

THE CONTRIBUTION OF POPULATION POLICY TO THE ACHIEVEMENT OF THE MDGs

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In discussing ways to achieve of the MDGs, it would appear that many people are taking for granted that population does not matter much. The purpose of this talk is to alert our audience of the importance of population trends for the future of humanity.

One of the major achievements of the past century was the rapid reduction of fertility levels, particularly in the less developed regions (slide 2). Total fertility, that is, the average number of children per woman, in the less developed regions (LDRs) dropped dramatically between the late 1960s and today, passing from 6.0 children per woman to 2.8 children per woman in just about four decades. Such a rapid decline could not have been achieved without committed, focused and strong population policies.

Population growth per se is today not such a salient issue largely because of the success of population policy. To show that, we have calculated a simple “counterfactual”, as economists call these exercises. What would the population of the less developed regions be today if fertility had remained constant at the level it had in the early 1970s? Here is the result (slide 3): the less developed regions alone would have 9.4 billion inhabitants today if fertility had remained constant. The difference between that number and their actual population in 2008 is 3.7 billion, a number larger than the total population of the less developed regions in 1970 (2.7 billion). These numbers should be sobering: what would the world be like if developing countries had 50 per cent more inhabitants today than they already have? All the challenges they face today: providing education, improving health, preventing hunger would be magnified.

This counterfactual scenario provides indications of where to look next for the identification of priorities in terms of action. Let us consider the different fertility levels of groups of countries by development status. The least developed countries as a group have experienced a much slower fertility decline than the rest of the developing countries and have today almost double the fertility level of the others (slide 4). The counterfactual suggests that it is crucial to reduce their fertility further and as rapidly as possible.

To assess what can be achieved by promoting fertility reductions in the countries that still have high levels let us compare the counterfactual scenario with actual outcomes for Asia, the least developed countries and sub-Saharan Africa, focusing first on the number of children, that is, persons aged 0 to 14 (slide 5). In Asia, the actual number of children is today about half what it would have been if fertility had not declined; but in the least developed countries and sub-Saharan Africa, the differences between the actual number of children and the number produced by the counterfactual scenario with no fertility decline are small because the fertility reductions actually recorded are very modest. That is, among the poorest countries of the world the situation now is not much better in terms of the child dependency ratio than according to the counterfactual scenario.

Now let us consider what might have happened to the population of the least developed countries if their fertility levels had declined faster (slide 6). If the fertility of the least developed countries as a whole had declined as rapidly as that of Asia, their population today would be 551 million. If their fertility had remained constant at the level of the early 1970s, their population would be 882 million. In fact, their population today is estimated at 767 million, that is, it falls between the potential minimum and maximum produced by the counterfactual scenarios. This comparison indicates that only a third of the maximum potential reduction in population size was achieved because of the actual reduction of fertility which has been slow and small.

Looking into the future, with a the least developed countries manage to reduce their total fertility from the current 4.6 children per woman to 2.0 children per woman in 2050, their population will more than double to reach 1.7 billion (slide 6). However, if fertility remains high (constant at 2000-2005 levels), their population could more than triple to reach 2.8 billion. In comparison, had their fertility declined as fast as that of Asia since 1970, their 2050 population might have been no higher than it is today. Particularly for poor countries which are already having problems meeting the Millennium Development Goals, slowing population growth seems necessary.

Fortunately, the Governments of the least developed countries are aware that rapid population growth poses a serious challenge. Inquiries among Governments have shown that, at least since 1996, about three-quarters of the Governments of the least developed countries have expressed concern about their rapid population growth (slide 7). Today, almost 4 out of every 5 of the least developed countries report being concerned about rapid population growth and many are taking steps to moderate that growth. But, as the scenarios we have presented show, there is no time to lose.

Let me conclude with a few key messages:

- Population growth has declined markedly in most developing countries because of reductions of fertility;
- Without fertility reductions, the population of the less developed regions would be much larger today (a difference of nearly 4 billion);
- Population growth is still fast in many countries, particularly the least developed, and is a cause of concern;
- Committed and focused policies to accelerate fertility decline in the least developed countries are necessary to moderate population growth earlier and produce smaller populations whose needs will be easier to meet.