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STATE OF THE WORLD

Transforming Cultures

From Consumerism to Sustainability

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2010

STATE OF THE WORLD

Transforming Cultures

From Consumerism to Sustainability

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“If we continue to think of ourselves mostly as consumers, it’s going to be very hard to bring our environmental troubles under control. But it’s also going to be very hard to live the rounded and joyful lives that could be ours. This is a subversive volume in all the best ways!”

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extreme close-up

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Environmentally Sustainable Childbearing

Robert Engelman

Although the idea seems pessimistic and is little discussed, it is possible that world population—at 6.8 billion people today and growing by 216,000 a day—has already surpassed sustainable levels, even if everyone on Earth achieved merely modest European rather than lavish North American consumption levels.¹

Estimates of what could be an environmentally “optimal” population are speculative and contentious. It could even be risky to venture a number, since some people might take it as a target worth aiming at by any means necessary, voluntary or not. Nonetheless, it is clear that with its current range of behavior patterns, humanity is hazardously raising the heat-trapping capacity of the atmosphere, decimating the planet’s biological diversity, and risking future food scarcity by depleting freshwater supplies and degrading soils.

What if today’s widely varying per capita consumption rates worldwide met in some narrow and modest range—but climate change and environmental deterioration continued anyway? Might it then be time, or is it time already, to evolve cultures that actively promote an average number of children born to each woman so low that world population

shrinks in the near future? And if so, how could that be accomplished in ethical and acceptable ways?

The influence of modern culture on childbearing varies widely. The range of modern human fertility suggests this diversity, with women in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in the Republic of Korea having barely more than one child each on average while women in Afghanistan and Uganda average more than six. Women around the world also vary greatly, however, in their access to family planning, which can help them decide whether any given sex act should or should not be open to conception and pregnancy.²

So it is not clear which is the larger determinant of fertility: culture and women’s (and men’s) response to its influence or simply the accumulation of chance pregnancies that result from sexual activity not effectively protected against the risk of pregnancy. Yet with the notable exception of China, where shortages of natural resources are sometimes invoked to justify the government’s one-child policy, it would be hard to identify a significant culture in which very small families are promoted to assure environmental sustainability.

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Paradoxically, according to United Nations surveys, many developing-country governments believe population growth is too rapid in their countries. And out of 41 National Adaptation Programmes of Action submitted by developing countries to the secretariat of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in recent years, 37 mentioned population density or pressure as hindering the success of adaptation to the impacts of climate change. Outside of China, Viet Nam, and some individual states in India, however, such governmental concerns do not translate into actual pressure on individuals to limit their procreation.³

For the people who work most closely with population and reproduction—especially health care providers who help women and their partners prevent pregnancy or enjoy it in good health when they want a child—this is as it should be. In fact, if there is any dominant global cultural paradigm around childbearing, it centers on reproductive health and rights—a social recognition that it is women and their partners, and no one else, who should choose when to bear a child and should do so in good health.

The closest thing to consensus on the perpetually divisive topic of human population is a principle first put in writing at a U.N. conference on human rights in Tehran in 1968 that “parents have a basic human right to determine freely and responsibly the number and spacing of their children.” The adverb “responsibly” has sparked some debate, though not much in recent years. It could, nonetheless, become the basis for discussion of what the word might mean in a world where environmental sustainability is challenged by human activities.⁴

Twenty-six years after the Tehran conference, in 1994, another U.N. gathering expanded on reproductive rights when representatives of almost all the world’s nations agreed that encouraging healthy and effective reproductive decisionmaking by women and their partners was the sole legitimate basis for governments to try to influence fertility levels and family size within their borders.⁵



USAID

Afghan girls get a meal along with their education.

Abuses of reproductive rights have been more the exception than the rule in six decades or so of global family planning experience. But those abuses—from incentive payments for sterilization to forced abortion documented in India and China and a handful of other countries—have soured policymakers and health care providers on population policies, programs, or media messages aimed at convincing women and couples to have fewer children than they would otherwise choose to have. Absent momentous changes in culture and politics around the world, it is difficult to imagine substantial professional or public support evolving for aggressive promotion of fam-

ilies of just one child or at most two children. The scope for new cultural efforts aimed at convincing couples to forego a wanted second, third, or fourth child for the sake of the environment seems small.⁶



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A young family visits a mobile health clinic offering family planning services and basic health care to members of marginalized rural communities in the Dominican Republic.

Does this mean that no conceivable cultural transformation could help shrink the world's population through lower birth rates? Not at all. (And, given the misunderstanding that accompanies this topic, it's worth stating the obvious: population shrinkage based on higher death rates is not something to hope for.) There is much in today's culture that promotes pregnancies that individual women do not seek or want, and these cultural aspects are an easy immediate target for elimination or reversal. Similarly, there is scope for cultural change that might lead couples to change their views about family size, though this

route to lower fertility requires vigilance so that the ultimate childbearing choice remains with women and their partners, not with other family members, the government, or the broader society.

Surprisingly, it is likely that global fertility levels would fall low enough to shrink world population if unintended pregnancies could be eliminated, although the reversal of growth would take some time to occur. By the best available estimate, nearly two out of five pregnancies worldwide are not planned or sought by the women who become pregnant. The figures are generally somewhat higher in low-fertility industrial countries than in high-fertility developing ones.⁷

Current average human fertility (2.5 children per woman) is only slightly above the fertility that would yield a stable human population size. (This is currently just above 2.3 children; stubbornly high death rates among the young in many developing countries push the global average above the usually cited figure of 2.1.) Moreover, all countries that offer women and their partners a range of choices of contraception, backed up by access to safe abortion, have fertility rates low enough to end or reverse population growth in the absence of net immigration. A world of fully intentional childbearing might begin to lose population within two or three decades, perhaps sooner.⁸

Moreover, demographic research over several decades makes clear a strong correlation between levels of education and fertility. The number of children women have in fact falls roughly in proportion to their advancement through school. According to calculations by demographers at the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis, women with no schooling worldwide have on average 4.5 children each. Those with some primary school average 3 children, while those who complete at least one year of secondary school average 1.9 children. And after just one or two years of college, fertility drops to 1.7 children per

woman—a rate well below population-maintaining “replacement” fertility.⁹

Given the force with which access to contraception and education for girls reduces fertility, it seems obvious that any cultural constraints on these should be given first priority in any move for reform. Unfortunately, such constraints are deeply rooted in human unease with both sexuality and the idea of gender equality. Cultural transformation must tackle these and advance the principle that all women should have control over their own bodies and fertility and that all should have opportunities equal to those of men—through education, media messages, and the work of policymakers at all levels. Limitations on access to contraception, such as requirements for parental permission or physician prescriptions for routinely safe options, are open to public pressure for legislative or regulatory change.

The use of sex and women’s bodies for advertising or easy laughs in television situation comedies fortifies the lower status of women and makes it even more likely that unintended pregnancies will boost population growth rates—not to mention complicate the lives and undermine the aspirations of young people. One study found that the level of exposure to sexual content on television strongly predicted subsequent teen pregnancy, with the 10 percent of teenagers most exposed to television sex more than twice as likely to become pregnant within three years of the exposure as the 10 percent with the lowest exposure.¹⁰

Such findings illustrate the power of culture—and of media culture in particular—to boost fertility or at least accelerate sexual initiation and subsequent childbearing. Combating such cultural influences thus can play an important role in lowering fertility and contributing to slower population growth. Moreover, there is evidence that media such as television and radio may contribute to lower fertility just as easily as to higher.¹¹

Where soap operas designed to model con-

traceptive use and small family norms are introduced, perceptions on ideal family sizes can fall. For example, after the radio soap opera *Apwe Plezi* (derived from a Creole saying, “after the pleasure comes the pain”) was aired in St. Lucia, of the 35 percent of the surveyed population who had heard it, listeners were more likely to trust family planning workers, view extramarital sex as less acceptable, and favor families that averaged 2.5 children as opposed to 2.9 children for those who had not heard the show. While of course other factors also contributed to this shifting norm—such as parallel increases in access to family planning resources—it is clear that the media can play an important role in shaping family size norms.¹²

Another area ripe for cultural transformation is the dominant political view that any jurisdiction in which population stops growing is headed, in the words of a recent *Washington Post* news story, for “slow-motion demographic disaster.” A national election in late 2008 in Japan, for example, seemed to revolve in large part on a proposed payment of \$276 per month to parents for each child younger than high school age. In Russia, politicians have urged citizens to skip work to have sex and have offered prizes—from refrigerators to a Jeep—to women who have a baby on Russia Day, June 12th. Both countries have declining populations.¹³

There is some evidence that incentives like these can modestly boost a country’s fertility, with a greater effect among women with lower incomes. Tax benefits targeted at parents on a per child basis, such as those in the United States, may have a similar impact—and, in fact, U.S. fertility has risen modestly in recent years, as has that in other wealthy countries. (In the case of the United States, fertility has recently risen to roughly the replacement value, which for that country is 2.1 children per woman.)¹⁴

Politicians justifiably worry that extremely low birth rates will ultimately make it more

challenging to support aging populations. But these and similar risks are manageable social challenges that pale in comparison to those the world faces in addressing human-caused climate change, the depletion of renewable freshwater supplies, and the loss of the planet's biological diversity. Anyone who takes these environmental problems seriously has good reason to oppose the efforts of politicians, economists, and the media to promote higher birth rates—as well as those of religious leaders, members of extended families, and others who urge pregnancy on women who have not chosen it for themselves.

Finally, there is the constructive role that education and open discussion about the changing environment and the relation of population to its sustainability can play in shaping reproductive decisionmaking. Studying a lobster-fishing village in Quintana Roo, Mexico, geographer David Carr of the University of California, Santa Barbara, found that cultural attitudes about childbearing had changed as the lobster resource declined. The use of contraception was universal, and the community's birth rates were comparable to those of such low-fertility countries as Italy, Estonia, and Russia. The villagers Carr interviewed explicitly tied their modest family size intentions, so different from those of their parents and grandparents, to the importance of preserving the fishing resource for their children.¹⁵

Perhaps significantly, many villagers also

mentioned the influence on their own reproductive ambitions of television soap operas depicting small North American families. While satellite television may not be considered by many as a positive agent of cultural transformation, in this case it may play a constructive role by spreading an idea—a small family norm—that contributes to environmental sustainability more powerfully than the messages about wealth and consumption might undermine it.

The sharp fall of fertility around the world in recent decades is proof that culturally influenced reproductive behaviors can change surprisingly fast. A family with roughly two children is already a cultural ideal in most industrial countries, albeit no doubt mostly for reasons unrelated to environmental sustainability. If nations soon reach a point where greenhouse gas emissions are actually capped and food and energy prices are high due to a rising mismatch of supply and demand, there is no telling how cultural norms about childbearing and family size might evolve. It is nonetheless hard to imagine that environmentally concerned citizens seeking curbs in human population growth will ever gain much public support for limiting reproductive rights. But the potential for cultural change that would slow and eventually reverse population growth—supporting or at least not undermining individual reproductive choice—is significant and worth pursuing.

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