Population and Poverty: New Views on an Old Controversy

Policymakers often ask how high fertility and related demographic variables affect and are affected by poverty. The popular view in the 1960s and 1970s—that fertility decline would slow population growth in developing countries and thus reduce poverty—came in for a great deal of criticism in the 1980s, and by the 1990s, it was no longer in vogue. The alternative perspective that emerged was that demographic considerations are largely irrelevant to poverty reduction.

Today, new thinking and fresh evidence challenge this view. Much of this research shows that demographic trends are indeed important. However, the potential benefits of slower population growth depend on the timing and intensity of demographic change, the economic and social status of women, and the type and focus of economic policies in countries undergoing demographic change.

The World Bank estimates that in 1998, more than one billion people lived on less than one dollar per day (Table 1).1 When we exclude China from the estimates,2 we see that there were almost 106 million more very poor people in the world in 1998 than there were a decade earlier. The world’s total population is projected to increase by another three billion people by the middle of this century, with almost all of this growth occurring in the poorest countries. As global economic growth has stalled, demographers and economists have been examining more closely the role played by rapid population growth in explaining the differences between countries that are reducing poverty and those that are not. Such efforts may help to identify the policies and program interventions that are most likely to reduce the numbers of people worldwide who are extremely impoverished.

POVERTY LEVELS AND TRENDS
Both the level of poverty and the rate at which it has changed vary greatly by region (Table 1). In Sub-Saharan Africa, the region with the most rapid rate of annual population growth and the lowest level of contraceptive practice, there appears to have been no progress at all in reducing the level of dire poverty: The proportion of Africans living on less than one dollar per day did not change at all between 1987 and 1998. Two other regions with the same rapid rate of population increase and similar levels of contraceptive use—the Middle East and North Africa, and South Asia—have widely differing rates of economic growth. As a result, between 1987 and 1998, the number of people living on less than one dollar per day declined in the first region and increased in the second.

The AIDS epidemic has further complicated the task of interpreting data on poverty trends, particularly in hard-hit countries in Africa. AIDS has reversed many of the gains in life expectancy in those countries, but it has also slowed population growth substantially. Additionally, because AIDS mortality is concentrated in the working ages and has been killing many trained people (teachers, for example), the epidemic is undermining those countries’ poverty reduction efforts. The long period between infection with HIV and the onset of AIDS has created a vicious demographic cycle: The peak of infection occurs among young adults. They have children, of whom some become infected and die, but most live on as AIDS orphans and are exposed to the same risks when they reach young adulthood.

VIEWS ON GROWTH AND POVERTY
There are two major contrasting views about the relationship between population growth and poverty:

• Some believe that high fertility causes poverty and that lower fertility is the key to reducing poverty. At the end of the 18th century, Thomas Malthus and his followers argued that high fertility and poverty went hand in hand. Malthus himself, focusing on the impoverishing effects of scarce land and rising food prices, urged couples not to marry and have children unless they could afford to support them.2

One and one-half centuries later, when population

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1. Excluding China
2. Including China

Note: Estimates based on data from income/consumption surveys. The table excludes countries the World Bank classifies as high-income. Source: reference 1, Table 1.1, p. 23.