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Pathways to Family Policy in Half a Century of Population Control: International Paradigms and National Programmes

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1 Introduction

The size, structure, and productivity of populations have been major issues in politics since the emergence of the state in history, that is since the first ancient empires. Population growth was an important advantage since a larger population meant stronger military power and economic growth, but population issues were not a global concern. However, the demographic transition that began in the eighteenth century resulted in sustained, long-term population growth, and population policy has since become a concern of global social policy. After World War II, fears of global overpopulation started dominating the international discourse. Global policy actors, such as international organisations as well as NGOs and private institutions, became salient players in the domestic policy arena in developing nation states.

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Thus, population policy is rich with international interdependencies. However, these have played out in vastly different contexts. Not only did political regimes differ, but global policy actors also encountered countries at different stages of their demographic transitions and proceeding at different paces. Naturally, these differences produced diverging interests, even among the countries of the Global South. Presently, many countries of the Global South have not yet completed their demographic transitions, while others have joined the developed welfare states in aiming to stabilise or even increase birth rates.

Countries also differ in their approaches and emphases on population policy and family policy. When the now-developed countries experienced their first wave of fertility decline, with total fertility rates dropping steeply from the 1870s until the 1930s, states responded with negative population policy: outlawing contraception and banning information about birth control. But they also started to regulate fertility through state interventions, which provide time, money, or services to families, leading to the development of family policy as a discernible area of social policy. To compensate for the economic cost of having children, countries institutionalised mandatory family-wage systems or family allowances financed by taxation or employer contributions (Montanari 2000). Rather than easing the burden of childrearing, such measures often pursue pro-natalist goals by taking into consideration the birth order either as a qualifying condition or to differentiate the extent of benefits. In general, measures that reduce the opportunity cost of parenthood can be classified as pro-natalist if they encourage working mothers to have another child. Other family policy measures, such as leave and care policies that combine incentives for mothers to engage in paid work while at the same time keeping infrastructural support for reconciliation at a low level, can serve anti-natalist goals as well.

Developing countries have been confronted with a vastly different international environment and were expected to play a proactive role in lowering their fertility rates. Did this international policy model leave room for measures aimed at the socio-economic well-being of families or did the goal of controlling population growth crowd out family policy? Were national governments impacted by newly emerging policy models and did they align their family policy with them?

Building on established narratives of population control as a global model (Barrett and Frank 1999; Connelly 2008), we trace how population policy was legitimised and understood globally and enacted nationally. To this purpose, we analyse the three major (that is political) UN population conferences (1974, 1984, 1994) as platforms of interdependence. On the one hand, they serve as “forums where ideas are shaped and disseminated, where experts present theories for world betterment” (Barrett and Frank 1999, 200). On the other hand, they are also the arenas for countries to signal commitment, criticism, or distance from global norms. While intended to be events of global consensus, often carefully orchestrated, they are also full of conflict, even when couched in the conciliatory language of diplomacy.

In this analysis, we focus on two countries, China and Kenya, whose demographic situations provide sharply contrasting cases. Still the most populous country on earth, China has completed its demographic transition and its population will start to shrink within the next ten years. Kenya is still a fast-growing society and according to current projections, population growth will not stop for some time to come. These differences not only reflect different legacies (McNicoll 2009), but they are contrasting cases, as will be shown, with regard to their ideological and political response patterns to population questions.

2 Population Control and Family Policies: Three Conferences

When the *World Population Conference* took place in Bucharest in 1974, the global movement advocating for curbing population growth was at the pinnacle of its success. In the three decades after WWII, the UN Population Division had turned population growth into a measurable problem by designing censuses and calculating projections. India had become a model country, embracing population control in its first five-year plan in 1952 and receiving ample support from American funded NGOs (e.g. the International Planned Parenthood Foundation). And in 1966, heads of state of countries with such different economic and

political systems as South Korea, Morocco, Finland, and Yugoslavia, along with eight others, signed a “Declaration of Population”, which acknowledged global population growth as a global problem demanding swift national responses. Population control had become firmly institutionalised as a model at the global level, with the UN Fund for Population Activity, founded in 1967, acting as a central funding agency and active in a growing number of countries that were adopting national population policies (Barrett and Frank 1999, 215; Connelly 2008, 232).

These milestones, which had turned birth control from a topic of moral suspicion into the obvious answer to a measurable and imminent global problem, rested upon a new rationalisation of population control in terms of collective as well as individual development. Its core idea, referred to as neo-Malthusianism, aligned family planning with the standardised goals of modern statehood (Meyer et al. 1997), promising economic development through population control.

The *World Population Plan of Action* (WPPA) to be adopted in Bucharest was supposed to further this agenda by enshrining a global goal of fertility reduction. Even though explicit targets were undermined by unexpected resistance from developing countries that strove to establish a New International Economic Order (NIEO) and concomitantly held the belief that “population problems are not a cause but a consequence of underdevelopment” (Finkle and Crane 1975, 105), the link between development and population remained the overall framework under which global norms of fertility control were operating.

However, in the final WPPA, the global population control for development agenda was circumscribed by two other frameworks, each aligned to world-cultural norms: First of all, the protest by countries of the Global South led to the inclusion of the “sovereign right of each nation” to formulate and implement population policies. Secondly, an emphasis on human rights and especially the right of “couples and individuals (...) to decide freely and responsibly the number and spacing of their children” brought the individual back into a framework from which they had been mostly absent and which had been primarily concerned with collective welfare.

While this broadened agenda could have opened the possibility to conceptualise family policy as an explicit element of population policy,

the WPPA itself understood population policy rather narrowly in terms of family planning and posited a conflictual relationship with family policy measures such as family allowances. In the preparatory session of the Population Commission, it was emphasised that “there might be conflict between population policies and family policies which, at another level, might be seen respectively as explicit and implied policies” (United Nations Economic and Social Council 1974). The plan, under the heading “Reproduction, family formation and the status of women”, mitigated these anticipated conflicts by advising against the curtailing of family policies with the aim of reducing fertility.

The 1984 conference in Mexico City reaffirmed the WPPA in its *Declaration on Population and Development* and therefore did little to reframe the link between population and family policy. The accompanying set of recommendations made more explicit calls for family policies, which were seen as complementary to family planning.

A vastly expanded *Programme of Action* adopted at the 1994 *International Conference on Population and Development* in Cairo signified a new paradigm (for its history see McIntosh and Finkle 1995). Even though development remains the broad context in which the population question is discussed, the emphasis shifted markedly from collective development to individual rights. This change is most evident in the many safeguards against coercive family planning programmes and the range of human rights invoked. The role of family policy, which is supposed to protect the stability of the family through addressing the “cultural and economic factors behind increasing costs of child-rearing”, on the one hand, and to “achieve equality and equity based on harmonious partnership”, on the other, was thus strengthened, especially when compared to the 1974 WPPA. While the programme’s long list of principles, objectives, and recommended actions allows that a “diligent researcher will be able to find language supporting almost any course he or she may wish to pursue” (McIntosh and Finkle 1995, 226), it still integrates family policy into the realm of population policy by way of re-framing the latter as dependent on the realisation of individual (social) rights. The flip side of this is that family planning with demographic targeting, once legitimised through the collective aspirations of “development”, is no longer a consensual policy model.

The successive plans and declarations place population control within an increasingly complex set of expectations with regard to national institutions: China and Kenya serve as cases that illustrate how national population policies interacted with global norms.

3 China

By the time of the first World Population Conference, the People's Republic of China not only already had rudimentary elements of family policy, namely maternity leave and benefit policies (legislated in 1951) as well as a childcare system directed at urban women workers, but it had also embarked on a massive expansion of its family planning programmes starting to set population targets in its economic plans in 1973. Under the slogan "Marry a little later, space a little more, have a little fewer, raise a little better", the Chinese authorities pushed birth control using intra-uterine devices and female sterilisation, as well as providing opportunities for abortions, which outnumbered live births during the 1970s (Connelly 2008, 339; Therborn 2004, 278). However, China had little interest in becoming a model case with regard to its population policy. Following the Sino-Soviet split, it positioned itself firmly in the camp of the developing countries, supporting the demands for an NIEO and emphasising respect for the principle of sovereignty as a basis for international cooperation. It is against this backdrop that its statement at the Bucharest conference, which at first glance seems to contradict its own policies, must be understood. The Chinese representative polemicised against the neo-Malthusian framework originally espoused by the developed countries and emphasised that "of all things in the world, people are the most precious". The notion that population growth itself posed any social or economic problem at all was rejected. "Along with this development, the population has grown rather quickly. This is not at all a bad thing but a very good thing". If anything caused population problems, it was "unemployment" and "imperialism". However, the statement did still leave room for population policies. They could and should be implemented if national sovereignty was respected, aid was not made conditional, and the "complete voluntariness of the parties concerned" secured. China

committed itself to “planned population growth” (Wei 1994), a phrase that perfectly expresses its commitment to a large-scale policy of population control while at the same time disavowing the legitimacy of prevailing global discourses of neo-Malthusianism.

By the time of the 1984 World Population Conference, when the one-child policy, introduced in 1979, was widely known, China had to defend itself against the suspicion that its policy contravened the recommendations set forth at the conference, which clearly demanded that couples should “exercise their basic human right to decide freely, responsibly and without coercion, the number and spacing of their children”. In a rhetorical sleight-of-hand, the Chinese delegation committed itself to the “principle of integrating state guidance with the masses’ voluntariness”. Similarly, Chinese officials at the 1994 conference in Cairo emphasised that population policies “should help couples to freely and responsibly make decisions concerning child-bearing. All forms of coercion must be opposed” (UN Department of Public Information 1994).

But even as China’s diplomatic stance within the UN shifted from emphasising national sovereignty as an organisational principle towards paying at least lip service to the idea of substantive shared world-cultural norms, the link between population policy and the social rights of families was not taken up in official statements. Likewise, family policy measures to encourage couples to have a second child after ending the one-child policy are gaining relevance but are still rudimentary and ineffective (Yang and Huang 2020).

4 Kenya

On paper, Kenya is a pioneer of population policy among the countries of Sub-Saharan Africa (Therborn 2004, 280). When Tom Mboya, Minister of Planning and Development, pushed for the adoption of a population policy in 1966, he was following a script set forth by a global epistemic community: experts from the US-based Population Council had arrived in 1965 and recommended a highly standardised step-by-step programme which was applied in countries across the Global South, “(T)he government should declare a policy to reduce population growth;

set up a family planning council with representatives from different ministries and NGOs; start the programme where success was most likely; and ‘rely heavily on the intrauterine device’” (Connelly 2008, 234). But between 1967 and 1978, when President Kenyatta died, national commitment remained low, bar the adoption of neo-Malthusian rhetoric in national development plans. Under the Moi presidency (1978–2002), the efforts to curb population growth gained more traction, even though this was mostly due to the utility of neo-Malthusian logic for blaming low economic growth on high population growth. Considerable pressure by donors who insisted on the creation of the National Council for Population and Development in 1982 was an additional factor (Chimbwete et al. 2005). Correspondingly, its delegates reported, “progress towards implementing the recommendations of the Plan of Action” at the 1984 conference in Mexico City and reaffirmed how population growth placed “serious constraints (on) the country’s socio-economic development” (UN Department of Public Information 1984). In reality, progress was half-hearted at best and fertility had barely budged. Why then did Kenya show so much commitment to the idea of population control? Financial incentives, especially the prospect of using the funds meant to expand rural family planning to build facilities that could (not quite in line with donor expectations) be used to provide maternal and child healthcare, are an obvious explanation. Yet, as reported by Chimbwete et al. (2005, 92), honest belief in neo-Malthusian ideas as a path towards becoming a modern nation state was present among bureaucrats in the Ministry of Economic Planning and Development.

At the 1994 conference, the Kenyan delegation reaffirmed its belief in the causal link between population growth and development, while at the same time disavowing coercive policy models,

I disagree with the simplistic argument that fertility control will solve the problems of poverty (...) caused by population growth. The concern of this view is only the achievement of population targets and runs the risk of the application of physical, economic or intellectual coercion. (UN Department of Public Information 1994)

As with population policy more generally, Kenya was eager to espouse the newly enshrined symbiosis of neo-Malthusian population control with the rhetoric of reproductive rights. Kenyan delegates adopted the idea that national as well as individual welfare and the rights of women and children within the family depended on population policy:

The population policy thus aims at improving standards of living and quality of life; improving health and welfare through information and education; further reducing fertility and mortality rates; encouraging Kenyans to adhere to small family size; promoting family stability while recognising the rights of women and children; and eliminating social and cultural practices that have a negative impact on women and girls. (UN GAOR 1999)

The third national population policy, enacted in 2000, was explicitly framed as integrating the 1994 Plan of Action into national policy. In its latest “Population Policy for National Development”, adopted in 2012, Kenya did not include such boilerplate signifiers of international norm acceptance. However, Kenyan representatives were eager to show commitment to the 1994 plan when discussing the post-2014 agenda for population policy at the UN. As evidenced by growing contraceptive use, which rose from 17 percent of women aged 15–49 in 1984 to 58 percent in 2014, and falling birth rates, showing a significant decline of total fertility from 7.1 (1984) to 3.9 (2014) births per woman, national aspirations to follow global norms are also no longer decoupled from national priorities.

Even though Kenya throughout its history has been strongly influenced by external models of population policy, neither in its national policy frameworks nor in its international statements does it include family policies of any kind.

5 Two Ways of Dealing with Interdependence: Instrumental Policy-Making and Selective Norm Dilution

Our reading of the national developments and international proclamations of our two cases show two contrasting variants of interdependence within world society. Whereas one can trace how global ideas of neo-Malthusian population control directly impacted national policy in the case of Kenya, China struggled to legitimise a family planning programme that had originated endogenously, with reference to global norms. Incoherence and decoupling, widespread wherever global models are adopted (Meyer et al. 1997, 154), thus took different shapes in these cases. Kenya's wholesale commitment to a global model led to *instrumental policymaking* in its first phase (up to the mid-1980s): While donor money funded projects that were not immediately linked to family planning but rather paid for infrastructure which could be used for other purposes, the actual policies of curbing fertility were at first relegated to development plans (Chimbwete et al. 2005). In the case of China, the actual policies show a great deal of coherence and conformity to policy models envisioned by the international birth-control movement, but China opposed a global norm that would have imposed population targets on developing countries. China thus supported the circumscription of the original thrust of the WPAA through the emphasis of sovereignty as a countervailing principle: It engaged in *selective norm dilution*. In both cases, any connection between family and population policy, as far as it was present within international discourse, fell prey to the practice of selective legitimisation or instrumental adaption of global policy models.

National family policy developed independently of international population discourse in both cases: the nationwide adoption of maternity leave provisions in China originates in a different kind of interdependence. As in many other socialist countries, China emulated the Soviet model of social insurance (Hu 2015). When its national policies changed from aiming at the reduction of fertility to increasing it in 2015 (UN Population Division 2015) and family policy measures were extended

concomitantly, it reacted to the (perception of) increased demographic pressures. Kenya, however, exhibits only minimal family policy measures. Its main instruments are a limited maternity benefit scheme adopted in 1976 and a small cash transfer to orphans and vulnerable children, which has existed since 2004. Both barely qualify as family policy measures since they are primarily aimed at either the health of working mothers or the mitigation of extreme kinds of poverty brought about by the HIV crisis. While interdependencies have played a role in bringing about embryonic types of family policy, the Chinese case suggests that the development of family policy as a discernible area of social policy presupposes a political interest in positively influencing fertility, not unlike the developments in early twentieth-century Europe.

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