

The Role of United Nations in the Global Population Issue

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Summary

While rapid population growth poses severe issues in third world nations, in first world nations the opposite phenomenon, population decline, has arisen as a new issue. Continued population growth inhibits development and aggravates poverty; on the other hand failing birthrate in turn will result in stagnant development and then to less financial support for the nations in need and the solution of global issues. However, the population today is the outcome of rapid social changes brought about in the last several decades, and when one recalls the fact that the figure was less than half that of today in 1950, the current state is by no means a standard that needs to be sustained. Failing birthrate should not be solved by encouraging fertility; rather, the world should accept this reality as a natural phenomenon, acknowledge not only its demerits but also merits, and further anticipate solutions other than increasing the number of children. On the other hand, the two paths population is taking in first and third world nations will only result in exacerbation of global economy. At the current state, the United Nations should give priority to population growth problem, which ultimately will result in assisting the population decline issue. In such situation, one needs to find the balance between human rights s/he possesses as an individual and responsibility for his/her decisions as a global citizen. Accordingly, the United Nations needs to find a means to involve general citizens more in its projects and to find a balance between the two very different paradigms first-world and third-world nations are going through; population growth and population decline.

Although global issues such as population growth, environmental destruction and sustainable development have long been discussed and endeavored upon, these problems are yet today far from solved. On the other hand, while population growth is the greater problem at the moment, a new issue of failing birthrate has arisen in first world nations, which in turn will result in stagnant development and then to less financial support for the solution of global issues. However, when one recalls the fact that in the 1950's the global population was less than half that of today, the current state is by no means a standard and failing birthrate should not be solved by increase in fertility. Rather, the world needs to accept what is already becoming a reality, acknowledge not only its demerits but also merits, and begin to anticipate solutions other than increasing the number of children. In such situation, one needs to find the balance between human rights s/he possesses as an individual and responsibility for his/her decisions as a global citizen. Accordingly, the United Nations needs to find a means to involve general citizens more in its projects and to find a balance between the two very different paradigms first-world and third-world nations are going through; population growth and population decline.

The population of the world has reached 6.5 billion in the year 2005, and by 2050 it is predicted that it will further grow and reach 8.5 billion. Although the growth rate itself is in decline after reaching its peak in the 1990s, the population continues to grow with additional 7.6 million each year. Until industrial revolution, population growth had stayed almost null for the 99% of the 15 million years of human history (Kono 1986:5). Even by 1950, the population is known to have been approximately 2.5 billion (Kono 1986:1), indicating that the population has more than doubled during the last half century. In such state, growth in global population gives rise to numerous and severe issues. Firstly, it becomes a great inhibition in endeavors toward development as it causes a dearth for food, clean water, living space and employment. Since the 1950's, demand for water alone is estimated to have risen threefold. Secondly further demand for grains, aquatic products, forestry products, minerals, energy and others to match the needs of the additional population will cause excessive use of natural resources, leading to forest destruction, land erosion, water salination, desertification, submerging lands and so on, further deteriorating agricultural lands and causing environmental damage (Salas 1984: 77). According to statistics, 96% of the population growth noted in the modern era is happening in third world countries (United Nations, 2004). Several key factors are responsible for this phenomenon. One of the first variables causing this would be the economic system based on agriculture in those nations, for in areas where agricultural business is the key economic industry, the greater the number of working hands the better. Another variable is lack of appropriate sexual, reproductive and/or contraceptive knowledge, leading to unwanted pregnancy. Furthermore, in areas where educational infrastructure is not yet sufficiently developed, people, especially female population, may not only be uneducated but also be illicit, in which case gaining knowledge on reproductive

health will be a further difficulty. Thirdly, accessibility of reproductive health services is another factor that plays a major role in population growth. It is not unusual for rural areas in third world nations to be lacking in any medical facilities, let alone one that can provide reproductive health services. Even in areas where UNFPA has established such facilities, some have reported as not satisfactorily accessible in terms of available time and place for the poorest segment of the population (the State of the World Population 2004:19). The fourth social variable affecting population growth is apprehension for financial support after reaching advanced age on the parents' part. Couples tend to have a great number of offspring in order to secure future income earner. The fifth factor is high mortality rate in third world nations. Low survival expectancy may compel people to give birth to a greater number of children, often for reasons discussed above. Here is an important demographic paradox in that the greater the mortality rate the greater the birth rate, and high mortality rate is sustained as a result (Salas 1985:24). The improvement of health services will ensure greater survival of infants, and as a result lower the birth rate.

Thus on the micro level, the global population issue can be defined as the improvement of reproductive health and rights, while on the macro level it is an immensely broad field including developmental and political problem dealing with further burden on the environment, development and human rights. Numerous factors notwithstanding, in the end the key to population stabilization is preferred family scale, or in other words the number of children. Demographic stabilization will only become a reality when the average family scale in third world nations lowers and comes close to the standard in first world nations: two children or less per a female (Salas 1985:18).

On the contrary, in many of the first world nations, the very opposite has become an issue. When total fertility rate, or the average number of children that would be born to a woman over her lifetime, stays lower than the replacement-level fertility for a prolonged period time the society is going under population decline. According to demographic transition theory, the improvement of mortality rate brought by economic development causes population to go through three phases: first phase being high fertility and mortality rate, second high fertility rate and low mortality rate, and then finally to low fertility and mortality rate, leading to population decrease. Today France has the highest fertility rate among the first world nations marking 2.01 in 2006, and nations facing this issue today include England with 1.79, Sweden with 1.77, Germany with 1.36, Italy with 1.33, and Japan with 1.26 (the data are those of 2005). The issue is also prevalent in Asia, with the birth rate of 1.17 in Korea (2002), 1.25 in Singapore, 1.24 in Taiwan and 0.94 in Hong Kong (2003). Although for many of the European countries population transition had been completed before the world war II, sharp decline in the birth rate rose as a problem in the late 20th century. In Japan, population decline first drew the attention of

general public when back in 1990 the birthrate marked the lowest with 1.57, which during the so-called “baby boom” after WWII in late 1940’s had marked as high as 4.32 (Akagawa, 2005:118). Birth rate of a community is generally determined by the number of population of the parental generation and the number of children given birth. Falling birth rate in modern society today is mainly caused by the parents’ voluntary family planning (Okazaki 1977:45). Again, not unlike population growth, innumerable factors associated with community systems and values contribute to this transition. Firstly, changes in marriage is one of the key factors in this issue. In Japan, tendency to marry later has been noted since mid 1970’s, with the average age of first marriage becoming 29.6 for men and 27.8 for women in 2004, which in 1964 were 27.2 and 24.5 respectively. In relation to marriage issue, less number of marriages, changes in marriage styles such as cohabitation have also encouraged the preference of less number of children. Secondly, economic development and financial stability in first world nations has given the ability to choose a small number of children to prospective parents. In contrast to parents in third world nations, couples in relatively wealthy nations need not worry about gaining financial support by a number of children. In relation to this, differences in economic system between first and third world nations are another key factor. While much of business in the former may be secondary or tertiary manufacturing, the latter may by comparison depend on primary industry, which necessitates a greater figure of working hands per household. Thirdly, high survival expectancy of children as a result of comparatively well provided health care, sanitary conditions, advancement of medical technology and others also lessens the need for prolificacy. Education also endows one with the knowledge of efficiency of high investment on a smaller number of children, also leading to preference of small-scale family. Ironically, the desire to provide the children with ample investment may in some cases turn into a financial burden for the parents, also enhancing population decline. Fourthly, changes in peoples’ perspective on gender role may be another key factor. Despite in many cases the relation between women’s roles in a society and birth rate are not made clear, quite a few researchers point out that the greater the equality between couples and the amount of women’s activity outside of household, the lower the birth rate (Ato and Hayase, 2002:104).

The result of population decline on the macro level seems to be disastrous. It will cause aging of population, necessitating the need to reform and strengthen social security services ranging from care service for the elder, medical insurance system to national pension system. In Japan, according to national statistics the population of senior citizen, or those over 65 years of age, has reached as high as 25.6 million in 2006, amounting to 20.04% of the total population and renewing the record. By 2015, one in every four is predicted to become over 65 years of age, which will turn Japan into the most aged community in the world (Yamaguchi 2001:266). Due to these factors national pension system is currently of the greatest concern to

the general citizens in Japan. Back in 1950, there were 9.3 people below 20 for every person over 65; by 2025, this proportion is predicted to become 0.59:1 (United Nations, 2004). While statistically national pension system today is operated by four working population supporting one senior citizen, in 2015 it will decrease to two supporting one, which results in unequal balance between what one must pay and what he will gain after retirement. If the present system is maintained without any adjustment, national burden ratio of social security, tax and financial deficit combined on national income will be as high as 73% in 2025 (Yamaguchi 2001:266). Moreover, several aspects of population decrease will result in stagnant or failing economy and development. Smaller number of children will cause a dearth for working hands, and even if the shortage were to be filled with greater employment of senior citizens and guest laborers, it is likely that they will lack adaptive ability that the young generation possesses. Furthermore, decrease in employees in itself will result in less GDP. Industries targeted at the young, such as toy or educational industry, will face downhill spending and smaller market (Akagawa 2005:123). As aged individuals in general have the tendency to prefer saving over investment, less financial liquidity is expected. The list can go on for quite some time. However, neither the recent population growth nor the current population is by any means a standard that must be sustained when one considers how world population had been 2.5 billion half a century ago; in nations where sharp drop in population is an issue, one must also pay heed to the positive dimension of the phenomenon or the community will not be able to take advantage of what merits it offers alongside demerits (Yamaguchi 2001:270).

Solution of population density is one of the positive results of decline in population, although depending on administrative systems continued urbanization and depopulation of rural areas could persist. In relation to smaller market for certain industries, as is already evident in the case of university enrollment, less competition for education and employment may become a reality. To take Japan for an example, especially in terms of secondary education, the system of harsh enrollment competition has long been questioned. This era could be presenting an opportunity to reconsider the efficiency of memorization oriented education in Japan. Other suggested merits include greater investment per child, less time required for nurturing on the whole, enhancement of parent-child relationship, changes in gender and generation role as a result of higher female and senior employment, and less environmental damage (Akagawa 2005:121). Nevertheless, one must note here that without the stabilization of population growth in third world nations, what little environment saved from destruction in first world nations will amount to nothing.

Accordingly, demerits of population decline tend to be macro-level as opposed to merits which tend to be micro-level. People who are for development claim that development should be considered a priority, and as development proceeds population growth rate will

voluntarily decrease, just as first world nations have demonstrated in their economic development procedure. However, it must be noted that there exists a difference between the path first world nations have taken and the path third world nations will take, in that today development of many nations are being inhibited by population growth. In the past, decline in mortality rate was brought on by improvement of economic and social systems; whereas population growth noted in third world nations today is caused by advanced technology imported from first world nations. In other words, the result is not so much social as technological, or in other words internal as external, and has come to burden economic development (Okazaki 1977:281). Thus the opinion that population decrease in first world nations will compensate for population growth in third world nations is highly problematic. If no measures are taken and the current global state is maintained, the economic potential of majority of first world nations will deteriorate and official development aids may need to be reduced or even terminated. Poverty in nations with great dependency on assistance will suffer direct impact if such situation should become a reality (Kaneko 2003:21).

Several approaches offer solutions from different perspectives on population growth issue. From a human rights point of view, improvement of women's education in third world nations will bear evident effect as has often been suggested by researchers (Ato and Hayase 2001:55). Improvement of literacy rate will open the door to education, higher school enrollment will diminish the habit of gender preference upon provision of parental care and provide with basic medical knowledge, all of which leads to empowerment of female gender role and improvement of infant mortality rate (Salas 1984:24). In relation to this improved knowledge on reproductive health/rights will result in a smaller number of unwanted pregnancy. According to World Fertility Rate, there exists a great gap between actual birth rate and desired birth rate: for instance, the former for seventeen countries was 3.8~8.3, while the latter was 3.7~4.7(Salas 1984:16). There are also some cases where existing norms and values inhibit successful family planning. Efficiency of traditional contraceptive methods is one of those issues. According to statistic provided by the U.N., over 64 million women still rely on such methods, which may be based on folk superstition and turn out to be highly unreliable. Among the poorest population, a number of women possess no knowledge of less reliability of traditional contraceptive methods. According to the Turkish Population and Health Survey done in Turkey on over 5,000 women, others still hesitate to switch to reliable modern methods due to fear of side effects, health problems and opposition by husbands. Regarding this, reproductive health education needs to include information on benefits, dangers, prevention rates of both traditional and modern methods, also taking into consideration traditional, religious or family values on contraception. More directly, greater accessibility and higher quality of available health and medical care, combined with epidemics prevention, will also contribute to the

problem solution significantly. Involving men, who in most cases are socially, economically and politically more powerful than women in such programs is also efficient in enhancing couples' decisions on family planning and improving women's status in decision making (United Nations, 2004). From a developmental and political perspective, involving female in political and national projects is another key factor in population policies, and UNFPA has requested that each nation pay heed to women's education, employment, political participation, household and parental role and improve the gender role in whole as from past experiences it is clear that women's educational standard and amount of labor activity play an important role in relation to population policies (Salas 1984:20). In addition, further technology transfer in fields such as medical services from first to third world countries should be encouraged. In some nations politic measures are taken on national level to reduce the population growth, but they may not be the best means of solving the issue as the effectiveness of policies such as one-child policy in China is questioned. While fertility rate in both urban and rural areas in China has successfully decreased from 6.1 and 5.0 in 1949 to 2.0 and 1.4 in 1992 respectively (Wakabayashi 1996:61), the policy has borne new issues such as illegal delivery, gender preference of male over female, mass abortion of female infants, the necessity to support four parents and in some cases even grand parents per couple, existence of "second" children who are given no right to administrative or medical care services due to lack of registration as a national citizen. Decisions influencing population are not made by governments but by individual couples, and the most efficient programs are known to be those that directly reach and motivate couples (Salas 25). The struggle of the nation with one of the greatest population in the world is yet to bear fruit.

In dealing with population decline, on the other hand, issues related to social construction rather than fertility rate will play a crucial role, and administrative systems will have to go under a major reformation. In the case of Japan, national pension system will be one of the issues with highest priority. Emigrants and guest laborers is a means of gaining working hands, but although the topic has been an actively debated one at the present, the idea is far from accepted by the general public. The government will be required to establish administrative environment where guest laborers will be able to enter Japan easily and work under fair conditions as unjust treatments of foreign workers have already begun to be reported. Quite a few nations have already endeavored upon this problem, and those including green card system in Germany, visa system in Switzerland, newly employed guest laborer system in Korea may provide some clues for prospective policies to Japan. Greater working opportunities for women and the aged will be another necessity in dealing with failing birth rate, with greater variation in employment pattern such as in-home labor and prolonged compulsory retirement age. In order to accomplish this task, an environment where women are actually able to work needs to be

provided, such as sufficient nursery facilities, supportive operational system including maternal/paternal leave, financial support during the leave, informational support on coming back to office and contraction of working hours for parents with infants. In some areas in Japan including Miyazaki prefecture, an endeavor to join elder care facilities and nurseries has been launched, based on the idea of reducing the operational expenditure and improving services. Such experimental enterprises should be further encouraged.

At the present state, the need for assistance by the U.N would still be greater in third world nations than in first world nations. As numerous reproductive health/rights have already been established by the U.N, the task the U.N now faces is in addition to further establishment of such projects improvement of efficiency of the existing services. By gaining local and citizen-level feedback, the existence of health services needs to be advertised, the accessibility in terms of time and place for the poorest segment of the population has to be upgraded and a greater number of local staff must be trained and employed. For an organization as immense as the United Nations, localization becomes an issue to some extent; the established service requires to be assessed on whether it truly accords with local needs, its prevalence in the area and people's acceptance and opinion towards the project. In achieving this assignment, founding of monitoring and reliable gender-segregated data collection systems need to be planned and launched. The United Nations can contribute with its technology and past experience in assisting all involved governments on improvement of demographic registry system, data collection system, data assessment, analysis and maintenance that at the same time pays heed to individual privacy protection. To sustain reliable organization on demographic policies, further internship, advertisement, education and training of staff is also another field in which the U.N can provide assistance.

On the other hand, several points on assistance for first world nations by the United Nations should be suggested. The adoption of agenda such as UN Principles for Older Persons or United Nations Development Program by the international society acts as a strong factor in encouraging the nations to come up with national policies, and in this way the United Nations plays an essential role in enhancing the empowerment of not only women but also the senior citizens, which will become a significant challenge in many of the countries in near future. Secondly, with the number of foreign laborers in first world nations increasing, issues regarding human rights of those laborers may increase. Many of the laborers are citizens of third world nations, which in many cases do not possess sufficient backup system to support these workers; the U.N and associated NPO may be able to provide them with support in terms of human rights issues in stead of their home countries, or encourage the host nations in founding organizations specialized in emigrant worker support. For the meantime, the immediate tasks related to population decline should be handled by national governments than the United Nations; rather,

further endeavor on population growth issue will in a long run contribute to assisting first world nations. On a more civic level, the issue of awareness of the general public in both first and third world nations arises. One usually possesses some knowledge on the U.N, but s/he would not imagine that s/he also has the power to partake in its projects. More than often s/he may find him/herself participating in such projects associated with global issues only through ODA figures, occasional donation and statistics presenting a long line of numbers and percentages. This would be especially marked in third world countries, where equal and sufficient education is a privilege and individual wealth is far limited. Nevertheless, what UN works on are global issues which concern all peoples, and should neither be seen as specialized nor distant by the general public. The global issues have already reached a point where they cannot be left for “someone else” to be solved. It is true that each individual should be given rights including the right to choose the number of children according to his/her liking, but above all one should be reminded that s/he also has a responsibility as a global citizen in making those decisions. The world is yet to find a means of living outside the planet, and in the end it will be the future children who suffer the direct impact of consequences borne by the world today.

It is not likely that the U.N will grow to become the fourth sector of the world (Kunugi et al. 2006:158); in which case it needs to continue its search for ways to positively encourage the existing three sectors, civic society, economy and government, in the direction of effective global issue solution. In the current state, the world seems to be caught in a negative spiral in which population growth necessitates greater financial assistance, population decline in supporting nations makes it challenging for the aimed figure to be achieved, insufficiency of financial resource fails to provide with adequate measures to stabilize the growth rate, and again further increase in population requiring even greater financial aid. In terms of population capacity, dealing with failing birthrate by encouraging fertility is not the best measure, while the difference in population between nations that exacerbates by the minute demands rapid-acting solution. It is essential that improvement of efficiency for presently run projects and enhancement of awareness level especially for the civilian population in first world nations are worked upon. In addition, as the demand for migrant workers increases in countries facing population decline, increase in need for human-rights support for the laborers is expected. In such state, the United Nations has to locate and maintain a balance between the two opposite phenomena and the problems they pose. The era presents the United Nations with a touchstone for its true potential; the world waits for it to provide milestones for a better future.

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