

COMMENTARY

Population: Perceptions and Realities

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I PROPOSE THAT we look into issues of population and development, of women's health, and family welfare. I also propose that we look at the cultural dimensions of reproduction, specifically, how Filipinos look at population issues, and how these interface with economic, political and religious ideologies. These ideologies converge to create a "culture of population", a way of looking at people which affects what demographers call reproductive intentions (the number of children a person will want to have), as well as our interactions with our communities and with the nation.

As an anthropologist, with an interest in demography, I hope to stimulate some germinal ideas that can help us to deal with our population problems in a more scientific and humanist manner.

Population facts

I promise not to use too many statistics but I did want to start out with "hard" facts, which we can then compare with perceptions.

The current Philippine population, projected from the 2000 census, is about 80 million. Between 1990 and 2000, the annual population growth rate was 2.3%, one of the highest in Asia.

These figures are often cited in the newspapers but may not mean much to people. They take on greater meaning explained in relation to other countries, for example, our population being the 14th largest among all countries in the world.

We tend to think of countries like India as very crowded, and look at the Philippines as being far from the madding crowds that we associate with these population-dense countries. Yet, excluding city- and island-states, we actually rank eight in the world in terms of population density, after Bangladesh, South Korea, the Netherlands, Belgium, Japan, India and Sri Lanka. It is striking that of these eight, four are developed and the other four are developing countries. The Philippines actually belong to the league of Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka, facing daunting challenges of trying to develop, economically, amid very large populations.

As a whole, the Philippines is quite densely populated but Metro Manila is even more packed with people, with a current population of about 13 million, more than double the entire population of the Philippines in 1900. This sprawling urban center's population is the 14th largest among the world's cities, larger than that of Moscow, Shanghai, London, Dhaka and Paris.

Again, it is not just the absolute population size that matters but density. And again, we tend to think of "crowded" cities in terms of those in South Asia. Yet, it turns out Metro Manila is the fourth most densely populated city in the world, after Cairo, Tianjin and Seoul. Manila is, in fact, more crowded than Mumbai, Delhi, Shanghai or Hong Kong, the cities that we tend to associate with crowding.

Facts versus perceptions

The decision to adopt family planning, at the level of couples, communities and nations, depends to a large extent on perceptions. Are we "crowded" or not? Do we have too many people or too few?

The perceptions go beyond actual head counts. Many factors affect the way we evaluate population, resources and space. There is, for example, a tendency to think of the population problem as "their" – other people's – problem. For the upper classes, the population problem is often framed as rapidly reproducing slums, of teeming masses of the unwashed. These perceptions are accompanied by many fears, of criminality, of seething political discontent.

To some extent, it is true that urban poor communities have large populations. To be more concrete, we should look at the Philippines' largest barangays in terms of population. These are Barangay 176 in Caloocan, better known as Bagong Silang, with a count in 1995 of 188,419. This is followed by three barangays in Quezon City: Commonwealth with 120,569, Payatas with 112,690, Batasan Hills with 109,723.

Compare those population figures with the more affluent Barangay Forbes Park with 3,420, Dasmarinas (Makati) with 5,757 and Wack-wack Greenhills with 3,222.

Numbers to people

The Chinese term for population is *ren kou*, which literally translates to “people’s mouths”. It is a graphic way of describing populations, recognizing that beyond the numbers that come out of censuses, we are dealing with people, with very real needs in terms of food, shelter, jobs.

The objective reality for the Philippines is that we have a large population, the majority of whom live in abject poverty. Groups opposed to family planning will say that large population is in fact our greatest resource, that populations should be seen as consumers that fuel economic growth. We also find, in the letters these groups write to the newspapers, glowing pictures of how the country is blessed with vast natural resources that can support a much larger population.

But we forget we are a country that mainly consumes the products of other nations, while exporting people to work overseas, their remittances used to purchase more of imported products rather than developing our own productivity.

I would also challenge the claim that we have vast natural resources that can be tapped since we have, over the years, depleted our resources. To cite just one example, at the turn of the 20th century much of the country was covered by forests; today, there is practically no primary growth left. Not only have we squandered our resources, we have poisoned our environment, making it difficult to sustain the resources that are left.

Amid these problems of population and environment, our population continues to grow rapidly. Our usage of family planning remains low, about 50% of married women, compared to 60 to 80% in neighboring countries. The figure of 50% includes people using ineffective methods such as withdrawal.

Worse, our family planning programs have been greatly weakened under the current Arroyo administration, with the president directly interfering with the Health Department’s family planning programs, mainly by diverting funds intended for the purchase of contraceptives toward “natural” family planning.

President Arroyo herself provides an interesting study on perceptions. She has said that she herself used contraceptive pills many years ago, and blamed, tongue-in-

cheek, her being hot-tempered (*mataray*) on the use of the pills. Despite her being an economist, she seems oblivious of the problems posed, on economic development, by a large and rapidly growing population.

Reality checks

Three babies are born each minute in the Philippines. Half of the population is below the age of 21, constituting what demographers call a “youth bulge”, with formidable social and economic needs. While neighboring countries all reached the peak of the youth bulge by the year 2000, we will continue with this youth bulge into the year 2025 because of our weak population programs.

Filipinos do see and feel the adverse impact of large populations. At the level of communities, we see the uncollected garbage, the unemployed and underemployed, currently comprising about a third of the population. We go to government hospitals and find two or three patients sharing a bed. We go to Rizal High School in Pasig and find 25,000 students, with 200 sections for the freshman year alone. That high school is reputed to be the largest in the world, cited in the Guinness Book of Records.

Those are the visible consequences of rapid population growth. What people do not often see is the continuing environmental degradation that comes from the strains of population. Neither are people conscious about how women’s health is affected. It is not surprising that our annual Family Planning Surveys always show women want to have a lower number of children compared to their husband. Women bear the brunt of child-bearing and child-rearing. They know how child illnesses and mortality increase because of closely spaced births. Our infant mortality rate is still among the highest in the region. Put in absolute terms, if there are 1.8 million births this year, about 50,000 of these babies die before the age of one.

Little attention has been given to the psychosocial strains that come with crowding. There is so much talk about drug dependency and yet people have not bothered to explore the correlations between drug use and the despair of living in crowded urban slums.

Groups opposed to family planning say that other countries have all “grayed”, often citing exaggerated figures about the geriatric population and warning that we, too, will turn gray if we adopt family planning. “Look,” we are told, “we are exporting Filipinos to care for the aged in other countries”. We forget that this continuing

export of labor represents a tremendous loss of social capital for the Philippines – we are losing health professionals and caregivers to other countries, so that our own children, as well as our own aged, are often neglected, as a result.

Again, groups opposed to family planning claim that the use of family planning is part of a “culture of death”, that contraception leads to abortion. Yet we know too that there are at least 400,000 abortions – all illegal and performed under extremely unsafe conditions – performed each year in the Philippines. In Metro Manila, one in every six pregnancies is aborted. The studies from the UP Population Institute are very clear in showing that these result from unwanted pregnancies, pregnancies that occur largely because of lack of access to contraception.

There are many unseen vulnerabilities that come with our large population. For example, one reason given for the deadly spread of SARS (Sudden Acute Respiratory Syndrome) in Hong Kong early in 2003 was its congested living conditions. Specifically, it was mentioned that the Kun Tong district, one of the areas affected by SARS, had a population density of 55,000 people per square kilometer.

I have wondered if our health authorities are aware of the population densities in parts of Metro Manila. Manila’s District 1 (Tondo) has a population density of 64,000 people per square kilometer. That figure is still lower than 88,000 for the municipality of Navotas, or 100,000 for Tatalon in Quezon City. Epidemics spread much more efficiently in densely populated areas, which makes the Philippines particularly vulnerable.

Culture and crowding

Despite all these vulnerabilities, we still hear all kinds of arguments against family planning. I have already cited anti-family planning groups claiming that large populations mean a more robust economy because of the large numbers of consumers, as well as laborers to export. A variation here is the idea that other countries with a “contraceptive mentality” are now paying the price with graying populations, without anyone to care for them except the Filipino caregivers we export.

While we need to counter such arguments, I also feel we need to tackle the cultural perceptions of population and crowding. Ironically, our large population has itself created an environment that distorts cultural notions of crowding. Because we are so used to crowds, we are actually unable to recognize crowdedness.

Positive cultural norms are built around crowds. While westerners will gasp and complain when they see a large crowd, Filipinos will say, “*Oh, masaya!*” (Oh, how happy!). Happiness is in fact a crowd.

It is not surprising that when Filipinos visit a western country, they will often complain that life there is *malungkot* (sad), the sadness coming from what they say are deserted streets (*walang katao-tao*, no people).

I have thought about our local terms for crowd and cannot think of one which has an exact equivalence in meaning. We talk about crowded-ness (*masikip*) but the term does not quite have the negative connotations of the English “crowd”.

These notions of crowds and crowdedness interface with our strong reproductive imperative. Culturally, we believe everyone must reproduce. Not to have children is *sayang* (a waste). An infertile couple is looked at with great pity.

One’s personhood is in fact defined by this reproductive imperative, overlapping with gender constructions. Masculinity (*pagkalalake*) is defined in terms of virility, so that it not uncommon to hear men boasting that they have several panganay (eldest children), meaning they have several wives producing first borns. Likewise, femininity (*pagkababae*) is also defined in terms of having children, although there is much less emphasis on the numbers.

My point is that given this reproductive imperative, it is not surprising our culture evolves values and norms that see a large population positively, at all levels: within households, communities and the entire nation, and interacting with notions of social interactions. When Filipino parents see a child staying alone in his or her room, they will automatically ask, “Is anything wrong?” It is hard for Filipinos to understand, for example, that someone might want to be alone, and that there is peace to be found in solitude.

There are powerful interactions among these cultural norms — even couples who want to plan their families will insist on having at least two children because a single child would be *malungkot* (sad), growing up without siblings.

It should not be surprising that this complex of values and perceptions spill over into all spheres of public and private life. Our concepts of living space, for example, are minimal. The last national survey found that the median floor area of a Filipino home is a mere 29.6 square meters, but my use of “mere” reflects my own bias. Filipinos living in a 29.6 square meter home, with 10 other people, will find this acceptable, even *masaya* (fun).

Our notions of living space extend beyond homes. The way we drive, the way we queue – all reflect a recognition that space is limited but still tolerable. But the adaptations here can become dysfunctional. Because space is limited, space is immediately grabbed when it becomes available. An empty lot is taken over by squatters. On the roads, an empty lane, even if it is meant for cars moving in one direction, are taken over by do-it-yourself counterflow drivers. Even our art forms tend to be crowded, every space of a canvas painted in.

We actually fear open or empty spaces, and move aggressively when we see a vacuum, operating on concepts of *singit*, moving into the most crowded spaces, and *sayang*, a waste, just as not being reproducing is a waste.

All these cultural perceptions, dysfunctional as they are, become even more problematic when amplified by political and religious ideologies. There is this building on Shaw Boulevard with a mural on its side showing Jesus carrying a baby with the caption: “This is a CHILD (capitals in the original), not a choice.” That mural captures a powerful religious ideology that equates reproduction to a divine mandate.

We have to become sensitive to cultural perceptions, and the way these are built. Even the distinction between “artificial” and “natural” family planning, for example, needs to be challenged. “Artificial” family planning, especially when uttered in the same breath with “natural” family planning, transforms “artificial” to mean “unnatural”, unearthing women’s fears about hormonal pills causing cancer, fears that are not surprisingly peddled by anti-family planning groups. Note that one could argue, as some religious groups do, that the abstinence in natural family planning is “unnatural” because it is asking couples not to have sex when nature “intends” sex to occur.

People on the Left will ally with religious conservatives to argue that there is no population problem, that there are enough resources to go round if we had more equitable distribution of wealth. It is a point I will agree with, but will also question as myopic if presented as the only solution.

Another argument I hear is that a couple should be allowed to have as many children as they want, as long as they can support the children. Again, the concept of *sayang* is operational here, sometimes even mixed with eugenics as people shake their heads, “Look at who is reproducing, only the poor and uneducated. The rich (presumably rich because they are more intelligent) should have more children to improve the gene pool.”

The problems arise not just in terms of ideological debates around family planning but in the way lifestyles and worldviews compete, or even contradict each other. Although we like to think of ourselves as “social”, we in fact have very individualistic worldviews, a product of an American laissez-faire economic philosophy. For example, we do not like governments interfering with our private lives, a point used by anti-family planning groups to argue against involvement of the government in providing contraception.

But our individualism, combined with our reproductive imperative, can be disastrous. We say it is all right for couples to have as many children as they can, as long as they can afford to raise them, but forget that there are issues of environmental conservation and public commons. A couple may be able to afford to have 12 children but would having those 12 children be responsible, given the strain on resources that are public goods?

It is common for westerners to write local newspapers expressing horror about our large population and urging the government to intensify family planning programs, especially for the poor. I tend to have mixed feelings about this. Westerners, as well as the Filipino upper classes, have no business telling the poor to practice family planning if they themselves do not plan their families, or do their share for conserving resources. Just to be more concrete here, we know that a low-income Filipino household, with perhaps six to eight members, will typically have an electric bill of about P50 a month, consuming very small amounts of energy, while a household of four in one of Makati’s plush villages will easily run a bill of over P10,000 a month.

We have to be comprehensive in looking at the complex of perceptions people have and how these converge to alleviate or exacerbate our population problem. Culture has a “habituating” function, allowing us to accept problems as “natural”, or inevitable. I fear that as our population continues to grow, we are unable to see, or unwilling to come to terms with the problems of crowding. We argue that there is no population problem but complain incessantly about environmental degradation, pollution, traffic, the substandard care in public schools and hospitals.

It is time we reexamine our population education programs. There is more to population issues than anatomy classes and contraceptives. We need to bring in a scientific understanding of population and development issues. We need to link family planning to social responsibility. We need to challenge the monopolies of a noisy conservative minority with their distortions of scriptures and theology. Public health and family planning must once again be linked to ethics and morality in all forums.

Finally, I suggest our population education programs build on our culture, drawing from and critically challenging existing perceptions, norms and values to develop a new ethos of reproduction and child-rearing. Do we bring children into the world to fulfill our masculinity or femininity, to carry on the family line? Do we look at them as old age insurance? Or do we see children as people, brought into the world to be provided for, cared for and loved, so that we can build families, communities and a nation?

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