

## VALUE OF CHILDREN AND POPULATION GROWTH IN AFRICA: A NEED FOR A POPULATION POLICY.

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### **Abstract**

A key factor that influences fertility in Africa is the value placed on children and some of the determinants of this value are socio-cultural and economic in nature.

This study therefore, intends to examine the extent and dimension of the influence on population growth in the continent. Documentary research was employed in data collection and it was found that to many African parents children mean continuation of lineage, acquisition of social power, availability of labour force, security in old age, and blessings from God and any attempt to regulate the number of the children will provoke some divine retribution. This explains why family planning is unpopular in many parts of Africa.

It is rather paradoxical that the continent with the fastest growing population should be the least concerned about its impact especially with the dwindling resources. The author is of the opinion that Africa needs a population policy which should aim at achieving lower population growth rates by voluntary fertility regulation methods that are compatible with the attainment of economic and social goals of the continent.

### **Introduction**

The value placed on children is a key factor that influences fertility, and some of the determinants of value of children are socio-cultural and economic in nature. In communities where children are seen as an agent to continue family name, fertility is likely to have a high profile. Furthermore, in cultures where the aged are dependent on their adult sons and daughters for support, the fertility will in all probability remain high in order to guarantee enough surviving children to meet this need.

In accordance with these ideals it is generally believed that Africans in the past tried to have as many children as they were physically able to produce to ensure that at least, a living descendent was always left behind to remember and honour the departed. A man without children was said to have his wealth given to strangers after his death and that his identity was soon forgotten and merely merged into a collectivity of nameless ancestors.

In the erstwhile traditional communal society of subsistence living, there was little or no harm for wanting to have many children. From an economic viewpoint, as long as parents could grow sufficient food to meet the needs of the children until they got married there was no need to limit their numbers. A large family size was further made attractive as the responsibility associated with child rearing could be structurally transferred from parents to extended family members without altering the juridical or social status of the child as a bona fide offspring of the biological parents.

However, the great value placed on large family size and uncontrolled reproduction is being contradicted by the stark realities of vicious trap of increasing population and dwindling resources. Africa is facing a rapidly worsening population problem. It has become difficult to meet the basic needs of many people in the areas of food, housing, education, jobs and healthcare delivery. Despite the fact that the conditions which made a numerous progeny attractive in the past have radically changed, Africa's positive attitudes toward large family size appear to persist. Population growth in Africa is becoming a matter of genuine concern not only to policy makers and development planners but also to families.

Considering the world population trends, it has been indicated that Africa's current population of more than 738.7 million will strike 1.18 billion in 2015. By this statistical projection, world population will reach 7.28 billion by 2015 from its current 5.76 billion. It is estimated that 12.8 percent of people live in Africa presently. The continent's average infant mortality rate is high as 94 with Liberia (just coming out of a brutal civil war) having the highest rate of 200 per 1000 births. This trend is across all African war torn countries.

But with an annual population growth of 2.7 percent and a fertility rate of 5.7, Africa is one continent with the fastest growing population. With this alone, Africa's population may quadruple to 2.8 billion in 2150 with a disproportionate number of children and minors.

No wonder, the 1994 Cairo Conference on population had many speakers who regretted population growth in countries of low gross national product like African countries. Unplanned population has been identified as one of the main factors responsible for socio-economic problems in Africa. There is high unemployment and or underemployment among the productive sector of the African population (despite the disproportionate number of children and minors in the population) and this age-group may present a potent threat to political stability and economic growth being less amenable to nationalist, anti-imperialist rhetoric as a panacea for their problems.

Mazrui (1998) aptly describes the situation as:

...much of the political unrest on the African continent can be attributed to the presence of unemployed, frustrated and alienated young people. They are easily drawn to parties and groups that promise total and revolutionary change, rather than incremental and evolutionary change. In the recent past they have been in the forefront of pro-democracy movements in many of the African countries. High unemployment... leads many in this sector to hanker only after

government jobs. The entrepreneurial ethic is largely absent. Palliatives like a padded bureaucracy and expanded public welfare subsidies may only serve to worsen the problem by increasing the appetite of the state for the meagre resources of the population and country.

This goes to show that even the productive sector of the African population is often not producing anything of value. This study, therefore, intends to examine the extent and dimension of the influence of the value of children on population growth in the continent.

## **Materials & Methods**

The data were sourced through documentary research - official documents, periodicals, journals, textbooks, and archival reports all informed by the research objects.

## **Results and Discussion**

The question "why do people want children?" is almost as difficult or easy to answer as a question like "why do people want to eat?" The obvious answer may be that it is in the nature of all living creatures to have offspring and to want to have them (Berelson, 1973). In Africa, the more meaningful question is: why did people in the past and partly even today, want to have as many children as possible? The general answer was likely to be that it was good to have many children. The general and diffuse motives accompanying this answer are that many children mean continuation of lineage, acquisition of social power, availability of labour force, assurance of physical protection, security in old age, and the blessings of God.

This ideal of fertility is firmly impressed into the primary purpose of marriage among African families. It is for procreation and all other aims are regarded as secondary. Children constitute the most important visible signs of success and achievement. They are essential to ensure a man's social position and to confer on him prestige and influence within the lineage and the community. Conversely, barrenness and sterility are socially considered humiliating conditions and misfortunes.

An unmarried man is looked down upon. Amongst the Hausa for example, if a man lives without a wife, although having money enough to procure one, he is regarded as being not quite normal. A bachelor is the butt of many jokes being known as a man with a broom because he has to sweep his own hut and he is supposed to dream of nothing but house work (that is, women's work). This treatment is as a result of the fact that every man is expected to help in increasing the population and this can only be legitimately achieved through marriage.

The inestimable value placed on children in Africa is further buttressed by the fanfare which characterizes the arrival of a new child and the significance of names the children are given (especially those that have taken extra-ordinary effort to come). Such names as *Nwakaego* among the Igbos (a child is greater than money), and *Funmilayo* among the Yorubas (God gives me joy); are names that bear sociological

imprints of the joy and traumatic experiences of the family visa-visa the birth of the child.

There are some shared sentiments on the intrinsic advantages of a large population among different African cultures and these are best expressed by some common names, for example, *Ewawoche* (among the Idomas) symbolizes “multitude is king”, and *Igwebuike* symbolizes “multitude is strength” among the Igbos. These ifaines directly or indirectly point to the consciousness, value and power of a large population or number of children (Ukwu, 1988).

By far, the most consequential value placed on children among different African cultures seems to be the preference for a male child. Although marriage in many cultures in Africa is consummated by the birth of a child, its stability and at any rate, the dignity of a wife in both her matrimonial home and the larger society are tied to her bearing at least, one surviving male child (Anyebe, 1998).

The typical behaviours of families finding it difficult to produce a male child are often identical to those of a childless state. Whereas a woman usually takes her husband’s surname after marriage, the name of a family is traditionally perpetuated through the male child, likewise property transfer and matters of inheritance are in most cases exclusive to male children.

Sex preference has a considerable influence on family size as most couples would not hesitate to continue bearing children if they do not have a surviving male child among their children. Some men would even opt for more wives to ensure that they have at least a surviving male child.

Research findings have not deviated from this trend. For example, Dow (1967) in a study, found that in Nairobi children are important to men because of the guarantee of personal immortality they offer. Blount (1973), in his own study among the Luo, found that there is a strong preference for male children. This preference is related to the descent system of the Luo, whereby descent is traced from one generation to the next through the male line. Among the Nyoro, there was a preference for male children at least on the man’s part, to breed children for the clan. However, there is a growing opinion that a man is just as happy to have girls as boys: men just like to “zara” (beget children) regardless of their sex (Beatie, 1958).

This situation may not be unconnected with the introduction of a cash bride-wealth, girls became a greater source of personal profits to their fathers, than was the case in traditional times. In fact, sometimes a certain clan or lineage is thought to be particularly fertile and girls from it are eagerly sought for marriage.

The old age security hypothesis whose central thesis is that in societies where the aged are dependent on their adult sons and daughters for support, fertility will remain high in order to guarantee enough surviving children to meet this need. For example Caldwell (1976) argues that the traditional expectation that children should support the economy of the family at a very early age and the importance attached to them over time as they assume management roles, makes it imperative for them to care for their parents in old age. The upward flow of wealth from the younger generation to the older generation exceeds the downward flows since child rearing costs are minimal. He thus submits that fertility decline will occur only after children are perceived by parent as socio-economic liability rather than as contributors to the household earning and welfare. He maintains that a fair degree of emotional nucleation is needed for economic nucleation and considerable amounts of both are required before parents are free to indulge in greater expenditure on their children.

Harrison (1984) and Greenhelgh (1985) argue that parents increase their fertility because they see children as means of raising the family’s wealth and social status. Caldwell has as early as 1969 observed in Ghana that one third of all rural households receive cash remittances, and that such remittances were most commonly used to maintain members of the migrant families especially their parents. It was also reported by Johnson (1974) that in Kenya, 89 percent of urban migrant regularly sent money back to their villages representing about 20 percent of the urban migrants wages - a positive sign of close family ties.

Cain (1982 and 1983) has stressed the importance of children as a type of insurance against risk and in the prevention of downward mobility in a variety of circumstances particularly those beyond the family’s control. According to him, in circumstances where child survival is uncertain to where sons’ loss is great, it could be argued for a reproductive strategy that justifies large number of children in high risk settings.

Orubuloye (1985) argues that in Africa, the relationship between the life style of the educated middle class and that of the traditional group has not made the former break all ties with tradition as most of the urban dwellers still identify themselves with their places of origin by spreading their resources to cover the needs of a large number of immediate and less fortunate relatives. This is demonstrated by parents at home sending their younger children to live with their educated working relatives in urban areas for assistance with their education or to learn or to secure wage employment.

The tendency toward high fertility is reinforced and rationalized by some common beliefs propagated by both traditional and western religions (Caldwell, 1987). These beliefs are to the effect that "it is God that gives children" and therefore, "pregnancy is God's act of providence" which should not be subject to human regulation. Any attempt to regulate it could provoke some divine retribution.

It is rather paradoxical that the continent with the fastest growing population should be the least concerned about its impact especially with the dwindling resources. The author is of the opinion that Africa needs a population which should aim at achieving lower population growth rates by voluntary fertility regulation methods that are compatible with the attainment of economic and social goals of the continent.

### **Conclusion**

An inestimable value is placed on children in Africa because of certain beliefs and expectations. For example, to many Africans, children mean continuation of lineage, acquisition of social power, availability of labour force, security in old age, and blessings from God. Most parents consider a large family as visible signs of success and achievement, hence high fertility. The inestimable value placed on children is further buttressed by the fanfare which characterizes the birth of a new child and the significance of the names the children are given.

By far, the most consequential value on children among different African cultures seems to be the preference for a male child. Although marriage is consummated by the arrival of a child, its stability and at any rate, the dignity of a wife in both her matrimonial home and the larger society is tied to her bearing at least, one surviving male child. The typical behaviours of families finding it difficult to produce a male child are often identical to those of a childless state. Whereas a woman usually takes her husband's surname after marriage, the name of a family is traditionally perpetuated through the male child, likewise property transfer and matters of inheritance are in most cases exclusive to male children. Sex preference has a considerable influence on family size as most couples would not hesitate to continue bearing children if they do not have a surviving male child among their children.

The dangers which unsustainable population growth portends are obvious. The uncontrolled population growth in the continent has made it difficult to meet the basic needs of many people in the areas of food, housing, education, jobs and basic health care delivery. Much of the political unrest in many countries of Africa can be attributed to the presence of many unemployed and frustrated young people. This situation makes a population policy which aims at strengthening those factors that discourage high fertility not only desirable but imperative.

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