

Population & Societies

Is a population policy really necessary?

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The questions of world population and the shaping of demographic trends will be on the agenda of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in June 2012 (Rio+20). Jacques Vallin contributes to the debate by analysing whether a population policy is really necessary today.

From the writings of Plato (4th century BCE) on the population of the ideal Greek city, to the famous precept of Jean Bodin (1576) "the only wealth is man", the desire to influence the size or composition of the population is an ancient one. But highlighting our ancestors' interest in demographic problems and their quest for solutions does not answer the question of whether a population policy is necessary today. As a policy involves assigning an objective to society and implementing measures to achieve this objective, there are at least two sides to the question: are the objectives justified? and are the measures taken both acceptable and effective?

Does a demographic ideal exist?

The myth of an optimal number

The existence of an optimal population size for a given territory has long been a subject of debate among economists, and now ecologists. Let's imagine the very first settlers in previously a uninhabited area. To begin with, they need to increase their numbers as rapidly as possible. As the population grows, it becomes more economically and socially structured, and productivity increases. As time goes by, the process will reverse,

however; productivity will fall and living conditions may deteriorate to the point where life expectancy decreases, unless other measures, such as migration or fertility reduction, are implemented to achieve zero population growth. Clearly, this scenario appears to justify a historical cycle of populationist policies, followed later by Malthusian ones.

But this scenario is questionable. Unless we go far back to the time when the first humans spread across the planet, the arrival of modern man in a virgin territory is, with a few rare exceptions (such as Réunion Island which was probably uninhabited until the seventeenth century), no more than an academic hypothesis. Over the last thousand years, the colonization of new territories has taken place at the expense of existing populations who used available resources differently and who, more importantly, were much less well-armed to defend their societies and their cultures. In this case, a populationist policy which almost exclusively favours new settlers is much less easy to justify. True, such a policy led to the development of the United States of America, the world's largest democracy, but was the genocide of the native-American populations a reasonable price to pay?

There are other circumstances in which populationism may be more readily defended. After the Black Death and the Hundred Years' War, for example, the kings of France offered certain freedoms and tax exemptions to migrants who were willing to resettle and start farming again in ravaged areas.

The objective of an optimal population size viewed in Malthusian terms, corresponding in this case to a

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maximum acceptable density, cannot be justified as it disregards the reality of technical progress which has constantly outstripped the pace of population growth. It is common knowledge that the Dutch with 400 inhabitants per square kilometre have a much higher living standard than the Madagascans, with fewer than 40, not because they have more available resources, but because of their more advanced agricultural, industrial and commercial technologies.

Growth

For Malthus, economic production, which increased arithmetically, would be unable to keep pace with the needs of a population which, for its part, increased exponentially. His idea was used by neo-Malthusians to convince developing countries that birth control policies were needed to slow down excessive population growth. To catch up with rich countries, the poor countries needed to invest massively in order to develop their economy and educate their future workforce. How could they hope to do so if population growth outpaced the increase in production? It was on these grounds that many developing countries implemented sometimes draconian birth control policies.

Paradoxically, while the quarrel between neo- and anti-Malthusians is now largely forgotten, the idea of overpopulation, on local or global levels, has been taken up again by certain ecologists who claim that the world would be a better place with a population of just one billion (as in 1800!) rather than nine or ten billion, as will soon be the case. Is this sufficient grounds for a depopulation policy? Hardly. Not only does depopulation raise as many problems as population growth, but implementing such a policy would be highly problematic. Raising mortality is clearly unacceptable, and emigration is not possible on a planetary scale. This leaves the option of reducing fertility and maintaining it well below replacement level over a long period, which would soon give rise to an economically unsustainable dependency ratio (ratio of young and old people to adults of working age). The major challenges highlighted by ecologists, such as climate change and the growing scarcity of basic resources such as water and non-renewable energies are crucial issues that must be treated with a stronger political will than is currently the case, but reducing the global population is certainly not a practical solution. Attention should focus more on managing the consequences of past demographic trends than on dreams of returning to a demographic golden age that never actually existed.

Population structure

Population size is not the only population policy challenge. Age composition is also an important factor.

Is there an ideal age composition that a population policy might reasonably seek to achieve? In economic terms, an optimal age structure may be one which minimizes the dependency ratio by maximizing the number of working-age adults. This would entail reducing the proportion of older adults, whose numbers are increasing rapidly in countries in the last stage of the "demographic transition".⁽¹⁾ But how can this be done? By reducing life expectancy? Who would dare to envisage such an option? By stimulating births to reduce the proportion of elders? Such a measure would raise the proportion of children and increase the dependency ratio. In countries where the elder population is still small, the proportion of working-age adults can be maximized by a sudden fertility decrease that produces an immediate drop in the proportion of young people. It is this phenomenon which has opened an exceptional demographic window of economic and social opportunity in certain developing countries. But such situations are temporary and short-lived, with potentially damaging long-term after-effects. The ideal is thus to achieve an invariable age structure, but this is only possible in a so-called "stable" population. So the question boils down to whether we want a stable growing population, or a stable decreasing one, since in one or other case, the dependency ratio remains more or less unchanged (more younger people in the former case, more older people in the latter). In fact, sooner or later, both population growth and depopulation are problematic, leaving only one rational long-term objective: that of a "stationary" population with constant size and age composition. But, very likely, this is a purely utopian dream.

Are population policies effective?

Let us look at four types of objective which, as we have seen, may seem desirable and acceptable in a given context: reducing mortality, limiting fertility if the population is growing too quickly, or encouraging it if the opposite is true, and controlling migration.

Reducing mortality

The oldest and most universally acknowledged demographic objective – that of reducing disease and death – is paradoxically the one that least naturally comes to mind in relation to population policy. Indeed, health policies have never been perceived by public opinion, or by political decision makers, as a demographic issue. Yet they are historically the first component of

(1) A fundamental change whereby, thanks to effective measures for combating mortality, women in modern societies no longer need to have large numbers of children.

population policy, and triggered the start of the demographic transition. This is probably because improving health and fighting against death are natural aspects of the ancestral quest for a better life which, at the outset, was quite independent of any demographic objective. For many years, countries across the world have devoted a growing share of their national income to health policies, and together set up the World Health Organization whose sole purpose is to achieve this goal.

But should the immense progress achieved be attributed to health policies alone? If the analysis is limited exclusively to policies under the direct responsibility of ministries of health, then this is certainly not the case. But the answer is a definite yes if we include all collective actions (both public and private) with an underlying health objective that contribute to this goal, notably policies to improve agriculture and food safety, to enhance social protection, to broaden access to education, to fight against inequalities, to improve living conditions, etc. We cannot be sure that all actions taken to improve health are effective, but there is no doubt that, both in the strictest sense and more broadly, health policies are of vital importance.

Limiting fertility

The need for political intervention to reduce fertility in countries where populations are growing too fast is more debatable, especially if the question is viewed in the narrow sense of birth control programmes. This can be illustrated by two historical examples.

The first example concerns France, a country where the Catholic Church severely condemned the very idea of contraception. Despite a total lack of any collective will to limit population growth, the French population was the first to make widespread use of a birth control method (coitus interruptus) that, while archaic, was nonetheless effective. The Protestant countries, for their part, while more open to the idea in principle, followed suit only a century later, and again without any government intervention.

The second example concerns the three Maghrebian countries (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia) which adopted radically different approaches when, in the 1950s and 1960s, rich countries started expressing alarm about the supposed threat of rapid population growth in poor Southern countries. In the mid 1960s Tunisia set up an extensive programme with technical and financial backing from the United States. Algeria adopted a very different attitude, denouncing American neo-Malthusian imperialism and arguing that economic development would bring about change in fertility behaviours. Morocco, for its part, chose a more intermediate stance, announcing the creation of a programme to please the United States, but endowing it with limited resources,

for fear of being outsized by Algeria. Yet to everyone's surprise, by the late 1990s, fertility in all three of these Muslim countries had fallen to around just two children per woman! [2] The decline began somewhat later in Algeria and Morocco than in Tunisia, but has been more rapid. Moreover, in all three countries, this trend is due as much to the considerable increase in age at marriage as to the spread of contraceptive use.

There are few examples of countries where the introduction of a birth control programme can be clearly identified as the main factor behind a desired reduction of fertility. The most well-known case is certainly that of China, where the effects of the birth control programme are undeniable, but where the methods applied (strict controls on marriage, couple separation, withdrawal of family benefits if a second child is born, punitive taxes for a third, etc.) are so incompatible with human rights that they can hardly be recommended as a model for others.

While classic birth control programmes have not proved entirely effective, other policies, not directly designed for this purpose, have had a much greater impact. These are the policies that have promoted universal access to basic education, for girls especially, that have opened the labour market to women, and that have improved their family, social, economic and cultural status. These factors are common to Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, and explain their similar fertility trends. Birth control programmes, for their part, have often extended access to contraception, providing greater physical and moral comfort to couples and women who would have reduced their fertility in any case. This, in itself, would have amply justified their existence.

Encouraging births

Similar symmetrical arguments can be used against policies designed to raise fertility by restricting access to contraception and abortion. The main effect of the French law of 1920 which made abortion illegal and prohibited the dissemination of information on contraception was to increase the number of dangerous clandestine abortions. By contrast, the legalization of contraception and then of abortion produced neither a drop in fertility nor an explosion in the number of pregnancy terminations.

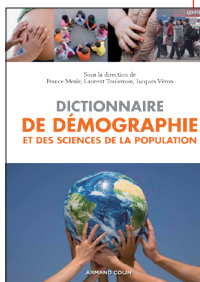
Family policies, for their part, which in France were widely introduced after the Second World War, appear to have played a social role much more than a demographic one. They did nothing, in any case, to prevent the spectacular European fertility decline observed in the last quarter of the twentieth century. The recent rebound in France mainly reflects the efforts made to enable women with children to pursue their

DICTIONNAIRE DE DÉMOGRAPHIE ET DES SCIENCES DE LA POPULATION

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working career (daycare centres and nursery schools, school opening hours, etc.).

Finally, birth control depends first and foremost on the wishes of couples, and little can be achieved by seeking directly to contradict their desires. Unwelcome trends can only be slowed down or reversed through coherent sets of policies modifying the context in which these desires are formed.

Controlling migration flows

For policies aiming to influence international migration flows, the question is a very different one. Each nation is the guardian of its own borders. It may establish international agreements for freedom of movement (such as the Schengen agreements), impose a visa system to restrict the inflow of foreign nationals or even prohibit international migration altogether. While this national right is not open to discussion, restrictions seen as intolerable inevitably lead to transgression. Customs barriers have given rise to smuggling, the ban on drugs has led to drug trafficking, and border controls have produced illegal immigration.

In a world with an ever-widening wealth gap between poor and rich countries, pressure on borders is growing and the traffic in illegal immigrants is increasingly profitable, while emigration hopefuls are becoming ever more desperate. In Europe, in particular, the measures against illegal migrants now openly challenge the principles of human rights. There is something absurd about a world economic system which imposes free trade upon poor countries, at the cost of increased inequality, while preventing their populations from circulating freely.

The only policy that would reduce migration pressure over the long term would be one that stimulates the development of poor countries and thereby narrows the gulf that separates them from the rich ones. Classical

economists believed that the best way to achieve this was a "*laissez-faire, laissez-passer*" approach. Rich countries are refusing to apply this maxim to the circulation of persons, yet fail to deliver on their promises of development aid.

Adapting to demographic change

This brings us to two conclusions. First, in terms of objectives, implementation methods and efficacy, there are both good and bad population policies. While the former may be useful, we clearly have no use for the latter. But at the same time, a population policy in the strict sense, however useful it may be, is unlikely to achieve the desired objective if it does not form part of a more general set of economic, social and cultural policies that favour changes in individual behaviour.

This leads to a third conclusion: it may be more important to take measures aimed at adapting our societies and our economies to demographic change than to seek ways of influencing this change. We all know that any attempt to counteract demographic ageing would be absurd. Indeed, this ageing process reflects one of humanities greatest conquests: a life expectancy of nearly one hundred years! Rather than trying in vain to raise fertility above two children per woman, let us focus on providing decent living conditions for the growing cohorts or older adults in our modern societies.

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ABSTRACT

Implementing a population policy implies that an optimal population size can be defined, based on the quantity of available resources and on the level of progress in production technologies. But these economic questions cannot be dissociated from the population age structure, trends in life expectancy and improvements in health. The efficacy of programmes to control births or to encourage fertility has been limited, and the same is true of policies to control migration flows.