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Toward a Better Consensus on Population: Adding the Quality Dimension
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Executive Summary

The role of population change in development and the associated policies have been highly controversial topics over the past decades. On the one hand there is little doubt that rapid population growth is a major hindrance in rural development, while on the other hand the free choice of the number of children is viewed as a basic human right. What has been labeled the “new consensus on population” achieved at the Cairo World Population Conference in 1994 is a focus on the unmet need for family planning, i.e., the fact that women in developing countries have on average somewhat more children than they say they want.

The main thesis of this presentation is that the paradigm becomes much stronger and more convincing when female education is explicitly taken into consideration. All over the developing world women with more education want and have significantly fewer children than uneducated women. In Ethiopia, for instance, the DHS (Demographic and Health Survey) shows that women without formal education have on average more than six children, while those with junior secondary or higher have only two. This is explained by a shift from “quantity” to “quality” in which more educated women chose to have fewer children and offer them better life chances. But education also provides women with better access to all kinds of information including health practices. As a consequence, child and maternal mortality are much lower for educated women. It has recently been shown that this is primarily a direct consequence of education and not of better income and household wealth which tend to improve along with education. Recent studies on the unmet need for family planning have also shown that the main reasons why women still have fewer children than they want are lack of information and a weak position vis-à-vis the husband. Here again, improving female education is the best remedy. Due to this strong interaction of education with both fertility and mortality, education becomes a very important and at the same time uncontroversial population policy. These effects will be illustrated numerically for selected African countries.

New data of education by age and sex for most countries in the world for the period 1970-2030 have facilitated new studies on the returns to education. These show that basic female education is not only a key for stabilizing population growth, but also the key for economic growth and escaping the poverty trap (Lutz et al. in Science 2008), for improving agricultural productivity and food security (PEDA Models by UNECA), for the spread of liberal democracies (Lutz et al. in PDR 2010) and for enhancing societies’ adaptive capacities to climate change (Lutz, in preparation).

Viewed together these studies suggest that the combination of massive new efforts in female education together with reproductive health services should become the overriding priority in all international development policies. Human capital (measured as Population x Education x Health) must be recognized as the root cause of almost any development and given the corresponding priority in international development efforts.

Adding this quality dimension to the consideration of population numbers makes this approach a much more powerful, more acceptable and hence better population consensus. It is completely in line with the Millennium Development Goals and highlights the important interaction between the individual goals.