

The Corner

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Population Growth in the Philippines: Problem or Potential?

By Christopher White

Posted on February 08, 2011 1:23 PM

In one week, a population-control bill in the Philippines is likely to be passed that supports coercive government-funded family-planning initiatives for demographically targeted populations. If passed, one year or even one generation from now, the root problems that this bill seeks to address will still exist. In fact, they're likely to be exaggerated.

“The Responsible Parenthood, Reproductive Health and Population and Development Act of 2011,” as this bill is officially titled, is in essence an attempt to curb the growing population of the Philippines through a variety of measures — most notably, a new sexual-education program, greater access and distribution of contraceptives, and eventually, government-funded abortion. This past week the bill made its way out of a plenary session and is now on the fast track to becoming law.

At present, the population of the Philippines is estimated to be over 92 million making it the world's twelfth most populous country. Fertile women in the Philippines have, on average, 3.1 babies each — a stark contrast to neighboring Singapore, which had an all-time low average of 1.16 in 2010. Given its size and increasing growth, the needs of the Philippines are vast — education, health care, and better sanitation to name a few. But is population growth really the root cause of these problems and needs? History seems to indicate otherwise.

During the 20th century many Asian countries tried to implement population-control measures in an effort to eradicate poverty and better control limited resources. Countries such as China, Thailand, Taiwan, Singapore, and South Korea — all thriving economic powerhouses — are now reporting sub-population replacement rates and are unsure of how they are going to be able to replace themselves.

In contrast, Hong Kong — one of the world's densest populations — has become one of the hallmarks of Asian economic success. In the middle of the 20th century, the future for Hong Kong seemed dismal. Food and clean water were in short supply, jobless rates were high, and its growing population seemed unstoppable. However, rather than imposing population control measures on its citizens, the Hong Kong government realized that population equals potential. By providing the right conditions — access to education, health care,

food and water, and a realization that the best investment to be made was in its people — Hong Kong created one of the most robust and thriving economies in the world today.

The mid-1950's demographic situation of Hong Kong is comparable to the Philippines today. Section three of their proposed bill states that “the limited resources of the country cannot be suffered to be spread so thinly to service a burgeoning multitude that makes the allocations grossly inadequate and effectively meaningless.” Not only does this “guiding principle” fail to recognize that the greatest natural resource of the Philippines is human potential and ingenuity, it neglects the real needs of the country.

After World War II, the Philippines adopted a number of anti-market and protectionist economic policies that have resulted in these less than favorable conditions. As a result, roads were left unfinished and irrigation systems never built, and the poor conditions of seaports and airports crippled one of the nation's best natural industries, agriculture. Most hurt by this environment were small-scale family farmers. In the provinces where they lived, schools were never built, hospitals and health-care facilities were poorly constructed and the means to access them were limited. Filipino lawmakers have tried to argue that population control will solve the nation's poverty problems, but countless statistics and studies have proven that this just isn't so. It is improved working conditions, quality schools, skilled birth attendants, and health-care facilities that will solve a number of the nation's problems — maternal health, education, and employment among them.

The current bill in the Philippines aims to provide a roadmap for “responsible parenthood.” The solutions presented to achieve this are a state recommended family size of two children per couple, mandatory government family-planning certification in order to receive a marriage license, and mandatory sexual education in all schools. This bill, in effect, focuses on what will go on in schools before the schools or the roads that lead to them are even built. Rather than looking internally to see what it can do to promote the family and improve their current working and living conditions, the Filipino government would seemingly rather penalize the family unit itself for the nation's economic ills.

On February 3, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong of Singapore marked the beginning of the Chinese New Year by urging his citizens to have more children: “We also need Singaporeans to produce enough babies to replace ourselves, and that has proved extremely challenging.” In addition, the PM noted that additional children bring “more joy” to families. The Philippines would do well to heed Mr. Loong's advice. Not only will they find more joy, but also, like their neighbors in Hong Kong and Singapore, they're likely to find prosperity.

----- *Christopher White is international director of operations for the World Youth Alliance.*

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Re: Population Growth in the Philippines

By Christopher White

Posted on February 09, 2011 10:51 AM

Andrew, you take issue with my “rhetorical flourishes,” namely my use of the words “imposed” and “coercive” to describe the proposed legislation in the Philippines. A widely agreed upon definition of coercion is “to compel by force intimidation, or authority, especially without regard for individual desire or volition.” Considering the violations of individual liberty scattered throughout this bill, coercion seems to be a most accurate description.

I thank you for taking time to actually read through some sections of the bill — something I’m afraid many Filipinos have yet to do themselves. And since you’re keen on quoting sections of this proposed bill, I’ll take the liberty of playing from your playbook.

As a principle of “responsible parenthood,” section 20 states that “the state shall assist couples, parents and individuals to achieve their desired family size within the context of responsible parenthood for sustainable development and encourage them to have two children as the ideal family size. Attaining the ideal family size is neither mandatory nor compulsory. No punitive Action shall be imposed on parents having more than two children.”

Such language places two opposing expectations on the state. The state is required to assist couples in achieving “their desired family size” but also “to encourage them to have two children as the ideal family size.” This is self-conflicting language that will yield messy and incoherent implementation.

Although section 20 provides that “attaining the ideal family size is neither mandatory nor compulsory” and that “no punitive action shall be imposed on parents having more than two children,” this is, in effect, a two-child policy. Although there will be no penalties for failure to comply, there will be an expectation, promulgated through teaching programs sponsored by this bill, that this is the “right” family size and that to have more than two children is to be “irresponsible.” Social shame, peer pressure, and official state teaching bring into question the voluntariness with which Filipino citizens can comply with this law. Legally, the section might not be compulsory, but socially and politically it will have a coercive effect.

Then, there’s the issue of sexual education in the classroom. I’m all in favor of knowledge-based approaches to sexual education — a curriculum that teaches young people to make responsible, future-minded decisions

and encourages the development of self-control. Research in the United States has indicated that the most successful programs in sex education combine both character-development skills and scientific data, while focusing the students on future-minded goals (such as marriage and child-rearing). I do, however, believe that this bill's mandated reproductive-health curriculum undermines the rights of parents to be the primary educators of their children. This sexual education program is a state developed program that will be mandated for implementation in both public and private schools, not simply state schools. This is a direct violation of the Philippines constitution, which recognizes the "complementary roles of private and public institutions."

As for the issue of mandating a "certificate of compliance" in order to obtain a marriage license, one might want to revisit Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to which the Philippines is a signatory#more# "(1) Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution. (2) Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses." This is more than just the so-called nanny state outlining necessary rules and regulations — this is a direct violation of established freedoms and norms as outlined in widely recognized and agreed-upon international law. I have my suspicions that your inclinations might be different if this was an example of the government adding more regulation to, say, obtaining a business license.

And yes, there is the abortion issue. As you correctly noted, Section 3 (13) of the bill states that "this act recognizes that abortion is illegal and punishable by law." Nonetheless, this bill provides the framework for the eventual recognition of abortion as a human right. The carelessly crafted language of the bill uses the terms "reproductive health care" and "reproductive health care services" interchangeably. There is, however, a distinction made between the two in international law — namely that "reproductive health care" does not include abortion and "reproductive health care services" or simply "reproductive health services" *does* include abortion. It is highly likely that an activist judge in the Philippines would find grounds here to overturn the current illegalization of abortion.

Also of note are the unmentioned violations of freedom of conscience and religion that are peppered throughout this bill. The bill requires that all reproductive-health workers "provide information and educate" and "render medical services" consistent with the new provisions in this bill. Similar to recently passed health-care legislation in the United States, this bill does not include measures that protect conscientious objections for health-care workers or institutions that refuse to provide certain services due to religious or cultural beliefs and practices. In addition, the health-care workers that receive this new training will receive a 10 percent honorarium to incentivize them to buy into the new programs.

In your response to my initial article, you claim that "what is happening in the Philippines is that a democratically elected legislature is, well, legislating." Perhaps this is the case, but the impetus seems to be something other than concerns about population growth. There is strong evidence to suggest that this bill is a project of American social engineering abroad. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has visited the Philippines

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multiple times in the past two years and has remarked that U.S. funding agencies would be at their disposal if this bill is passed. And, apparently USAID has already jumped the gun, as the Philippines is now papered with ads in local bus stations, billboards, etc. promoting the new sexual-education program that is supposedly yet to be debated or designed by the Filipinos legislating this bill.

Simply legislating? I don't think so. There are nice incentives to look forward to if this bill is passed.

"Responsible parenthood" doesn't seem to be the issue here, but rather the lack of responsible governance.

— *Christopher White is international director of operations for the World Youth Alliance.*

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