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Politicians' support for population control is dangerous

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Recently, when asked if he would act to “curb population growth” because “the planet cannot sustain this growth,” Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders answered in the affirmative, noting he would focus on “poor countries around the world.”

Former Vice President Joe Biden, one of Sanders' rivals and current leading contender for the Democratic nomination, previously voiced acceptance of China's one-child (now two-child) policy, telling a Chinese audience, “Your policy has been one which I fully understand — I'm not second-guessing — of one child per family.”

The problem with embracing a demographic goal to “curb population growth” rather than leaving each family to make their own decisions is that it often results in coercion. Also, the very idea of “overpopulation” is fundamentally misguided.

Today, China's two-child policy still limits family sizes and requires that parents apply for birth permits. This year, one couple who could not afford a fine of \$9,570 for violating family planning regulations, had their modest life savings seized. While rarer than under the one-child policy, there are even still cases of forced sterilization and abortion.

“A third baby is not allowed so we are renting a home away from our village. The local government carries out pregnancy examinations every three months. If we weren't in hiding, they would have forced us to have an abortion,” one Chinese father of three told the BBC.

The idea of population control is old. In 1798, an English clergyman, Thomas Robert Malthus, published *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, warning population growth would deplete natural resources. To prevent famine, he thought it morally permissible to “court the return of the plague” by having the poor live in swamps and even to ban “specific remedies for ravaging diseases.” His nonchalant attitude toward the welfare of the poor would prove an enduring part of overpopulation alarmism.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Malthus' view became resurgent. In 1966, U.S. President Lyndon Johnson made foreign aid dependent on countries adopting population control. In 1969, President Richard Nixon established a separate Office of Population within USAID and gave it a \$50 million annual budget. In 1977, the head of the office, Dr. Reimert Ravenholt, said that he hoped to sterilize a quarter of the world's women.

By the 1980s, the background document to the International Conference on Family Planning, co-written by the United Nations Population Fund, International Planned Parenthood Federation,

and Population Council, decreed, “When provision of contraceptive information and services does not bring down the fertility level quickly enough to help speed up development, governments may decide to limit the freedom of choice of the present generation.”

Neo-Malthusianism spread among international organizations and government leaders. The neo-Malthusians offered financial support to the cause of curbing population growth, rewarding governments in poor countries that enacted population control while sounding no alarms when those measures became coercive.

India’s Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared an Emergency (1975-77) suspending civil liberties and mandated some 11 million sterilizations. China’s one-child policy (1979-2015) saw over 300 million Chinese women fitted with IUDs modified to be irremovable without surgery, over 100 million sterilizations, and over 300 million abortions, many coerced. In 1983, the UNFPA bestowed the first Population Award prize to Indira Gandhi and to Qian Xinzong, the man who was then in charge of China’s one-child policy.

Ironically, population growth can be beneficial. Wherever people are free to engage in innovation and exchange, economist Julian Simon noted they are the “ultimate resource,” increasing the supply of other resources, discovering alternatives, and improving efficiency.

Research has found every 1 percent increase in population lowers commodity prices by almost 1 percent, meaning each person helps decrease scarcity, on average.

Today, population is at an all-time high, yet wherever economic freedom allows humanity to realize its innovative potential, prosperity has exceeded our ancestors’ imaginations.

Human wellbeing is improving rapidly, as chronicled on websites like HumanProgress.org (of which I am managing editor) and [Our World in Data](http://OurWorldinData.org). Whatever challenges, environmental or otherwise, may loom ahead, it will be human ingenuity that will have to rise to the occasion.

The more minds working on solutions, the better.

In any case, birth rates tend to fall without coercion as countries grow richer. But the potential for human rights abuses alone is sufficient reason to oppose aiming to “curb population growth.”

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