

The London Family Planning Summit, 11 July 2012

The evidence is irrefutable: population growth continues to compromise economic growth, and it is poor women who are suffering the most from multiple pregnancies. To move forward, things must change



Another opportunity has come knocking on the door of the developing world to wake up to its population responsibilities. It was the Family Planning Summit held in London on 11 July 2012, sponsored by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the British Government. The aim of the Summit was to increase by 120 million the number of women and girls of the developing world that would have access to voluntary family planning services within the next 8 years. For this, the Summit planned to raise US\$2.3 billion, but it overshot this target by \$300 million through pledges from governments, international agencies, foundations, and civil organisations in the private sector.

International statistics used at the summit presented a dismal picture for the Third World. Every 2 minutes a woman dies from pregnancy-related causes, and 99% of these deaths occur in the developing world, particularly in rural areas. Sub-Saharan Africa alone has about 5 million abortions per annum. If the target of the Summit can be achieved, about 50 million unwanted pregnancies would be averted by the year 2020, reducing death from pregnancy-related causes by 200 000.

The summit rightly emphasised the importance of making available to women and girls the knowledge and the appliances necessary for voluntary family planning. This works well where the level of female education and autonomy is reasonably high. The situation is different in the developing world where the percentage of educated women is still very low, and oppressive male dominance is strongly supported both by tradition, culture, and religion – whether imported or indigenous. This suggests that men should be more intensely targeted than has been the case in the past. In the typical family in the developing world, the wife and daughter cannot do anything without the express permission of the husband or father. Violation of this rule attracts serious repercussions which, in the worst cases, include social ostracism, physical mutilation, and even death.

When a woman requests family planning advice after

anything from 5 to 12 deliveries, I insist that she should bring her husband for the discussion, and many find it difficult to get their husbands to come. When he turns up and you lay the choices before them, the man often says it is up to the wife. 'She is the one who gets pregnant!' Men need to be more supportive of their wives.

Furthermore, both the temporary and permanent methods of contraception are easier in men, but the average man in developing countries is more likely to turn the subject into a joke. In polygamous families, wives frequently seek supremacy over their mates through the number of children. There is also considerable ignorance about the methods of contraception in men. Vasectomy is often misunderstood as castration that would result in impotence.

Some factors weaken the political will of countries to curb the rate of population growth. While political instability is the gold medallist, religion and polygamy are not far behind. The distribution of national wealth within our countries is often partly based on population, and the political administrative units often think it is smart to outbreed the other provinces. For centuries, our people have derived all their needs through farm work, with the size of the farm depending on the number of manual labourers available. Each family desired many children to increase the labour force and their prosperity. The situation has changed, while the wish for large families remains. Because the rate of population increase outstrips that of economic growth, many countries in our region have to run to remain on the same spot, growth-wise. Despite their considerable efforts in developmental programmes, the people experience worsening of the socio-economic conditions.

Today, large families are more common with people in the lower income bracket. They are also more affected by unemployment, school dropout, and socio-political unrest. Governments in developing countries should regard as top priority the reduction of poverty, increasing education, and raising the standard of living. This would result in an increased demand for family planning services and create a favourable environment for the non-governmental organisations and the private sector to record impressive success in establishing the more formal family planning services.

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