic will inevitably lead to abuses, such as the compulsory sterilisation of minorities. In fact, denying the role of smaller families in economic take-off helps to perversely maintain poverty and inequality.

Of course, slowing human population growth is not enough to solve our human predicament (illustrated, for example, by the increasingly dire predictions concerning climate change). The tension between the right to reproduce and the struggle to develop is hardly unique. All acts of co-operation necessarily entail a trade-off between competing freedoms and responsibilities. As a society, we choose to restrict the freedom to drive on both sides of the road (except in Delhi on the way to the airport!)

Nor are human restrictions on fertility a recent invention. While a few demographers might still claim otherwise, there is increasing recognition that contraception is ancient, by methods including prolonged lactation, herbs, taboos and possibly other means.

SKewed AGE DISTRIBUTIONS

One reason to lower fertility is to reduce 'youth bulges'. These refer to concentrations of young men who are poorly educated, under-employed, (rationally) resentful, comparatively easy to manipulate and potentially violent. Such men are vulnerable to recruitment into activities which can damage society, such as gangs, rebel groups and terrorists. A youth bulge was pivotal in the 1994 Rwandan genocide, when land scarcity forced many young unmarried men to unsuccessfully seek work in the city.



The harmful effects of distorted age structures have also been observed in elephant populations, many of which have been traumatised by human and elephant population pressure. Older elephants are sometimes killed in the presence of their young. Charles Siebert writes in the *New York Times* that such elephants exhibit behavior typically associated with post-traumatic stress disorder, including 'asocial behavior, inattentive mothering and hyperaggression.'