Family Responsibility

by Anthony Wayne Smith

Anthony Wayne Smith is Special Counsel to NPG, and is one of the founders of the population stabilization movement in the United States. He served as a Fellow of the Population Reference Bureau at the time Robert C. Cook was reorganizing it in 1948. Beginning even earlier, he was associated with William Vogt, Fairfield Osborne, and Hugh Moore, particularly with respect to the environmental aspects of the population explosion.

As president of the National Parks and Conservation Association from 1958 to 1980, Mr. Smith brought the population issue into its programs and wrote extensively on population in its Magazine.

The dedication of the family-planning and socio-economic development movements as humanitarian efforts during the past forty years has been highly commendable. But viewed as instruments of population stabilization, these efforts have thus far failed.

A new dimension must be added, and swiftly, to the population stabilization effort: small-family motivation. By small is meant sub-replacement; statistically, a total fertility rate less than replacement; ethically and practically, a maximum, not average, of two children per couple; in some countries one child as a target.

Recurrent famine, abject poverty, soil and forest destruction, plant and animal extinction, mineral depletion, air and water pollution, hideous urbanization, financial collapse, civil unrest, a world in chaos, all testify to that sad failure.

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By motivation is meant an appeal to responsibility, and the use of socioeconomic incentives and disincentives. Incentives can be direct, like housing, equipment, educational or tax advantages, or cash payments, or indirect, like getting jobs for women outside the home, though indirect incentives will have to be supplemented by direct benefits.

We must free ourselves of the notion that rewards, particularly cash payments for acceptance, continuity, and voluntary sterilization, are coercive. At present, we permit payments to procurers of such sterilizations but not to acceptors. If there is coercion it is among the promoters, not the acceptors.

The problem is to get family size down to replacement or sub-replacement. Not all the access/supply efforts in the world will do that unless desired-family-size comes down rapidly. That is where the efforts of the population stabilization movement should be focused.

The Bucharest and Mexico City Declarations both contain the caveat that freedom of choice as to the number and spacing of children is limited by responsibility. Responsibility means concern for the children, parents, community, and society, or it means nothing very much. There can be no question at this late date that it means not-more-than-two, and in many cases not-more-than-one, if disaster is to be forestalled.

It means that family responsibility and limitation, not merely family planning, must be the theme of funding by national and international financial institutions such as USAID, UNFPA, the World Bank, and philanthropic foundations. Groups and coalitions of non-profit organizations should reorient their efforts toward that end.
In terms of national plans, the targets should be universal access/supply, and replacement fertility or less, by the year 2000; population stabilization at the earliest date thereafter permitted by population momentum; and reduction thereafter by attrition to carrying capacity, which will be far below the peak populations resulting from runaway reproduction some time in the late twenty-first century. But targets will not be enough; they must be implemented by motivational systems and monitored at short intervals by thorough-going public review.

What does all this mean for action by the American population, humanitarian, and environmental movements? It means, first of all, continued vigorous support for family planning, but coupled with motivational programs. Family planning without more will not be enough.

A policy revision of that magnitude will require a sea change in conventional thinking within the birth control movement, one long overdue. It will entail a revised vocabulary; we should be talking about family responsibility and family limitation, not family planning without more.

It means that family responsibility and limitation, not merely family planning must be the theme of funding by national and international financial institutions such as USAID, UNFPA, the World Bank, and philanthropic foundations. Groups and coalitions of nonprofit organizations should re-orient their efforts toward that end.

National and international lending and granting institutions, public and private, should incorporate both environmental and demographic conditionality into their loans to industry and governments: That is, financial assistance should be conditioned on the adoption of resource management and population stabilization programs and their effective implementation. The population programs should be based on family responsibility, not merely planning. Nonprofit groups should press the point.

Survivalists fight desperate battles to rescue threatened or endangered species; they plead for ecological reserves in the tropical forests, in the oceans. They seldom suggest that anything should be done about the human proliferation which is crowding the other animals and plants from the earth.

Big families are cruelly inhumane to the children themselves and to the community and society as a whole.

The famine-relief, food supply, child-care, maternal welfare, immunization, and other health movements should look at the undesirable side-effects of their devoted efforts. Valiant contributions to rescue famine victims are mocked by death from malnutrition thereafter. Lowering infant mortality means but misery if malnutrition results in impaired mental and physical health. Immunization campaigns compound the dangers of overpopulation if they are not led by population stabilization and reduction campaigns. All these movements have magnificent fund-raising skills and extensive field organizations around the globe. They should incorporate family responsibility programs into their work; nonprofit groups and coalitions should urge them to do so.

As to legal immigration, a ceiling should be established for all immigration, including families and refugees, no higher than recorded emigration. This has been called Zero Net Migration.

In our home land, America, a revitalized population movement will seek first of all to abolish illegal immigration. One long stride has at last been taken with the new legislation imposing penalties on employers who hire illegal immigrants, a major source of present population growth, and establishing procedures for proving legal residence. As to legal immigration, a ceiling should be established for all immigration, including families and refugees, no higher than recorded emigration. This has been called Zero Net Migration. Immigration should no longer contribute to our population growth.
And we should enact a formal national policy of population stabilization and reduction as a result of continued low birth rates to carrying capacity. We can then enjoy the advantages of a constantly growing per capita GNP if that is what we want.

But what of the present political impasse? It will not last forever. The pressures driving nations toward population stabilization and reduction are ponderous and ultimately irresistible. It will take time to get our own house in order: to reorientate birth-control efforts toward family responsibility and limitation, to initiate a small family moral campaign, to fight off the attack on voluntary parenthood by the anti-abortionists and to organize the legislative and political machineries which an ultimately successful population stabilization effort will require.

The law and regulations which forbid assistance to effective stabilization programs such as cash incentives to acceptors of voluntary stabilization should be rewritten with a view to changing them when the time is once more opportune.

Proliferation is a far graver threat to civilization than the nuclear weapons, the dangers of which are visible and at long last understood. Proliferation unchanged will bring economic, social, environmental, ecological and political collapse on a planetary scale. Proliferation reversed can usher in a great civilization such as before was only the stuff of dreams.

A Global Small Family Campaign

The following letter to the editor by Anthony Wayne Smith appeared in the August 20, 1986 issue of the National Catholic Reporter.

The Reporter is to be commended warmly for publishing Steve Askin's articles on the population problem in Kenya and Father Arthur McCormack's concuring note. The tragic situation in Kenya is largely typical of much of the Third World. The article did well to highlight the differences among religious leaders in Kenya on birth control methods.

The UN Conferences on Population in Bucharest (1974) and Mexico City (1984), asserted the right of every couple to decide freely and responsibly on the number and spacing of children. Far too little emphasis has been placed in practice on responsibility which these conferences stressed.

We are dealing here with the responsibility of parents to their children already born, to themselves, and to their community, country, and society in general. Responsible conduct as to family size is moral; irresponsible conduct is immoral; this is surely within the domain of the churches.

The overcrowding of our planet has reached the place where population must be reduced by lowering birth rates to the carrying capacity of the earth as rapidly as possible in high rate countries, mainly in the Third World. This can be done only by reducing family size to lower levels (or increasing the death rate!). That means smaller families to each couple. In other words, in the situation of the world today, such reduction is responsible and moral; larger families are irresponsible and actually immoral though people may not realize this.

Family planning, meaning the provision of contraceptive information and supplies, by themselves, and socio-economic development, which is often frustrated by population growth, cannot do the reduction job. Motivation toward smaller families must also be provided. Socio-economic rewards and penalties, incentives and disincentives, have been found to be necessary and effective. But moral education and persuasion could be an ecumenical crusade for the small family and responsible parenthood to rescue the hundreds of millions of people throughout the world who will otherwise die of malnutrition or starvation during the next few decades.

But if people are to be persuaded toward small families, they must also be taught how to limit family size. They must have access to information as to the effectiveness of the full range of birth control methods. They should be encouraged to use contraception, not discouraged from it. In this situation, it is profoundly disturbing to find Catholic authorities in Kenya denouncing contraception as immoral.

Grant, if you wish, that periodic abstinence, referred to as natural family planning, may be one method of birth control, as are total abstinence and celibacy. But experience and common sense tell us that it will not be effective. Pope John Paul II conceded as much (in Acapulco 1982) when he said that natural family planning methods were not possible for vast sectors of the developing countries and pastoral compassion should be shown if they used other methods; that is, the practice of contraception by them should not be condemned for them. But compassion for the misery of hundreds of millions calls for advocacy not merely acceptance.

Grant, again, that the Catholic clergy may not be in a position to advocate contraception; they should step aside on that issue, avoiding denunciation, and join in the advocacy of smaller families. President Moi of Kenya has set a target of an average of four children for the year 2000. This will be impossible, the present average being eight, without an ardent
moral campaign for smaller families, nor indeed without socio-economic incentives and disincentives and effective birth control methods. He needs help, not hindrance, from all concerned with the welfare of the people of Kenya. Let me comment that I am not a Catholic; my background is Protestant; but I am strongly sympathetic toward the humanitarian efforts of all the churches. The churches should take the lead in a global small-family crusade. They should enlist the support of humanitarian organizations engaged in famine and food relief, maternal and child care, and health and immunization, whose work is constantly defeated, whether they recognize it or not, by population growth; of the family-planning, population, environmental, and ecological organizations, all of which have been negative toward motivational systems, and indifferent in many cases to the population issue itself; and of the powerful lending and granting institutions, public and private, which are struggling to manage an international debt crisis which cannot be managed without resolute attention to the underlying population issue. No clergyman has a right to stand in the way of such an effort; nor does any church doctrine authorize or require him to do so.

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‘A Slowly Falling Population Is Good’


Allen Carlson had the story backward in his article on de-population [Outlook, April 13]. He seemed to be recommending a breeding competition between the developed and the less developed countries. The developed countries would certainly lose that race.

But why try? A slowly falling population is good, not bad. There are fewer bodies to feed, clothe, shelter and care for. Per-capita gross national product can rise, not fall. In modern times, high productivity results from inventiveness, organization and the application of external energy, not manpower, and is limited only by the declining availability of resources and energy. Population contraction can and should produce affluence, spaciousness and leisure.

With stabilization or decline, no longer need we seek the eternal expansion of the supercities; the factories, office buildings, roads we have will be enough. No longer need our soils and forests be forced beyond their capacity; countryside, wilderness, wildlife can be restored. The available jobs managing the machines and maintaining the equipment can be divided up. The work day and week can be cut and incomes increased at the same time.

There can be leisure for the arts and sciences. There can be time for the handicrafts, taking over much work from the mass-production system. There will be time for learning for its own sake, for aesthetic and erotic pursuits, for friendships and for the enjoyment of the natural world.

The limiting factor will be resources and energy, ultimately solar energy. The solar-energy/population balance will be the key.

Food, clothing, shelter, medical care, education, travel—all these will become available for the average person working short weeks and days, once the rat race of eternal growth has been called off. The advanced countries are calling it off now when they cut down on family size; they are not going to work all that much harder for another child. We might well have been horrified by Carlson’s suggestion that we must maintain our populations so that we can produce weapons. We produce weapons, if we must, by automation computerization and assembly lines, not manpower. And are we to live to produce weapons?

The advanced countries are vulnerable to imported help. The oceanic pressures of population keep on pushing immigrants upon them, legal and illegal. It is tempting to hire them for what are considered the menial jobs. But farm labor and domestic service are honorable and pleasurable tasks, requiring skill and training, and if well-enough paid will be sought for by the native-born. The prosperous countries are checking immigration. What then of the less developed countries? They have been slow to recognize their predicament and their opportunities. Drastic measures to cut their birthrates are their only hope. The advanced countries have a huge stake in helping them to do it.

— August 1987