



Bomb or Boon: Linking Population, People and Power in Fragile Regions

Comment on “The Pill Is Mightier Than the Sword”

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Abstract

The relationship between population structure and violent conflict is complex and heavily dependent on the behavior of other variables like governance, economic prospects, and urbanization. While addressing rapid population growth might be a necessary condition for peace, it is by no means sufficient. Concomitant steps must also be taken to foster inclusivity, guarantee broader rights for all, particularly women, rebuild social contracts and ensure that all citizens have equal access to economic opportunity. Measures to control family size could reduce dependency and create greater socio-economic opportunities for women and youth. By so doing, the “youth bulge” phenomenon could be a boon for rapidly growing developing countries.

Keywords: Population, Conflict, Economics, Gender

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The vast number of unemployed youth in developing countries are viewed by many as an imminent threat to social welfare and political stability because of their tendency to either foment unrest, as was the case during the Arab Spring of 2010–2012, or become relatively easily influenced and recruited by violent extremist groups like the so-called Islamic State or Al Shabaab. Many see rapid population growth as a key driver,¹ because such growth generally occurs in countries that are not ruled justly, do not guarantee rights for all and where the benefits of economic growth are only enjoyed by a very small majority. A tempting corollary has been to focus action on reducing the quantum of young people these societies, effectively rebalancing the population structure in order to match available resources with the number of mouths that need to be fed. Potts et al² suggest that this could be accomplished by empowering women through the provision of family planning services and education in their intriguing article “*The Pill is Mightier than the Sword*,” which clearly reflects the maturity of this debate since the Malthusian era.” Although they dismiss the notion of a mono-causal relationship between demographic structure and violence, they do not fully explore important socio-economic challenges and potential opportunities that could make youthful populations more of a boon than a ticking time bomb. Also, women play a crucial role in fostering peace but strategies must be culturally appropriate and lasting success could only be achieved when they work alongside men.

This debate in their article focuses on two important questions. First, is there a causal relationship between youthful populations and violent conflict? Second, if this is the case, could negative implications be effectively addressed through gender empowerment? Generally, youthful demographic structures in regions where unemployment is high creates

situations of dependency that are not sustainable. The 15–25 youth cohort grows at a much faster rate than the relatively more stable working population, leading to frustration, restiveness and deepening poverty. Making the leap from frustrated youth to violent youth or youth-fueled violence demands closer investigation. Weber³ makes a strong case for making this leap by arguing that young men are usually catalysts for political upheavals and associated violence in fragile regions. Sommers⁴ disagrees and calls for a more nuanced understanding of state-youth relationships. He outlines a number of socio-cultural and governance factors that explain the purported association. Sommers’ caution is borne out in a number of empirical studies that fail to establish causality.^{5,6} Yair and Miodownik⁷ had differentiated results, finding a correlation with respect to non-ethnic wars, but not in the case of ethnic wars. Urdal⁸ observed differences in the relationships at national and local levels. He found the no link between population growth rates and national armed conflict, but found some relationship at the local level, when resource scarcity was part of the equation. His empirical work also suggests that youth bulges could increase the likelihood of armed conflict when youth have poor access to basic social services, economic opportunity, and representative governance. These studies all point to the complex nature of the purported relationship between the size and structure of demographic aggregates and the incidence of violent conflict. There is also a sense in which the youth bulge could be viewed as a boon. There are two reasons for this. Most fragile economies are of a steady growth trajectory and many are diversifying away from an almost total reliance on single commodity exports to a greater involvement in the service sector (particularly media, telecommunications, and information technology), commercial agriculture

and small-medium scale manufacturing. High population growth countries like Nigeria, India, Kenya, and Columbia are experiencing increased labor market participation (both skilled and semi-skilled) along the value chains of these growing sectors. A relatively abundant, low-cost workforce has contributed to consistently high economic growth rates in these countries. However, as discussed by Potts et al,² this demographic dividend is more pronounced and sustainable in countries where population dependency ratios are falling as families have fewer children. The second reason the youth bulge could be a boon is that frontier economies require the participation on risk-takers who start firms and create jobs. Essential preconditions for this include improved governance, reductions in barriers to trade, investment in critical infrastructure and an end to the culture of impunity (which breeds endemic corruption). Youthful entrepreneurs are breaking new ground in many of these countries and have the potential to contribute positively and become more vested in societal stability.⁹ Youth entrepreneurship will not be a panacea, but it could become an important factor in signaling change and more opportunity. Therefore, steps taken today to promote youth inclusion and equal opportunity could help forestall violent conflict over the long run.

Even if we cannot be definitive about causal links, the economic, socio-cultural, and political pressures caused by increasing population growth necessitate some thought being given to possible containment strategies. Potts et al² discuss case studies that illustrate the benefits of family planning in potentially fragile environments. Reducing population size and the proportions of the population that are dependent on others makes imminent sense. Smaller families and spaced births could engender empowerment by cushioning the burden on household budgets and allowing more time for women to be more active participants in economic and socio-political life. This point was made emphatically in an article jointly authored by the prime ministers of Ethiopia and Rwanda in 2012.¹⁰ This, however, presupposes that cultural barriers do not exist. Children are viewed as blessings and assets in many societies. In some cases, even if women earn and have spare time, they are not decision-makers. Although there is some evidence that gender roles are slowly changing, progress has been glacial and episodic.^{11,12} Furthermore, data presented in the 2015 World Development Report suggests that poorer households are much less likely to benefit from family planning services because of issues relating to access and affordability. This compounds an already difficult situation and fuels a vicious cycle of persistent dependency, constrained socio-economic potential and unrest in these societies.

The spatial distribution of the population increases also matter. Rapid urbanization in developing and fragile regions present a challenge Buhaug and Urdal¹³ describe as an "urbanization bomb." In many cases, intra-city cleavages have replaced the rural-urban divide as a major conflict interface in many urban areas. In addition to grinding poverty, cities in the developing world lack the necessary health infrastructure to provide family planning services to most citizens. Consequently, fertility levels tend to be much higher in the urban slums, partly because they are close enough to the hospitals and clinics to receive basic healthcare but unable to

afford/access regular family planning services. Cities are also the frontier for recruitment by violent extremist organizations and the perpetration of acts of terrorism.¹⁴

Most empirical research evaluates the role of women in civil wars and trans-national armed conflict; relatively little empirical evidence has been presented to analyze the role of women in promoting peace and preventing violence in situations involving trans-national non-state actors. It is, therefore, difficult to be categorical about gender roles in such circumstances. Iran, one of the case studies used by Potts et al,² substantiates this point. The country has clearly made significant gains with population control since the introduction of family planning and internal unrest has been quelled. However, Iran's purported sponsorship of terrorist groups has made it much less secure and much more of a global threat. This suggests that the stabilizing effects of population reduction might vary depending on the type of conflict in question.

The jury is still out on the relationship between population growth and violent conflict. There are as many members of the 15-25 years old cohort working for peace, as those who perpetrate violence and human rights abusers. By the same token, the same high testosterone levels that are associated with dominance and violence can also foster healthy competition and innovation. Efforts to modify the population structure would only be effective if they are conducted in concert with initiatives that improve governance, promote broad-based economic welfare, and guarantee basic human rights for all. Representative governance is a central element of this strategy. The focus must shift from sporadic efforts to increase participation in democratic events (like elections) to ensuring that women and the youth are part of the democratic process. This involves routine consultations with community groups, the decentralization of decision-making to allow for more input from hitherto marginalized groups and targeted investments to improve the quality of life. Governments should focus less on economic growth and a lot more on economic welfare, which incorporates both equity and equitable distribution of resources. This could be done via spending and taxation policies that incentivize prudent decisions by institutions and individuals, as well as social safety nets that would enable those living below the poverty line to avail themselves of available healthcare and educational opportunities. Creative financial intermediation could address critical barriers that make it hard for youth entrepreneurship and women-owned businesses to thrive. Gender empowerment must be considered a legitimate human right that is not incompatible with local culture or traditions. Governments must do more to uphold their part of the social contract through effective legislation (as in the case of Rwanda) or by expanding opportunities for women (as happened in Indonesia). Gender empowerment could contribute to slowing down population growth, but the beneficial impacts on peace and security would only accrue if empowerment is done in a manner that is culturally-sensitive and leads to lasting societal transformation that enables both men and women to work together to prevent the outbreak of violent conflict and to promote peace. Leadership, both political and technical, must be resolute and sustained, if meaningful progress is to be made. Adopting this approach, I

will take the liberty of paraphrasing Potts et al,² the pill can be part of a comprehensive and coordinated solution that can be mightier than the sword.

Ethical issues

Not applicable.

Competing interests

Author declares that he has no competing interests.

Author's contribution

RG is the single author of the manuscript.

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