

The Ethics of Controlling Population Growth in the Developing World

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Background

The World Resources Institute predicts that the world's population will increase by 34% by the year 2050, augmenting the earth's population by 2.3 billion humans (Choppin, 2009). A stunning 90% of this increase will occur in the developing world (Eager, 1973). This staggering rate of growth was predicted as early as 1798 when Thomas Robert Malthus (1888) printed his *Essay on the Principle of Population*, predicting that populations would continue to grow until they were limited by famine and disease. However, Malthus was unaware of the groundbreaking technological breakthroughs of this century, which have only contributed to the world's population growth. Viral vaccines and medical devices have suspended the Malthusian equilibrium, where population growth is exactly countered by famine and disease. However, what we must ask ourselves is not *when* we will reach Malthusian equilibrium, but *whether* we should allow ourselves to reach that point. More specifically, and what I address in this essay, is whether it is morally acceptable for developed nations to invest in population control mechanisms in developing countries in order to limit their population expansion.

Key Distinctions and Assumptions

According to the description of population growth derived from the Demographic Transition Theory in Eager's (1973) book *Global Population Policy*, there are three fundamental stages in the development of a nation. This model provides a simplified lens through which I will discuss population growth. Stage one comprises high death and fertility rates, a common occurrence in most developing nations. Stage two comprises a decrease in death rates because of increased medical treatment, but continually high fertility rates. Stage two thus entails a high population growth. The third stage usually arrives after a long, yet unspecified period of time and consists of a decrease in fertility rates that accompanies industrialization. Encompassed within this three-stage model is a simple recognition that there are three fundamental means of changing population size as noted by Bayles (1976): births, deaths and migrations. When considering world populations, one can assume migration is zero,

pending extraterrestrials arriving on our planet, and thus the two key metrics I will consider are birth rates (fertility rates) and death rates.

In his groundbreaking essay *The Tragedy of the Commons*, Garrett Hardin (1968) highlights one useful distinction used in population control debates. Hardin distinguishes between directly coercive population control methods and passive methods. Coercive methods are defined as methods that force the agent to decrease the number of children. Examples include China's one-child policy. Passive methods are defined as methods that allow the agent to choose the number of offspring, but still limit population growth. Examples include family planning, contraceptives, and voluntary abortions. Specifically, Hardin suggests that if you do not force people to limit their number of offspring, there will always be a percentage of the population that does not acquiesce. Over time the population will continue to grow as those who do not acquiesce to the limitations will produce the most offspring, who in turn will be less likely to limit their own number of offspring (Bayles, 1976).

Methods of coercively increasing death rates to limit population growth were implemented by the ancient Greeks, who practiced infanticide, the killing of unwanted children (Bayles, 1976). Eskimos partook in similar methods by practicing euthanasia on the elderly, who were no longer able to contribute to society (Bayles, 1976). However, most current debates on population control do not discuss increasing death rates, but instead focus on methods of curbing fertility rates. By looking at Hardin's passive/coercive distinction alongside the discussion of reducing fertility rates, we can distinguish four clear standpoints on population control. The first two standpoints maintain that it is morally acceptable for a developed country to (a) coercively and (b) passively limit fertility rates in developing nations. The last two standpoints argue that it is not morally acceptable for a developed country to (a) coercively or (b) passively limit fertility rates in developing nations. The standpoint against passively limiting population control takes the no-to-all population control mechanisms position. In this essay I will highlight the arguments for each of the four standpoints and conclude with my own personal analysis.

In this essay, I continually refer to controlling population growth in developing nations as limiting basic human needs. In developing nations, a large number of offspring helps provide a family with basic staples like food and water. By forcing a nation to decrease its number of offspring, many of these needs may not be met within individual families.

Underlying this essay is one core assumption: that it is even possible for societies to control population growth levels. This assumption is based on historical campaigns to combat population growth. For example, Neurath (1994) highlights how China's "Two children per family is enough [campaign]...brought the birth rate down from 34 per 1,000 in 1970 to 18 in 1979—the same numerical result...that had been seen twenty-five years before in Japan" (p. 189).

Throughout the essay I refer to various liberty-limiting principles, which are principles used in ethics debates to justify party A limiting the freedom of party B. British philosopher John Stuart Mill put forth the first liberty-limiting principle, the Harm Principle, in his 1859 work *On Liberty*; five other principles have become generally recognized since. In this essay I use these principles to debate whether it is morally acceptable to limit another's liberty to choose his or her number of offspring. The principles themselves are described in the essay body.

For Foreign Investment in Population Control Mechanisms
 Before arguing for specific population limitation methods, one must first establish that it is morally acceptable for developed countries to invest in population control mechanisms in developing countries, regardless of what mechanisms are chosen. Just as war is at times needed to protect certain protectable interests of a country (examples include World War II), population control is needed in much the same way. The threat of population growth to national security in the United States was first noted during Nixon's term. In his 1973 book, Eager reprints The Executive Summary of the National Security Study Memorandum 200:

We [the United States government] cannot wait for overall modernization and development to produce lower fertility rates naturally since it will take many decades in most developing countries, during which time rapid population growth will tend to slow development and widen even more the gap between rich and poor. (p. 73)

This memorandum defines development and lessening the gap between rich and poor as key interests of the United States. However, it is valid to assume that the vast majority of the citizens in developing nations have an interest in achieving development goals and in lessening the gap between rich and poor. It is also valid to assume that slowing population growth would help resolve these issues, because fewer humans means less competition for resources like money, water, and food. From these assumptions, the key issue is not *whether* we should attempt to lower population sizes, but *how* to maximize achieving these interests for all while infringing the least upon other protectable interests. The issue thus boils down to who should bear the burden, both in limiting population growth and in providing resources to do so. The least coercive method (also the least burdensome method) is for the richest countries to provide the resources to limit population growth in the fastest-growing areas. Fewer protectable interests are put at risk by concentrating population control on a small, high fertility rate area; on an absolute scale, fewer agents are involved than would be if a global strategy were to be implemented. This model should therefore be the most morally acceptable means of achieving the population limitation goal.

For Coercive Population Control Mechanisms.

The debate surrounding coercive population control mechanisms, defined earlier as mechanisms that force an agent to limit the number of offspring, depends heavily on the time scales for which the mechanisms would be

implemented. For example, a country could force abortions on those who already have one child for an unlimited amount of time, or could specify a certain time into the future for which these laws would be in effect. The coercive methods argued for here are meant to be implemented on short time scales in order to bring nations from step two to step three of the demographic transition theory (to go from low death rates and high fertility rates to low death and low fertility rates). If we follow Hardin's logic in *The Tragedy of the Commons*, we conclude that on these short time scales (the amount of time may vary and needs clarification in each instance), coercive population control mechanisms are the least coercive methods, because passive methods are simply ineffective in the long run. A real-world example of Hardin's theory can be seen in China, where birth rates were out of control during a birth control campaign in the 1950s, but dropped from an annual growth rate of 2% to 1.3% from 1970 to 1979 with the initiation of the one-child rule (Neurath, 1994, p. 189). Because passive methods are extremely inefficient, developed countries will need to overspend on ineffective methods and developing countries will not receive the benefits of lower population growth rates. Harm is actually done by implementing passive mechanisms; developed countries lose money that cannot then be spent on further aid, and developing countries must allow foreign intervention with limited hope for a benefit.

In order to justify coercively limiting fertility rates in developing countries on short time scales, I turn to two generally accepted liberty-limiting principles: Extreme Paternalism (the freedom of a person may be justifiably restricted in order to compel that person to benefit himself or herself) and the Social Welfare Principle (the freedom of a person may be justifiably restricted in order to benefit society as a whole) (McGinn, 2010). I invoke the Extreme Paternalism Principle here, because there are substantial benefits for the individual whose freedom to procreate is being limited (e.g., increased time to devote to each child, fewer children dying at young ages). I also invoke the Social Welfare Principle here because there are non-trivial benefits for society as a whole (e.g., lower infant mortality rates, reduced stress on resource and land use). Furthermore, since the limitation of one's liberty would occur over a short period of time, the liberties limited would not trump the benefits mentioned.

For Passive Population Control Mechanisms.

Passive population control mechanisms can provide the benefits of reduced population growth in the least coercive manner. Coercive population control mechanisms rely on the assumption that developing nations left to their own conscience will not limit their number of offspring. This assumption does hold true when no foreign aid is provided, because limiting population growth means limiting basic human needs. In this case I assert that basic human needs are being limited, because a large number of offspring is necessary in developing nations to aid families in collecting food and water as well as other tasks necessary to keep the

family alive. However, basic human needs are not limited when outside aid is provided. Foreign aid in this case would replace the benefits that a higher number of offspring would provide (food, water, and other staples). In this scenario, where the decision to produce fewer offspring does not impinge upon one's basic human needs, individuals will be more inclined to voluntarily limit fertility rates. Developed countries should therefore not only be allowed, but should also be incentivized, to provide a combination of foreign aid and passive population control mechanisms to developing countries. It is necessary, however, to recognize that foreign aid indirectly pressures individuals to limit their number of offspring, because they know the foreign aid will only exist if they produce fewer children. However, this pressure can be justified through the principles of Extreme Paternalism and Social Welfare described earlier, since the benefits to the individual and society (economic growth, more time to devote to children, higher education for children that no longer need to solely provide physical labor, etc.) far outweigh the slight pressure on one's liberty to decide his or her number of offspring.

Passive population control mechanisms also provide a much more even distribution of the burden in reducing population growth among all parties involved. Although the developed countries investing in certain mechanisms would most likely be unwilling to implement coercive population control mechanisms in their own countries, passive population control mechanisms—such as contraceptives, freely available abortions, and family planning through agencies like Planned Parenthood—are already in common use in most developed countries. Developed countries are therefore currently taking on the highest burden of population control, since most developing countries implement minimal amounts of passive or coercive population control mechanisms. However, population growth is a global problem, influencing land use and resources globally, and thus the burden should be shared equally. By allowing developed countries to invest in passive population control mechanisms that are already in use in the investing countries, the struggle to control population growth becomes more distributively just.

Against Population Control Mechanisms

Against Coercive Population Control Mechanisms.

Coercive measures can be shown to be distributively unjust through Rawl's Difference Principle which argues that for any form of justice to be just, the worst off must benefit the most (McGinn, 2010). Because coercive methods give an uneven distribution of the burden to developing countries (the worst off) and because developed countries (the best off) benefit the most, coercive methods are at their root unjust. To illustrate this point I will walk through two hypothetical scenarios. First, if developed countries invest in controlling population growth in developing countries, it is likely because population growth rates are the highest in those countries. Therefore, even if the investing country institutes coercive

population growth mechanisms in its own country, the total number of abortions or other units of population control will be much higher in developing nations than in the developed ones. This would give an uneven burden to developing countries. Second, it can be reasonably assumed that developing countries lack the technologies that replace human labor in the workforce (large factories, for example). Therefore, a large number of offspring is necessary to provide basic human needs through collecting food and building shelter. From this assumption, it follows that a limitation on population growth would actually be detrimental to developing nations while benefiting developed nations in terms of increased national security and growing international financial markets. On the basis of being distributively unjust, it is therefore morally unacceptable for developed nations to invest in coercive population control mechanisms in developing countries.

One must also note that since offspring in developing nations provide basic human needs for families and provide a large working class for the state, developed nations should be kept from investing in foreign population control mechanisms through two of the most core liberty limiting principles: the Private Harm Principle (the freedom of a person may be justifiably restricted if the person harms another individual) and the Public Harm Principle (the freedom of a person may be justifiably restricted if the person harms the public—the state, the federal government etc.). Both the citizens and the state in developing countries are harmed by coercive population control mechanisms; once family sizes are forcibly restricted, the entire survival structure of the family and the state breaks down.

Against Passive Population Control Mechanisms.

Any investment can lead a country down a slippery slope to a point at which the developing country uses the foreign investment in ways far beyond the initial goals of passive population control. Former Secretary of State Colin Powell aptly summed up this concern in his 2002 letter to Congress:

Regrettably, the People's Republic of China has in place a regime of severe penalties on women who have unapproved births. This regime plainly operates to coerce pregnant women to have abortions in order to avoid the penalties and therefore amounts to a 'program of coercive abortion.' Regardless of the modest size of [the United Nations Population Fund's] budget in China or any benefits its programs provide, UNFPA's support of, and involvement in, China's population-planning activities allows the Chinese government to implement more effectively its program of coercive abortion. (Watson, 2009)

Along with this real-life example of coercive abortions, one can imagine a number of other destructive results that could arise from population control mechanisms. A growth of sexism, which already exists in China where males are preferentially selected over females, and a growth of racism, whereby the nation receiving funding preferentially orders certain races to limit their number of offspring, are just two

examples of plausible harmful outcomes from foreign population control investment.

What are at stake here are human rights. Every human in the world has a “negative right” to *not* let the government decide how many offspring he or she has, a right that derives from the right to liberty. This negative right is of utmost importance, because without procreation, the human race would not continue. By infringing on this right, the agent is psychologically harming the affected individual by implying that he or she is nothing but a means of controlling the number of people on earth. Therefore, developed countries should be kept from investing in any form of population control mechanisms in developing countries through the Private Harm Principle described earlier.

Any population control mechanism degrades the value of human life and is therefore morally unacceptable. According to this argument, advocates of population control instrumentalize human beings as just another metric for dealing with problems like resource limitation and land use. By instrumentalizing human beings, developing countries infringe on each individual’s derivative moral right to an open future, which stems from a human right to liberty (Harris, 2003). An open future is defined here as a future that is not simply to some government’s end, e.g., population limitation. Just as slavery is condemned because it instrumentalizes the individual as a simple unit of labor, population control should be viewed in the same light, since human beings are kept from ever coming into existence in order to impact a variety of global issues, including resource scarcity. In order to defend using human lives to lessen global problems, a monumental burden is placed on developing countries to show that limiting human lives is the least coercive way of dealing with the global problem at hand.

However, in this debate, one must also weigh the rights of the living against the rights of the unborn. A debate outside the scope of this essay would consider whether people currently on the planet who lack needed resources as a result of population growth have more of a right to an open future unencumbered by resource limitation and land use than people who are not yet on the planet, and therefore do not yet have a stake in its resources. Another debate would weigh the benefits to society as a result of a smaller population against the restrictions placed individuals.

Personal Analysis

Passive population measures to date have, by most estimates, failed. Documented evidence shows that even in instances where passive measures correlated with a decline in population growth, the decline was almost always not due to the mechanism itself. For example, “the family planning program in Taiwan accounted for only 11 percent of the reduction in the crude birth rate between 1965 and 1975; in South Korea between 1 and 10 percent between 1968 and 1971; in Costa Rica between 4 and 13 percent” (Smith, 1987). What is needed is a strongly incentivized

program for curbing population growth using passive mechanisms. Incentives in this case must be used in both the positive and negative sense; those who use contraceptives or other measures are offered tax breaks, for example, while those who refuse to limit their number of offspring do not receive such benefits. What this system does is replace the government as an agency that must force individuals to limit their number of offspring with an economic pressure. The government simply guarantees that one's family will be compensated enough so that fewer children are not a detriment to the family. The exact metrics of population control (how many children is acceptable, whether the number should change between families, etc.) is another debate outside the scope of this essay.

The funds to compensate individuals who voluntarily limit their number of offspring should come from developed countries in order to make this system distributively just. According to the World Bank, "Only about 1 percent of official aid now goes for population assistance. A 50 percent increase in all population programs would take care of today's unmet needs (i.e., all requests for birth control assistance)" (Grant, 1987). This is not a substantial burden on developing countries, since currently no country spends more than 0.5% of its budget on population programs (Grant, 1987).

The primary logic behind this conclusion is that the recipients of this aid are still making fully voluntary decisions to use the mechanisms at hand. Therefore, each individual can still exercise procreative autonomy and can still secure the basic human needs that would have been provided by a large family. Even with the pressure to use mechanisms such as contraception, the individual will not use the mechanisms unless he or she sees a substantial benefit and does not have to give up any basic human needs (the goods that were provided by a higher number of offspring). Therefore, the individual's conscience is a stopgap measure to ensure that basic human needs are not being infringed upon. Furthermore, the system will not ultimately work until the government aptly compensates the citizens, so there will be a natural pull towards a point of agreement between the government and its citizens.

The system I propose is also distributively just. The individuals who are worst off (those in developing countries) receive a substantial benefit in the form of compensation, and the developing countries that benefit from a decreased population pay in accordance with this benefit.

Critics may claim that any population control mechanisms instrumentalize humans. I would argue that by not providing aid for passive population mechanisms, society is instrumentalizing entire families, since the parents must bring children into the world for the sole purpose of providing goods for the family. The parents and children are then each instrumentalized into roles: creators of a workforce and the workforce itself. By providing developing countries the means necessary to escape from these instrumentalized roles, developed nations are

ensuring that the individuals in the developing country exercise the right to an open future.

Aside from controlling population growth, a passive population control system would provide substantial additional benefits. A decrease in sexually transmitted diseases through the use of contraceptives and a reduction in domestic violence due to family planning and sexual education are just two examples of these benefits. I would therefore claim that incentivized passive population control mechanisms produce the greatest benefit at the least social cost and should thus be implemented.

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