



Lower Fertility: A Wise Investment

Plans that encourage voluntary, steep reductions in the fertility rates of poor nations pay dividends in sustainability for everyone **By JEFFREY D. SACHS**

The world faces looming ecological threats from the incredible stresses that global economic activity places on our major ecosystems. True, rapid population growth is not the main driver today of these threats. Pride of place goes to the high and rising rates of resource use per person rather than to the rise in the sheer number of people. Even if the total population were to stabilize at today's level of 6.5 billion, the pressures of rising per capita resource use would continue to mount. With the rich countries living at roughly \$30,000 per person and the world's average income at around \$10,000 per person, simply having the poor catch up with the income levels of the rich would triple global economic throughput, with all the attendant environmental consequences.

Yet the continued rapid population growth in many poor countries will markedly exacerbate the environmental stresses. Under current demographic trends, the United Nations forecasts a rise in the population to around nine billion as of 2050, another 2.5 billion people. They will arrive in the poor regions but aspire to the income and consumption levels of the rest of the world. If the economic aspirations of the newly added population are fulfilled, the environmental pressures will be mind-boggling. If those aspirations are not fulfilled, the political pressures will be similarly mind-boggling.

For the poor countries, the benefits of lowering fertility are apparent. High fertility rates are leading to extreme local environmental pressures—water stress, land degradation, overhunting and overfishing, falling farm sizes, deforestation and other habitat destruction—thereby worsening the grave economic challenges these lands face. High fertility also represents a disaster for the added children themselves, who suffer from profound underinvestments in education, health and nutrition and are thus far more likely to grow up impoverished. In short, a move to lower fertility rates will mean healthier children, much faster growth in living standards and reduced environmental stressors.

Reducing fertility rates in the poorest countries would also be among the smartest investments that the rich countries could


make for their own future well-being. Fifty percent of the projected population increase by 2050 will fall within Africa and the Middle East, the planet's most politically and socially unstable regions. That development could well mean another generation of underemployed and frustrated young men, more violence because of joblessness and resource scarcity, more pressures for international migration, and more ideological battles with Europe and the U.S. The global ecological toll could be just as disastrous, because rapid population growth would be taking place in many of the world's "biodiversity hot spots."

Disappointingly, the Bush administration has turned its back on fertility control in poor countries—despite overwhelming evidence that fast, voluntary and highly beneficial transitions

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to low fertility rates are possible. Such transitions can be promoted through a sensible four-part strategy. First, promote child survival. When parents have the expectation that their children will survive, they choose to have fewer children. Second, promote girls' education and gender equality. Girls in school marry later, and

empowered young women enter the labor force and choose to have fewer children. Third, promote the availability of contraception and family planning, especially for the poor who cannot afford such services on their own. Fourth, raise productivity on the farm. Income-earning mothers rear fewer children.

These four steps can reduce fertility rates quickly and dramatically from, say, five or more children per fertile woman to three or fewer within 10 to 15 years, as has occurred in Iran, Tunisia and Algeria. Many African leaders are waking up to this imperative, realizing that their nations cannot surmount their deep economic woes with populations that double every generation. If we in the rich countries would rise to help with this vital task, we would find eager local partners. 

An expanded version of this essay is available online at www.sciam.com/ontheweb

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