

## The population time bomb

In Africa we must stop perpetuating the poverty trap because we are scared of being outnumbered



The socio-economic framework of many African countries promotes deliberate and rapid population expansion. Democracy means political representation based on population, and the people have found it useful to belong to political pressure groups – tribes, states, and local governments. Each desires high population to constitute a more powerful unit in order to be entitled to greater political representation and more social amenities.

The need to belong to larger in-groups for the purpose of outnumbering competitors has inspired the more primitive sentiments of tribalism and the territorial imperative. It causes instability and often the breakout of inter-tribal wars at the time of expected change of governments, at elections.

Polygamy is sanctioned by culture. Each wife in a polygamous family tries to have more children than her colleagues. The most popular religions – Christianity and Islam – erect formidable moral obstacles to family planning. High child and infant mortality in our countries make restriction of family size a hard sell. People do not often relate the number of children to their income because they are gifts from God.

Even at the national level, population is regarded as an asset rather than a huge shackle on the advancement of the country. 'Nigeria is the most populous black country on earth' is a common statement. We started boasting that 'Every sixth African is a Nigerian!' It progressed to every third, and finally we may yet have every African being a Nigerian!

If population grows faster than the economic development of the country, it becomes an enormous impediment to development. In sub-Saharan Africa, the huge majority is reported to live on less than a dollar per day. If the population increases without an equivalent increase in the per capita income, the situation gets worse. In most developing countries, we are seeing increasing poverty. Poor conditions of living, such as malnutrition, infections, infestations, at the early period of life cause dilution of the quality of its citizens by stunting of both physical growth and the intellect. Unemployment, crime and political instability are the consequences of uncontrolled population growth.

WHO statistics (*World Health Report, Geneva, 2000*) indicate that the rate of population growth matches the socio-economic state of the countries in the 'three world' groups. Japan, the UK, and the USA belong to

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the First World of wealthy countries. They have moderate populations, but the growth rate of those populations is less than 1.0%, and the fertility of their women lies between 1.4% for Japan and 2.0% for the USA. This means that these countries will have steady populations for the foreseeable future, and their strong economies will be able to cater for the relatively small increases. They have low dependency ratios, and low under-5 death rates. Some 20% of their population expects to live to ripe old age of over 70 years for men and nearly 80 for women. Their lives are relatively free of painful and disabling diseases.

With regards to their health services, WHO rates Japan's health delivery as the first in the world, the USA, with equally good and in some cases better health services is at position 15 because it has a large proportion of disadvantaged citizens. The standard of living in white areas of South Africa is higher than that of the developed world, but again the huge social differences among her inhabitants have pulled the country to position 151.

Although the populations of Third World countries are moderate, they have growth rates above 2.5% except for South Africa. Fertility is high, so are the dependency ratios. Under-5 mortality is very high – around 120, again except for South Africa. Life expectancy is around only 50 and in many cases falling. The economic growth rate will not be able to keep pace with the population growth rate, meaning that the proportion of poor people will increase as the population expands. These countries are scourged by preventable communicable ('tropical') diseases that make the lives of the people short and brutish. The less fortunate ones become permanently disabled.

Chile, Mexico and India are examples of 'Middle World' countries. They are much better off. However, big contrasts of poverty and wealth exist within them. The same contrasts also exist in the Third World, but, while the privileged class form less than 2% of Third World populations, it is much greater in the middle group of countries. Development is more even, and they are politically more stable than their volatile Third World sisters.

It will be an enormous task to change the attitude of the governments and the people in the third world to recognise population growth for what it really is, a tight bottle-neck to their development and in the long run, a dangerous time bomb. It will be possible to alter the situation only if each country immediately starts intense educational drive and action on family health issues.