Over-population: Menace or Myth?

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THE EXISTENCE of hunger on a global scale in a world which could feed everyone is undeniably the greatest scandal of our time. A report published by the U.N. last year stated that 100 children are born in the poorer countries every half-minute; within a year, twenty of these will be dead. Another sixty will suffer from malnutrition in their early years, and will have no access to medical care during their childhood, during which time their chances of dying will be twenty to forty times greater than if they lived in Europe or North America. Of those who survive to school age, little more than half will ever set foot in a classroom.

At the same time birth rates in the underdeveloped countries are much higher than those in developed countries. The recent U.N. publication *The World Population in 1970* observes: "The difference is so great that the level of the birth rate can serve as well as any other economic or social indicator to distinguish between more developed and less developed countries at the present time."

Faced with such a picture, the temptation to conclude glibly that the major priority for the Third World is a massive investment in "population control" programmes is very strong. Indeed many people take precisely that view. But this mistaken conclusion overlooks the most crucial factor of all: that high birth rates are a *result* of poverty rather than a cause of it. All the evidence suggests that a significant fall in poor countries' population growth rates can only follow, not precede, social reforms, better nutrition and education—which means that these things, not population control, should be the first priority in the fight against underdevelopment.

Why High Birth Rates?

Parents in the Third World desperately *need* children both to work on the land and to look after them in old-age. The Pearson Report (1969) summed up the situation as follows: ". . . in the developing world many parents want large families for good and valid economic reasons; not because they are ignorant or improvident. In such cases, access to family planning

information and facilities will not make much difference. When child labour makes a significant contribution to family income and when parents are dependent on a large family for protection and security in old age, there will be few incentives to reduce fertility, no matter what the social cost of rapidly expanding population."

In a situation of high infant mortality, this inevitably leads to high birth rates. The Indian Minister of State for Family Planning, Dr. S. Chandrasekhar, remarked recently that the best contraceptive is good nutrition—meaning that poor nutrition induces Indian women to produce from eight to ten children on the assumption that only three will survive to become breadwinning members of the family. If all the children were assured of good nutrition, and therefore of a reasonable life expectancy, mothers would feel freer to have less children. Hence the higher castes in India, who are better off, have the smallest families.

Education and Fertility

Surveys also suggest that lower fertility rates result from improvements in the level of education. To take just one example, Carlos J. Gomez concluded that "In thirteen Latin American nations under study: (1) illiteracy is positively correlated with fertility; (2) fertility is inversely correlated with the primary-school enrolment ratio." (*Population Bulletin,* October, 1962.)

Family Planning: the Record So Far

So better nutrition, lower infant mortality rates and (perhaps also) wider literacy appear to be *pre-conditions* of any significant drop in the Third World birth rates. The failure of birth control programmes to date, then, is simply one symptom of the overall lack of social and economic development. At present family planning programmes have significantly reduced birth rates in only a few small poor countries, notably Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan and Korea. All these are special cases and very unlike the typical underdeveloped country. Hong Kong and Singapore are small island countries, both of which are overwhelmingly urban, with fairly high literacy rates and well-organised medical services. Taiwan, and to a lesser degree Korea, are fairly highly urbanized (for Asia), relatively literate and beginning to industrialize.

Furthermore, in each case the birth rate had already begun to decline *before* the introduction of family planning services. Theodore K. Ruprecht and Carl Wahren observe in a recent OECD study: "It is important to realise that the only cases where family planning programmes can be shown to have had an apparent impact on the birth rate are in those countries, such as Taiwan, Korea, Hong Kong and Singapore, where they were established in a situation in which a downward trend in fertility had already be-

gun. Thus, it seems that *where family planning programmes have been successful, they have been so only in special and uncommon circumstances.*" (Emphasis in original.)

Far more typical is the experience of India, where an expenditure of $64 million on birth control in the three Five-Year Plans from 1951-66 had hardly any impact: indeed, the rate of natural increase at the end of the Third Five-Year Plan was double the rate at the start! It was widely reported in May last year that an Abortion Bill might soon be passed in India as a population control measure, owing to the failure of more conventional birth control measures, including sterilization, to slow the population growth rate.

Development the Solution

All of which reinforces the conclusion that economic development and only economic development can solve the poor countries' so-called population problem: it both increases the food supply and expands the social services, and simultaneously reduces the growth of population. This view is further supported by the historical experience of the advanced countries, which have found that economic development has led to a decline in family size. For development to occur in the Third World, many things are necessary—among them more liberal trading policies by the richer nations, land reform, tax reform, better marketing structures, co-operative movements, vigorous literacy campaigns, and many other changes often amounting to a complete social revolution. In the meantime, to attack the poor countries' birth rate is to attack the symptom and not the cause—which is as sensible as trying to cure someone of sleeping sickness by buying him an alarm clock.

Land Reform

There is a real danger that population control will be seen in Western minds as an alternative to urgent social reforms. Take the desperate need for land reform in many poor nations. In Latin America less than five per cent of the people own 95 per cent of the arable land; 12 per cent of the rural families of India own over half the cultivated land; and similar iniquitous systems of land ownership are prevalent in many Third World countries. This means that many millions of peasants are either completely landless or are tenant-farmers working for landlords, and so are wide open to exploitation.

Yet the Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal in his book *The Challenge of World Poverty* (1970) comments as follows on the World Bank, the United States and other rich countries: ". . . while in regard to agricultural policy their policy has more and more become a support for a reactionary policy in underdeveloped countries, shrinking away from the land reform problem, in regard to population policy they have in recent years come out in favour of radical reform." This is perilously close to the attitude that, when unjust social structures make it impossible for everyone to lead a decent life, the solution is not to reform the social structures but to reduce the number of people.

Exodus From the Land

One notable result of rural injustice is an exodus of people from the land to swell the ranks of the urban unemployed. The flow of 5,000 people a week into Rio de Janeiro is not untypical. The result is the mushrooming around the Third World's big cities of shanty towns where "the visitor looks down the endless length of rows of huts, sees the holes, the mud, the rubbish in the alley-ways, skinny chickens picking in the dirt, multitudes of nearly naked children, hair matted, eyes dull, spindly legs, and, above them, pathetic lines of rags and torn garments strung up to dry between the stunted trees." (Barbara Ward). On present trends the urban population of the developing countries will more than double between 1960 and 1980.

Underpopulation

Yet many rural areas, notably in Africa and Latin America, are underpopulated. Leonard Joy of the Institute of Development Studies, writing about a strategy for agricultural development, observes that "second to water, labour, too, is likely to be scarce . . . . The farmer is hard pressed at planting time. He is short of labour rather than land." (*Development in a Divided World.*) With too small a population, it is impossible for a community to drive away wild animals and cut the scrub in order to practise reasonably productive forms of agriculture. Still less can such communities build the roads, water supplies, schools, etc., on which developed societies depend.

A number of countries undoubtedly need a higher overall population for their balanced development. In tropical Africa there are nine countries with a density of less than ten per square mile and twenty-seven countries with less than fifty per square mile. Twenty-five African countries have less than five million inhabitants. No country in tropical South America has an average population density of over fifty per square mile, and the same holds good for temperate South America. In a major U.N. General Assembly debate last year, the delegates of many countries, notably Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Central African Republic, Iraq, Libya, Madagascar, Peru, Senegal, Sudan and Syria, considered themselves underpopulated.

So in many poor countries, as in the United Kingdom, the problem is not one of overpopulation but of an imbalance of population, with urban crowding existing side by side with rural depopulation.

That so many simplistic ideas about the "population problem" abound is in no way surprising: mental laziness often induces people to seek simple panacea solutions (such as "population control") to complex socio-economic problems. Nevertheless, if we are to mount a constructive attack on the social evils so often mistakenly ascribed to overpopulation, it is essential to keep the issue clearly in perspective. The worst aspect of the current wave of "population explosion" hysteria is its unfortunate effect of distracting attention away from the real roots of today's problems, thereby making their solution doubly difficult.