ICPD and its aftermath: throwing out the baby?

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Was “the baby thrown out with the bathwater” at the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo in 1994? That is to say, was something vital lost in the process of disposing of something unwanted?

The “bathwater” in this instance was the element of coercion in the family planning programmes of some countries. Let there be no misunderstanding about the view taken in this response: the “bathwater” of coercion needed to go. State coercion in matters of family formation is not only morally repugnant but is also counter-productive.

Here, the “baby” is the recognition of the public interest in accelerating the transition to replacement fertility levels. It is perhaps necessary to distinguish between the language of the conference report, which rather carefully protects the “baby”, and the language used in the subsequent flurry of triumphalism and interpretation. By some accounts the great achievement of the conference was the ending of population control and the proscription of demographic targets. In their place was erected the banner of reproductive health and the principle of individual choice.

The opponents of population control should consider the following questions. “Is it the case that populations growing out of control are the alternative to population control? Must society accept the cumulative consequences of millions of individual decisions, each made on a purely private assessment of net benefits, without seeking to influence the collective outcome?” Such a position would be consistent with one of three logical premises.

- There are no consequences for the wider society flowing from each individual’s decisions on fertility.
- There are no negative consequences, or only trivial ones, such that the overall balance is positive.
- Whatever the consequences, individual choice is the supreme value of society, overriding all others.

The first of these premises seems to be easily ruled out on purely factual grounds. In a world of finite resources the welfare of each individual is not independent of the number of claimants on them.

The second premise hinges on a long debate which in the last half-century has revolved around the notion that, in at least some circumstances, society has an economic interest in minimizing either future population growth, as proposed in a body of neo-Malthusian works (1, 2), or the rate at which growth occurs, as put forward in the seminal work of Coale & Hoover (3). While there have been many expressions of opposing views, the most influential in the main body of neoclassical debate have been those of Simon (4–6). Although Simon did not dispute the negative effects of population growth in the short term, he argued that, in a period of 120 to 180 years, positive population growth produced considerably better economic performance than a stationary population.

However, a recent review of Simon’s work by Ahlburg (7) quotes studies (8, 9) questioning his models and conclusions, and reaches the cautious judgement that “slowing of rapid population growth is likely to be advantageous for economic development, health, food availability, housing, poverty, the environment, and possibly education, especially in poor agrarian societies facing pressure on land and resources”. Other recent work has emphasized the positive contribution to economic development made by the “demographic gift”, i.e. the reduction in the youth dependency burden consequent on fertility reduction, in relation to the East Asian economic miracle (10, 11). Taken together, these findings effectively dismantle the second premise.

The third premise is normative in content, and as such is inaccessible to empirical verification or refutation. However, the extension of the principle to all areas of human conduct would lead to a state of anarchy.

The paradigm shift accomplished at the Cairo conference has now become more apparent. Previously, there was concern about population size relative to resources, and about the impact of population growth on the tempo and type of economic development, in a debate that involved economists and development planners. In the post-Cairo era the rhetoric is overwhelmingly concerned with human rights, reproductive health and individual choice, and the predominant voices belong to health professionals and human rights activists. Nowhere is this paradigm shift more apparent than in the activities of the United Nations system itself. In the process of preparation for the ICPD+5 Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) has organized three round table meetings on:

- adolescent reproductive health;
- reproductive rights and implementation of reproductive health programmes, women’s empowerment, male involvement and human rights;
- partnership with civil society to implement the ICPD Programme of Action.

Furthermore, UNFPA has organized four technical meetings on:

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Ref. No. 0035
international migration and development;
- population and ageing;
- reproductive health services in crisis situations;
- population change and economic development.

The report of the ICPD+5 Forum, held at The Hague in February 1999, shows the same emphasis. The substantive sections focus on: creating an enabling environment for the ICPD Programme of Action; enhancing gender equality, equity and the empowerment of women; promoting reproductive health; strengthening partnerships; and mobilizing resources.

The fact that a paradigm shift occurred is widely acknowledged. The following questions remain. Why was the “baby” of societal concern for demographic outcomes so crudely abandoned? And why was the loss so little resisted? The answer to the first question appears to lie in the success of a coalition of radical feminists, political conservatives, and reproductive health enthusiasts, presenting itself as occupying a middle ground between religious fundamentalists and totalitarian social planners (12). The second question is harder to answer. However, it may be plausibly argued that those with traditional demographic concerns assumed that couples would spontaneously opt for lower fertility if reproductive choice were to be enlarged in the way envisaged by the Programme of Action. On this basis there was little to be gained by disputing its language.

What are the practical consequences of the paradigm shift? On the positive side it has ushered in a new agenda for societal improvement. Even in the absence of any influence on fertility there would be a broad welcome for the widening of the range and availability of reproductive health services, the empowerment of women, and improved access to education, employment and legal protection, as contributions to a more civilized society. However, the new agenda may have switched off the interest of mainstream development economists and planners. It may be no coincidence that donor support for the Programme of Action is falling well below expectations.

In the aftermath, some activists have clearly wished to push the denial of societal interest further than occurred at the Cairo conference. The expression of demographic targets seems to be the crunch point. The report of the conference is inconsistent. In chapter II, principle 5 states: “Population-related goals are integral parts of cultural, economic and social development, the principal aim of which is to improve the quality of life of all people”. On the other hand, in chapter VII, section 12 adds a restriction: “Demographic goals, while legitimately the subject of government development strategies, should not be imposed on family planning providers in the form of targets or quotas for the recruitment of clients”. This is the concluding sentence of a section affirming the principle of free choice in the use of planning services, prescribing coercion, and discussing the role of state incentives and disincentives. It is thus reasonable to suppose that the opposition to demographic targets is perceived as a buttress to the condemnation of coercion.

If it is accepted that there is a legitimate societal interest in demographic outcomes, it is perfectly possible to proceed to a discussion of the limits of social or state action. Coercion is clearly not acceptable to the great majority of people. The conference report discouraged the use of material incentives. It endorsed the widest possible provision of objective information. It is highly questionable whether outlawing coercive action necessitated the denial of a collective interest in demographic outcomes, as reflected in the establishment of national demographic targets.

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**References**