

Book Reviews

Population and Development: Old Debates, New Conclusions, edited by Robert Cassen, U.S.-Third World Policy Perspectives No. 19, Overseas Development Council, Transaction, Oxford, 1994, 282pp.

In anticipation of the third International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994, the Overseas Development Council (ODC) requested fifteen authors from a number of disciplines to undertake an analysis of current research on the relationship between population and development. The ODC is a private, nonprofit organization which seeks to foster an understanding of how development relates to changing U.S. domestic and international policy agenda and helps shape the course of global development cooperation. This is not insignificant information in the context of this particular topic.

The old debate dates from Malthus, but approaching the new millennium has plenty of new perspectives, including race, gender, environment, sexuality, and reproductive rights. Specifically, the book reviews issues on the relationship between population and economic growth; the relationship between family planning and women's reproductive health and rights; the consequences of population growth at the family and societal level, for investments in human resource development; the impact of population growth on local ecosystems; and the rationale for population assistance programmes. The discussion is framed by the U.S. National Academy of Science study in 1986, which accepted a qualitative conclusion that "lower population growth would be beneficial for most developing countries". The new analysis accepts that the rates of population growth are declining in most countries, due to both reductions in mortality and birth rates. The question raised is if this demographic transition should be accelerated and why?

While acknowledging that population growth is not the overwhelming affliction of developing countries and is also not the prime cause of underdevelopment, their conclusions are considerably sharper than those of the 1986 NAS report. The new conclusion of this volume is that population growth under conditions of high fertility has clear negative effects at the individual and household level. These effects include impacts on the health and education of children and mothers' health and life opportunities. Women of all generations, not just those of child bearing-age, are disadvantaged under these circumstances. By implication the ultimate welfare of men is also affected, but the effects of population growth under existing cultural conditions are not gender neutral.

At the macroeconomic levels, the conclusions are less definitive. The impacts depend on the country's ability to accommodate population growth, through expanding economies and the commitment to investments in human development, including education, training and employment opportunities. Agriculture and environment are two significant issues, both in terms of food production for populations which will continue to grow due to momentum, and the issues of environmental degradation and over consumption. However, there is considerable uncertainty about the potential for technological innovation and structure change

required to address these challenges. Many of these issues are local as well as global, and their successful resolution, like that of national population growth, depends on cooperation between families, communities and government.

From the population policy perspective, two complimentary types of interventions are needed: quality family planning services for those who already desire to limit their families, and socioeconomic developments that will encourage that desire. Both supply and demand components must be addressed simultaneously in a variety of complex social and economic settings. However, the experience with policies and programmes in the past ten years demonstrates that many countries have developed the tools to do this. In general, the authors maintain that there are few contradictions between population policies and development policies, provided that the goal of development and population activities is the improvement of individual well-being, in particular the well-being of the poor, especially poor women.

The final message is that virtually everything that needs doing from a population point of view, e.g. education, better health and nutrition, elimination of discrimination against women, employment opportunities, responsibility for child care, needs doing anyway.

One of the convenient features of this book is that the authors provide both an outstanding overview of the thrust and conclusions of the report, and crisp summaries of each of the chapters. As such it is an excellent brief for policy makers as well as journalists. Rather than a highly technical volume, it cites the best evidence in a manner that is accessible to those who wish to continue an old, but important debate within a new perspective.

John Townsend