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Blaming the Symptoms

Population International on Violent Conflict

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In his alarmist, best-selling book, *The Population Bomb* (originally published in 1968), Paul Erlich predicted global disaster on account of overpopulation and mounting consumption. Increasing violent conflict would be one of the deadly results. The likelihood of war, he wrote, would grow "with each addition to the population, intensifying competition for dwindling resources and food."

The post-Cold War era has seen a dramatic increase in the outbreak of wars. From the former Yugoslavia to the Congo, the former Zaire, from Rwanda to Indonesia, horrific violence has plagued numerous countries since the fall of the Berlin Wall. The question is, why? Might it be related to Erlich's apocalyptic prognostications?

Researchers associated with Population Action International (PAI), a Washington, D.C.-based pro-family planning and policy advocacy group seem to think so. In a 100-page report released with great fanfare on December 17, they contend that there is a significant link between excessive population growth and violent civil conflict—deadly violence between national governments and non-state insurgents, or between different factions of a territorial state.

The authors emphasize, however, that it is not simply population growth that is the problem. It is the combination of disproportionately high numbers of young adults (between 15 and 29 years of age), rapid urbanization, and scarcities of cropland and water, which make conflict more likely.

At the same time, the PAI researchers are careful to note that "Demographic processes neither lead inevitably to, nor do they eliminate the risk of, civil conflict." That said, they assert that countries in the later stages of the demographic transition—a shift from high population growth to low that typically takes place as countries evolve from "developing" to "developed"—are significantly less likely to experience

violent civil conflict. This relationship, they argue, although not one of "direct causation," is, nevertheless, "striking and consistent."

In other words, population growth is, in the end, the principal source of the problem.

Part of the political agenda in publicizing the report, entitled "The Security Demographic," is to encourage Western governments—especially that of the United States—to increase funding for family planning and programs that augment the status of women and girls. Although laudable in and of themselves, the objectives are based on faulty assumptions. As such, they lay the groundwork for dangerous "solutions" to the supposed problem of population growth in the name of reducing violent conflict.

A key, unspoken assumption of the authors is that nation-states are self-contained, and are thus uniquely responsible for their own successes and failures. The world, however, has always been one of connections—ones that transcend boundaries and that are typically profoundly unequal in terms of their effects. Indeed, the very making of the world political map and global economy—one in which tens of millions die annually from preventable malnutrition and disease due to unequal access to and distribution of resources—is, in large part, a result of Western imperialism. It is hardly a coincidence that the vast majority of the poverty-stricken countries that concern the authors as sites of current or potential future conflict are former colonies.

For such reasons, it is folly to try to comprehend the existence of geographic concentrations of poverty—or wealth for that matter—by analyzing factors only contained within those particular areas, just as it would be wrong to limit such an inquiry to a narrow time frame that ignored history. Poverty and wealth are the outcomes of processes that transcend narrow notions of history and geography. Similarly, it is too simple to make sharp distinctions between countries at war and those at peace, especially when the latter are often intimately involved in supporting in numerous ways direct protagonists in an armed conflict.

To state the obvious, one can only understand why a specific conflict occurs by comprehensively examining a complex array of factors, a key one being history. Although the PAI press release announcing the report's release gushes that it "builds on 25 years of existing scholarly research and examines 180 countries," a look at the report's references reveals that the authors avoided any such thorough consideration. Apart from a single book on Sierra Leone and a handful of articles that focus on individual countries, the literature upon which they drew is devoid of in-depth analysis of the roots of any conflict. Instead, they relied largely on global or regional surveys of

population trends, environmental matters, and war, as well as generalized development analyses. By uncritically embracing the totalizing framework of the demographic transition, the authors display a notion of history that suggests some sort of universal process—one size fits all. Thus, it is the interplay between the size of a population, its growth rate, and a fixed resource base that determine the likelihood of conflict, not the specific underlying phenomena or other myriad factors.

The shortcomings of such an approach are painfully evident if one analyzes any of the specific countries that concern the authors. Two of the twenty-five they identify as having "very high levels of demographic risk of civil conflict," for example, are East Timor and occupied Palestine as both have high levels of population growth, rapidly increasing urbanization, and insufficient amounts of cropland and potable water. But it is nonsense to think that one can understand the presence of these phenomena without any sort of serious historical and political analysis, one that entails examining the systematic dispossession of the territories' peoples and resource base by colonizing forces and their partners-in-crime from the "international community." To the extent these areas risk "civil conflict," limiting population growth—the key variable—would do little to nothing to reduce societal tensions.

As even the PAI authors contend, "demographically high-risk" countries have avoided mass violence through various mechanisms—ranging from land redistribution to encouraging out-migration. Thus, high population growth is not a causal factor. At best, it only seems to be an accompanying factor, the effects of which are far less clear than the report suggests.

Given the types of interventions discussed by the authors that have lessened tensions within particular territories, would it not make more sense to focus on combating endemic poverty, lessening socio-economic inequality within and between countries, and stifling the international arms trade? Or how about eliminating or, at least, greatly liberalizing immigration controls by wealthy countries so that the poor have greater opportunities to access resources (such as relatively high-paying jobs) that will allow them to break out of their poverty? Or, to address a specific "at-risk" area of the world, how about ending Israel's occupation of Palestinian lands and allowing Palestinians a just share of the area's water resources?

Despite all their caveats and liberal pretensions, the PAI researchers have produced a dangerous and profoundly conservative report. Regardless of their intentions, the effect of their analysis and prescriptions is to reinforce an ugly global status quo—one in which there are huge and growing gaps between rich and poor. It is a socio-chasm that

often corresponds to racial distinctions, what many have characterized as "global apartheid."

The framing of their analysis in terms of demography focuses attention on mythical hyper-fertile Third World hordes, while obfuscating historical and contemporary factors that underlie poverty. As a result, the authors put forth an argument that is literally backward: Poverty and insecurity are not the result of too many people, as they suggest; rather, large numbers of people, and their urban concentrations are the result of historic impoverishment and insecurity, as well as misguided forms of development. Perhaps if the researchers had actually conducted on-the-ground research in the countries concerned, and spoken to some of the human beings that embody the supposed demographic high risk their conclusions would have been very different.

Backward analysis leads to misguided solutions. Hence, the report includes among its recommendations that military and intelligence analysts develop expertise in demographic matters. This is a recipe for disaster: Given the typical brutality of military establishments—especially in countries under occupation or authoritarian regimes, or in countries with ethnically different populations deemed undesirable by ruling elites—one can imagine all sorts of ugly types of interventions to combat "demographic threats."

In mid-December, for example, Ha'aretz, an Israeli newspaper, reported that Dr. Yitzhak Ravid, a senior researcher at the Israeli government's Armaments Development Authority, had called upon the state to "implement a stringent policy of family planning in relation to its Muslim population." Explaining why there was a need for such a policy, he continued: "the delivery rooms in Soroka Hospital in Be'ersheba have turned into a factory for the production of a backward population."

There is nothing in the PAI report to suggest that its authors would endorse such practices. To the contrary, they emphasize voluntary measures. But in advocating military involvement in population control, the authors open the door to unsavory characters and institutions. And by pointing the finger of blame at the poor and those at the margins of economic power, people who have little control over the forces shaping their lives, while failing to call for redistribution of wealth and control of and access to resources, the PAI team shields and serves the interests of the rich and powerful. It is this latter group (numerically small on a global scale) that consumes the majority of the world's resources, while working to maintain an international political economy that denies the global majority a fair share of the planet's wealth.

This is what needs to be challenged.

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