

COMMENT

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Family-planning programmes have a place in the overall development programme of a country. One of the major obstacles to development is undoubtedly population growth. But there may be more serious obstacles, e.g. political obstacles, or those arising from the social structure. Too much attention is paid to the relative cost of different population programmes. It is desirable to make cost-benefit studies, using alternative assumptions, to assess the relative merits of family-planning programmes and the institution of changes in the political and social structure which contribute to economic growth.

The complementarity of family-planning programmes and changes in the economic and social structure must be stressed. As elsewhere, family-planning programmes in South Africa need to be integrated with other efforts to alter the structural factors influencing family size, such as the rural/urban distribution of population. Where family-planning schemes exist without economic planning programmes, there has been no real success in retarding population growth. Small families as a norm should be considered part of the overall plan.

Since the cost to parents of producing and rearing children may be substantially below the cost to society, particularly in rural areas, the government is obliged to take action to limit the growth of population. However, the question remains open as to how much the government should decide for the people, and how much should be left to individual decision.

The importance of research in determining the place of family-planning should also be stressed. There is a lack of knowledge of the precise nature of the significant relationships and a lack of statistics; this hinders policy-makers. The crucial variables have not been sufficiently isolated, and factual information about variables is deficient, with the result that policy is based to a large extent on guesswork. Examples are the endeavours to raise the age of marriage without knowledge of the present marriage age, and the lack of knowledge of the present number of children per family.