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INDECISIVE POPULATION POLICY AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The history of population policy in Nigeria has been characterised by indecisive blueprint on the expected behavioural pattern of demographic variables required to facilitate sustainable development. The journey started with purely laissez-faire approach whereby the state did not see any problem with the size and structure of the population. This was reflected in the third and fourth national development plans. The main thrust of the 1988 and 2004 national population policies corroborates this position. This paper examines the implications of in-decisive population policy for socioeconomic development in the country. Using data from NPC, NDHS and PRB this paper demonstrates that laissez-faire stance on population issue by the Nigerian state is impacting adversely on her socio-economic development. Finally, in view of the structure, size of the population and rate of natural increase and its retarding effects on socioeconomic development, a decisive reductionate population policy combining explicit and implicit strategies is imperative for this country to attain desired socio-economic development.

Keywords: In-decisive, Population, Policy, laissez-faire, development

Introduction

Nigeria has a population of over 158.3 million as at 2010 with a rough natural growth rate of 2.4 percent; it is the eight most populous country in the world (Population Reference Bureau PRB, 2010). The PRB statistics indicates that the gross national income per capita in purchasing power parity (GNI per capita PPP) for the country is 1940 US dollars, one of the lowest in the world. The country's Life expectancy for male is 47 and 48 for their female counterparts. In fact about 84 percent of Nigerians live below US\$ 2 per day (World Bank, 2011). This indicates that standard of living in the country is in a deplorable state. Little attention is known about the role of demographic situation in the socio-economic condition prevailing in the country. Literature has shown that there is a significant statistical association, though complex, between population growth and development (Week, 2002). This complex association informs what is generally referred to as population-development debate.

Three major strands of opinions are advocated in the debate. The optimist believes that a positive association exists between the two variables, pessimist insists on negative association while the neutralist sits on the fence (Bloom and Williamson, 1998). Although it is a truism that the population factor is just one of the numerous factors that either promote or hamper socioeconomic development, it is globally accepted that the population issue plays a significant role in proffering solutions to social, economic, political and cultural problems confronting any countries in the world (Mba, 2002). Bloom and Williamson (1998) reviewing the literature on the relationship between population and development report that some measures of past birth rates exert negative and significant effect on economic growth. Deaton and Paxson (2000: 142) in a similar review argued that 'with high population growth the burden of children decrease workers' ability to save and so limit growth'.

The argument in this article is predicated upon the premise articulated above. This view stipulates that any population growing rapidly is capable of retarding socioeconomic development (Wusu and Ahiadu, 2006). Therefore it is imperative to reduce the rate of growth of a rapidly growing population in order to promote development. The role of a realistic population policy in the actualization of such reduction is certainly very crucial. Population policy is defined as "direct or indirect actions taken in the interest of the greater

good by public authorities in order to address imbalances between demographic changes and other social, economic and political goals" (May, 2004). The paper argues that laissez-faire approach to population policy over the years in Nigeria is one of the factors that have hampered socio-economic development in the country. Four additional sections are addresses. It attempts a critical overview of post independence population policies that have been drawn up so far. Analysis of available data on fertility levels as a measure of the effects of actual population policies implemented is also examined. The following section attempts a comparative analysis of selected development indicators across two selected countries that used to be in the same socio-economic development category but now making rapid progress towards socio-economic transformation. This is to reflect on the role of population in socioeconomic development. Finally clear suggestions are presented on the way forward on policy required to check the imbalance between population and development in the country.

Nature of population policy in Nigeria since 1960

In the first part of this section the issue of population policy is examined through the lenses of the first four post-independence development plans because during this period there was no clear comprehensive policy on population. In the first post independent development plan (1962-1968) the best mention of population was the recognition of the effects of the growing population on health and other social infrastructure (Mba, 2002; Obono, 2003). There was no clear position on the relationship between the country's population and her socio-economic development. Consequently, what kind of influence on demographic variables was required was obscured. The second development plan (1970-74) was able to appreciate the fact that the population was growing at a rapid rate but the then government did not see anything bad in the situation. The newly found oil wealth did not allow the government to perceive the long term effects of a population that was growing at the rate of 2.5 percent as a result of the joint effect of declining death rate and high birth rate (Mba, 2002). However, voluntary adoption of family planning was encouraged mainly to improve the standard of living of children (Obono, 2003). The development plan was certainly contradictory on population planning and so adoption of modern contraceptives remains quite negligible.

The third national development plan (1975-1980) did not make any categorical statement on population but it was able to establish a National Population Council. This silence on population showed that the government had not changed its position on the effect of population growth on the standard of living of the citizen (Obono, 2003). The fourth national development plan (1981-85) was the first to take cognizance of demographic variables in socio-economic well-being of the population. It was not surprising though, by this time oil price had begun to dwindle and the devastating effects of rapidly growing population on welfare had become apparent. It was clear to the then government that it was imperative to work on fertility rate in order to reduce the burden of the population on the economy. Mba (2002: 25) epitomizes the picture as:

On the demographic scene, available evidence on birth rates in Nigeria tends to indicate that there was a preponderance of very young persons as a result of persistently high fertility and declining mortality. The implication of this is that there were more people entering the reproductive age group thus establishing potential for greater population growth. Also, there was a high dependency ratio because of the high proportion of dependent youths compared with the number of people in economically productive ages of between 15 and 65.

Although this development plan marked the point at which the government became sensitive to the significant relationship between population and development it is important to note that comprehensive population policy was not drawn up until 1988.

The first explicit reduction rate and relatively explicit population policy came into being in 1988. This policy was clear on certain demographic goals. The policy indicated a four-child fertility goal. This goal was definitely not sufficient to bring down high fertility regime prevailing in the country. In addition the only means of controlling childbearing in the population which the policy stipulated was voluntary adoption of contraceptives. Beside the fact that the goals set were unrealistic (Obono, 2003), their actualization was almost impossible owing to the in-decisive approach to implementation. Mba (2002) argued that it was not certain if any "substantial progress" was made in terms of "the attainment of the quantitative demographic goals". In fact the target to reduce the number of children a woman is likely to

have during her lifetime from 6 to 4 by year 2000 and to reduce the rate of growth from 3.3 percent to 2.0 percent by year 2000 have not been attained as at today. The Total Fertility Rate (TFR) for the country stands as 5.7 (PRB, 2010). In 2004 the latest population policy was announced. This policy was the most comprehensive. Specific goals were set and clear objectives itemized. But it is still operating within the laissez-faire framework. The fertility related goals is still far from realization. The next section provides more explicit evidence in support of this claim.

Data

The data upon which the analysis contained in this paper is based were derived from four main sources. These include the National Population Commission (NPC), National Demographic Health Survey (NDHS), Population Reference Bureau (PRB) and the World Bank. The summary data sets published by these organizations were found of immense use in the preparation of this paper. The trend analysis of TFR was made possible through the combination of statistical information published by the NPC (analytical report at the national level on census), NDHS (final reports on demographic and health surveys) and PRB (world population data sheets). The World Bank publication on world development indicators was very useful in highlighting the poverty levels in various regions.

Fertility level as a measure of decisiveness of population policy

Table 1 shows the fertility levels since 1990. As indicated above, the first comprehensive population policy in Nigeria came into existence in 1988 while the second one emerged in the 2004 policy. In the 1988 policy, one of the targets reads to reduce the number of children a woman is likely to bear during her lifetime, now over 6 to 4 per woman by year 2000 and reduce the present rate of population growth from about 3.3 percent per year to 2.5 percent by 1995 and 2.0 percent by year 2000 (Mba, 2002: 6). As shown in table 1, TFR was still as high as 5.7 by 2010 implying that there has not been any significant change in TFR in the country to justify any claim of the impact of the policy. The 2004 policy was modest in its fertility targets, it only aimed at reducing the TFR by 0.6 every year and to ultimately bring growth rate down to 2.0 percent (<http://www.population.gov.ng/policy.htm>). It is apparent however that given the current situation, these targets are not likely to be actualized. In fact, the TFR estimated for year 2008 indicates an increase of 0.2 whereas the goal is to reduce it. Rate of natural increase remains as high as 2.4 and at this rate the population is likely to double in about 29 years to come.

Table 1: Total Fertility Rates, 1981-2010

Year	TFR
1981-82	6.3
1990	6.0
1991	5.9
1999	5.2
2003	5.7
2004	5.7
2005	5.9
2006	5.9
2008	5.9
2009	5.7
2010	5.7

Sources: National Population Commission,
National Demographic and Health Survey,
Population Reference bureau

The picture being painted here is that the 1988 and 2004 national population policies have not impacted the desired influence on demographic behaviour in the country. The crucial point is that the policies lack the strength required to drive the society towards innovative fertility behaviour that can actualize the targets. Pegging family size at 4 vis-à-vis a population size of almost 150 million, growing at 2.4 percent per annum, is certainly manifestation of a care-free policy that is driving towards no achievable demographic

goal. Given the cultural factors guiding fertility behaviour, a total voluntary approach to fertility management may be difficult to bring down the growth rate of the population as stipulated in the policies. The content and totally voluntary implementation strategy also adopted in the 2004 policy reveal that the laissez-faire attitude of Nigerian development planners to the population issue is still exerting apparent influence. It would have been expected that reviewing the effect of the 1988 policy would change the approach in 2004 and a little direct and tougher strategies would be deployed. The focus would not be just voluntary family planning campaign. For instance, in the case of Singapore, upon independence in 1965, the government captured the right attitude towards population control. It rolled out a policy having family planning campaign as the main thrust to check the growth rate of the population (just 4 million in size). But 4 years later the government evaluated the policy and discovered that its impact on the population growth rate was insignificant. Weeks (2002: 539) summarizes change in policy which the government of Singapore adopted in response to the evaluation report:

The result, in 1969, was a liberalization of the.....and concomitant establishment of some economic disincentives to encourage the adoption of the idea that "two is enough." These measures included steeply rising maternity costs for each additional child, low school enrollment priorities for third and higher-order children, withdrawal of paid 2-month maternity leave for civil service and union women after the second child, low public housing priority for large families, and no income tax allowance for more than three children.

This change in policy exerted greater effect on the TFR of Singapore. It dropped from 4.5 in 1966 to 1.4 by 1985. That was a decisive population policy needed to address demographic imbalance in a society. This is the kind of reactionary shift in policy focus expected in the 2004 population policy in Nigeria. But alas the same in-decisive approach re-surfaced.

Comparative Analysis of Development Indicators in Nigeria, China and India

In this section we try to compare TFR, Life Expectancy and GNI PPP per capita (US \$) of a few selected countries who recognized their population problem in the past and implemented decisive and effective population policy. Table 2 shows two countries along with Nigeria that fit this description. China is having the largest population size on earth in terms of size but having one of the lowest growth rates in the world. China's government realized that the population problem was going to be enormous and a very decisive policy was adopted around 1950s to check the growth rate (Baochang et al. 2007). The growth rate was so high that between 1949 and by 2008, the population had more than doubled.

The Chinese revolution, which built the foundation for the socioeconomic transformation which the country is having today, recognized the population question in the drive towards development and embraced one of the most effective policies in the history of the human race. Today, the TFR that was over 6 in 1952 is now below replacement level and the growth rate is just 0.5 (Poston, Jr, 2000; PRB, 2010). With this rate of growth, dependency ratio has declined significantly. Workers have opportunity to save and promote capital accumulation that must have aided the rapid socio-economic development China has witnessed in the last few decades. Indeed the demographic transition positioned China to benefit from the demographic window of opportunity whereby productive age group of the population increased and the proportion of dependent age group declined. These conditions promote economic growth provided there are policies to harness the benefits of change in age structure. Life expectancy of 74, GNI PPP per capita of 6,020 US dollars and only 36 percent of the population living below US\$ 2 per day are pointers of enviable steady socioeconomic progress in China. The demography of India is quite similar to the Chinese experience.

Table 2: Population and Development Indicators in China, India and Nigeria

Country	Population		TFR	RNI	Average Life Exp. Rate	GNI PPP Per Capita	% Pop. Below US\$ 2 a day
	1990	2010					
China	1.1bill	1.3bill	1.6	0.5	74	6,020	36.3(2005)
India	849.5m	1.2bill	3.6	1.5	64	2,960	75.3(2005)
Nigeria	97.3m	158.3m	5.7	2.4	47.5	1,940	83.9(2004)

Source: Population Reference Bureau (2010) and World Bank (2011); GNI PPP is gross national income converted to international dollars using purchasing power parity (PPP)

In a form of general observation, based on the data in table 2, China and India experiencing low TFR and RNI are also exhibiting higher development indicators. This reflected in the GNI PPP per capita, percent of their populations living below UD\$ 2 a day and the prevailing life expectancy. Nigeria's GNI PPP per capita, percent of population below US\$ 2 per day and life expectancy is the lowest. This can be explained by the fact that a population growing at 2.4 percent per annum is having many young people who depend upon the few that are working. It is thus very difficult to save towards capital accumulation. Until demographic transition in the country begins on an irreversible note, the country cannot benefit from demographic window of opportunities. The future may be worse owing to the fact that the population has so many youth that are graduating into the reproductive age group almost every year. Socio-economic development is likely to remain a dream for many decades if the population growth rate is not arrested now. The starting point is to embrace and implement a decisive population policy.

Conclusion

This paper has argued in favour of the pessimists' position on the population-development debate. As earlier stated, this group of theorists posits that rapid growing population slows down development. Although there are many factors that account for socioeconomic development, the population question cannot be relegated to the background. All over the world, there is no rapid growing population that is experiencing enviable socioeconomic development. Fertility is a key variable in population growth given that mortality has declined all over the world. Therefore, this paper argues for an urgent need for the Nigerian state to review the 2004 population policy and incorporate decisive anti-natalist fertility measures.

A few suggestions are raised here. First, fertility is largely a function of culture. There is the need to re-examine the cultural elements that support pronatalism in the country and use the tool of education to address them. Such cultural practices as the male child syndrome, children as women's marital security and children as old age social security may be difficult to suppress but the tools of education and public campaigns are capable of weakening their influence over time. Second, it may be necessary to introduce a comprehensive reproductive health curricular at primary and secondary school levels emphasizing the advantages of replacement fertility (TFR—2.1) to individuals, family and society. Third, the ongoing family planning strategy should be pursued more seriously. It is necessary to invigorate the family planning campaign highlighting the benefits in using contraceptives to space children and to stop childbearing after two. The rumors on the side effects of the contraceptives should be demystified.

Fourth, decisive strategies towards making the Nigerian people to accept the 2 – child - per – family slogan into their subconscious and make it a practice should be fearlessly pursued. Such strategies may include (i) free education only to first two children while subsequent children are made to pay heavily; (ii) health allowances for workers should be restricted to the first two children; (iii) workers having more than two children should be heavily taxed; (iv) maternity leaves should be restricted to first two children, etc. If these and similar strategies are decisively implemented, and regularly reviewed to tighten up any loose end, the population problem is likely to abates in the Nigerian state.

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