China's Solution?

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Those who cling to family planning programs as the answer to population growth might do well to heed the current experience of China.[75]
Through a far-reaching redistribution of land and food, assurance of old-age security, and making health care and birth control devices available to all, China achieved an unprecedented birth rate decline. Since 1979, the country has taken a different tack. Believing that population growth was still hindering modernization, the Chinese government instituted the world's most restrictive family planning program. Material incentives and penalties are now offered to encourage all parents to bear only one child. According to John Ratcliffe of UC Berkeley's School of Public Health:

> Enormous pressure-social and official-is brought to bear on those who become "unofficially" pregnant; few are able to resist such constant, heavy pressure, and most accede to having an abortion. While coercion is not officially sanctioned, this approach results in essentially the same outcome.[76]

At the same time, Ratcliffe points out, some of China's post-1979 economic policies undercut both guaranteed employment and old-age security. This has thrown rural families back on their own labor resources, so that large families-especially boys-have once again become a family economic asset.

And what have been the consequences? Despite the world's most stringent population control program, China's birth rates have actually fallen more slowly since 1980 than before the one-child policy was introduced.[77] The message should be unmistakable: People will have children when their security and economic opportunity depend on it, no matter what the state says.

Advocates of more authoritarian measures seem to forget altogether the experience of the other poor societies that along with China have reduced their growth rates to below 2 percent. Recall that among them are Cuba, Kerala, and Sri Lanka. None relied significantly on social coercion or financial incentives. As health care was made available to all, Cuba's birth rates fell, for example, without even so much as a public education campaign on family planning, much less financial incentives.

No one should discount the consequences of high population density, including the difficulties it can add to the already great challenge of development. While in some African countries low population density has been an obstacle to sustainable agricultural development,[78] in many countries much higher population densities would make more difficult the tasks of social and economic restructuring necessary to eliminate hunger. But if it is eliminating hunger that we are after, then we should attack poverty, inequality, and powerlessness head on. That is especially true as they are the root causes of high fertility and rapid population growth. Improving living standards and lessening inequality, including providing education for women, have proven to be the best ways to lower fertility.