

Why are Population and Development Issues not Given Priority?

*The notion that population is no longer an issue
in the Asian and Pacific region ignores key points.*

By Gavin W. Jones*

From the time of Adam Smith onward, economists have recognized important linkages between population trends and economic development. Yet, the attention given to these linkages in international conferences and other venues where policy is debated has varied enormously over time, and also according to the issues being discussed: women, environment, poverty and sustainable development, for example. Looking back over recent decades, it is hard to escape two conclusions: (a) politics sometimes plays a more important role than dispassionate academic discourse at such meetings, and this greatly influences the attention given to population matters; and (b) fads are almost as ubiquitous in international thinking on development issues as they are in matters of dress, eating habits and youth culture.

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The role of politics in influencing debate on population is nowhere better seen than at the series of United Nations-sponsored population conferences held at Bucharest (1974), Mexico City (1984) and Cairo (1994). Each of these conferences was diverted from its original concerns and objectives by unexpected political developments. (I use the term “political” here to cover both broader international politics and narrower conference politics). At Bucharest, there was an ideological confrontation over the structure of the international economic order, which resulted in such curious outcomes as the near-denial by China and India, both of which had strong domestic programmes to control population growth, that such programmes were needed. The point was that the United States of America was seen as the key proponent of population programmes and the key opponent of a new international economic order, and most developing countries were loath to be seen as lining up on its side. Ten years later came the Mexico City conference, which witnessed an about-face in the American position, unexpected even by many officials in the United States Government having population responsibilities. The United States administration appointed a delegation led by a leading “right to life” spokesman, which – to the bemusement of those who had followed the strong championing by the United States of the need for fertility reduction through government-sponsored family planning programmes at the Bucharest conference – promoted a line that the relationship between population growth and economic development is not necessarily a negative one and that what is needed is economic reform consistent with a market economy.

Finally, at Cairo, the remarkable networking skills of feminist groups managed to upstage the orchestrated efforts of the United Nations, through prior regional population conferences and expert group meetings, and to deliver an outcome that differed widely from original expectations. The reproductive health and reproductive rights emphasis was viewed with considerable suspicion by many of the delegations – including those from Asia – that finally agreed to the text of the document.

These unexpected political intrusions into three conferences where a consensus document was supposed to emerge from a carefully planned series of preparatory meetings and conferences served to reduce attention at the respective conferences to many important items that deserved more debate. On the other hand, they did not prevent (and in some respects contributed to) the emergence of valuable consensus documents, which helped to guide population policy and programmes over the decade that followed each of them. Indeed, the degree to which Asian countries had come on side in supporting the Cairo approach to population issues was clearly demonstrated at the Fifth Asian and Pacific

Population Conference in Bangkok in 2002, when vigorous tactics adopted by one delegation – in what looked like an effort to overturn the Cairo consensus – failed to shake the unity of the diverse group of Asian and Pacific delegations.

Turning to fads, we have witnessed a succession of emphases in the development field that have demanded priority attention from any agency wanting to be taken seriously. Environment, sustainable development, gender equity, refugees, human trafficking, HIV/AIDS, poverty reduction – all of them enormously important in their own right, but somehow turning into “the issue of the moment” in the hands of the restless seekers of relevance in the hallways of international conferences and the meeting rooms of international agencies and foundations.

In the realm of language, fads also abound, with development reports increasingly colonized by pro-active stakeholders utilizing their social capital. There is a danger of the much-publicized “demographic bonus” turning into another fad. Instead of being seen as another way of expressing one of the important truths propounded long ago by Ansley Coale and Edgar Hoover in their work entitled *Population Growth and Economic Development in Low-income Countries*, it is sometimes portrayed as a stunning new argument to show that reduced fertility has developmental benefits.

For recent evidence of myopia about population in the development debate, we might note that population was effectively ignored at the World Summit on Sustainable Development, held at Johannesburg in 2002, despite evidence of important linkages between population and environmental issues. Just at the time that in countries such as Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines devastating flooding and landslides have been blamed on massive deforestation, we need a nuanced discussion of the causes – illegal logging, expansion of plantations, but also population pressures on vegetation cover through expansion of smallholder settlements and changing patterns of shifting cultivation. The sustainability of the world’s megacities also needs careful study. Conclusions reached by some analysts – that the rapid growth of these megacities has ended – are the result of their ignoring the growth taking place outside official metropolitan boundaries.

Strangely enough, this neglect of the population factor in sustainable development comes at a time when the consensus on the negative impacts of high fertility are widely (and renewedly) recognized among academic economists, and new studies of population “waves” (the age structural effects of discontinuities in the underlying demographic variables) on development are yielding some interesting findings. What can explain this neglect of population issues in the broader development community?

Perhaps one problem is that much of what we might call the population establishment – the academic and policy community that operates on the premise that demography is reasonably central to understanding development issues and their solution – has had a rather narrow base of demographic training or administration of population programmes without much exposure to debates on the nature of development, or administration of broader development programmes. This group finds it hard to carry much weight in the general development community, now that the specter of the population explosion that drove so much policy formulation in the 1960s and 1970s has receded. The United Nations projections show a comforting leveling off of world population size by the middle of this century, so for many in the international development community and the foundations, the time has come to move on from population to more serious issues. The fact that global population size could well grow by another 40 to 50 per cent before levelling off no longer seems to cause much concern, now that the trajectory of growth is clearly a decelerating one.

The notion that population is no longer an issue in the Asian and Pacific region ignores two key points: (a) population is an important factor in development, not only when it is growing seemingly out of control, but also when it is stabilizing and (as is increasingly happening in parts of Asia) promising to implode because of very low fertility; and (b) there is an extremely wide range in population circumstances throughout Asia. Planners in Japan, the Republic of Korea and Singapore are now preoccupied with how to deal with declining labour forces and rapidly ageing populations. In countries such as these, the issues facing Pakistan and the Philippines may seem “old hat”. However, this does not negate the continuing and high degree of relevance of the issues for Pakistan, where fertility is now falling from high to moderate levels, and the Philippines, where fertility remains at moderate levels and is declining only very slowly. These trends portend further massive increases in population, which these two countries appear ill-equipped to deal with. Their populations could well double before population growth ceases. The internal forces that have blocked effective family planning efforts in these two countries can always argue that it is not rapid population growth but rather weak government, corruption and social injustices that are preventing economic and social development. The counter argument is that rapid population growth exacerbates problems of weak government, corruption and social injustice.

It is the interplay of the three determinants of overall population trends – fertility, mortality and migration – that is so crucial in affecting not only economic and social development but also matters such as social cohesion. The migration

factor is uppermost in the minds of politicians in Europe, not to mention Japan, the Republic of Korea and Singapore etc., as they contemplate the population futures facing them.

To summarize, there seem to be three reasons why population issues have fallen from the priority list of concerns:

(a) Political reasons: United Nations agencies, the World Bank, non-governmental organizations, foundations and donors want to be seen to be at the “cutting edge” and not left to deal with yesterday’s issues.

(b) The perceived recession of “the” population issue. In some ways, the population establishment has only itself to blame for “overselling” the population crisis and failing to build a broader consensus on the need for good training, good institutions and good policies that would integrate population factors into all aspects of development planning.

(c) Perhaps those of us who have both the conviction that population dynamics matter in development and the training to demonstrate that this is so are not engaging in enough dialogue with those who are preoccupied with particular concerns – globalization, poverty, injustice and environmental issues.