

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POPULATION GROWTH AND POVERTY IN AFRICA: A VIEW FROM THE SOUTH

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Abstract

The apparent intractability of the problem posed by widespread poverty in Africa has made it an international issue. Thus discussions and debates on the subject have been dominated by bilateral aid agencies, international Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) and development banks. The mainstream view from these debates and discussions is that rapid population growth in Africa has put pressure on the environment, leading to environmental degradation which translates into shortfall in food production and atrophied development. This view is as a result of ritualistic adherence to narrow ideological considerations and pre-determined stereotypes about Africa. From a political economy perspective, this paper re-appraises the relationship between population growth and poverty in Africa. Quantitative and qualitative evidence are drawn from the relationship between the ever-increasing complexities of the social dynamics that shape livelihood on the African continent and the wider global context of poverty in Africa. This paper locates the source of poverty in Africa outside the increase in population which should actually be viewed as an advantage to the economy of Africa where machines have not replaced manual labour.

Key words; Population growth, Poverty, Political economy, Degradation

Introduction

The development crisis in Africa has left majority of the people impoverished. The apparent intractability of the problem posed by widespread poverty in Africa has led to attempts to evaluate and explicate it through various ideological orientations. From the 18th century when Thomas Malthus' study alerted the world on the relationship between population growth and the limitations of natural resources to sustain such growth, fears have lingered about the plausibility and consequences of population exceeding the capability of the natural resources or what is popularly referred to as the 'carrying capacity' of the environment.

The fact that famine, which was once a universal threat to humanity is now found primarily in Africa allays the fears raised by Malthus. To what extent is this fear germane today? Who determines the carrying capacity of a particular environment and what constitutes rapid population growth? Must rapid population growth lead to shortage in food supply, environmental degradation and shortage of infrastructural facilities? These are some of the issues that this paper aims to address.

The Mainstream View

Perhaps because the views of the dominant group in any given society predominates within that society, the views of dominant bilateral aid agencies, international NGOs and such development banks as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have dominated the debate on the population 'problems' in Africa. These views rehearse or recast the modernization orientation that has dominated Western Social Science since the late 1950s

For a long period, the modernization theory held sway as a tool to explicate development or underdevelopment in human societies. Modernization theorists explain the plethora of problems confronting the Third World in terms of the presence or absence of criteria drawn from models of Western Societies. The presence of these attitudinal criteria or values in the industrialized countries of Europe and America are seen as having enhanced their development while the underdevelopment of the Third World is alleged to be a result of the negative attitudes or values inherent in the people. As Bernstein (1979:79) puts it, development is held to represent

The product of a historical process in the West which is at the same time a historical promise for other parts of the world

Ake (1982) attributes this to the Eurocentric teleologism in Western social science. Thus typologies of Western social science are used to characterize the evolution and development of Africa.

Therefore,

they represented the societies of the Third World as being approximations of the typologies of the lower ends of the development continuum and offered the Western Societies as approximations of the typologies of the higher and advanced stages of development continuum.... More importantly the methodology associated with this teleological perspective was such that the question of the development of Third World Countries was tangentially reduced to the possibility of becoming like the West (Ake, 1982:127-128).

It is in the same modernization orientation that Oscar Lewis come up with the 'Culture of Poverty' proposition to explicate the economic differentiation among individuals and the disparity in the wealth of nations. Negative attitudinal attributes, such as apathy, inability to save in order to invest in production, tendency towards the abandonment of wife and children and drunkenness are said to be the poor's response to their marginal positions in society. These characteristics are passed on from one generation to the other, through socialization. In the same vein, Paul Harrison (1983:213) opines that underdevelopment within the Third World is because the people are 'trapped in a pattern of overlapping vicious circles' According to him:

overpopulation begets poverty, which begets hunger. Hunger leads to sickness and sickness to malnutrition, in a spiral that can end in death or permanent disablement.... Both result in brains starved of nutrients and of stimulation and in educational failure. And that leads to low paid work and more poverty.

Extending the 'vicious circle' thesis beyond the individual's sphere, Paul Harrison (1983:429) posits that

The least developed countries are trapped in a vicious circle of poverty just as hard to escape as the one in which poor people fund themselves. Outside aid, far from being wasted is the only way this circle can be broken-into.

Rapid Population Growth and Environmental Degradation in Africa

Population growth has remained the most controversial issue in global development debate in recent times. Improvement in health care, which has reduced mortality rate has also increased birth rate and longevity. Most of this increase in population is taking place in the Third World. This is because most of the countries of the Third World have population growth rates of 2-3 percent per annum. This is reflected in population projections of African countries (see Table 1). At 3 percent growth rate, it is estimated by the United Nations that the population of Sub-Saharan Africa will be 1.27 billion by 2025.

Whitehead (1989:100) is of the opinion that

Such a population growth rate is quite out of step with current rates of increase in indigenous food production as well as exceeding any conceivable potential for improvement within existing agricultural strategies. Left to the process of natural selection the population explosion will ultimately be limited by wide spread malnutrition associated with even higher levels of infant mortality than those found at the present time.

Table 1: African Population Projections, 1980-2100 (Population in Millions)

SELECTED COUNTRIES	1950	1980	2000	2025	2050	2100	TOTAL FERTILITY RATE 1983	YEAR IN WHICH NRR= 1
CAMEROON	4.6	8.7	17	30	42	50	6.6	2030
ETHIOPIA	18.0	37.7	64	106	142	173	5.5	2035
GHANA	4.4	11.5	23	40	53	62	7.0	2025
KENYA	5.8	16.6	37	69	97	116	8.0	2030
MALAWI	2.9	6.0	11	21	29	36	7.6	2040
MOZAMBIQUE	6.5	12.1	22	39	54	67	6.5	2035
NIGER	2.9	5.5	11	20	29	38	7.0	2040
NIGERIA	40.6	84.7	163	295	412	509	6.9	2035
TANZANIA	7.9	18.8	37	69	96	120	7.0	2035
UGANDA	4.8	12.6	25	46	64	80	7.0	2035
ZAIRE	14.2	27.1	50	86	116	139	6.3	2030
OTHER SUB-SAHARA	59.8	121.7	218	381	524	651	6.5	2040
TOTAL SUB-SAHARA	172.4	363.0	678	1202	1658	2041	6.7	2040
TOTAL AFRICAN	215.0	452.6	826	1427	1940	2360	6.5	2040
OTHER AFRICAN	42.6	89.6	148	225	282	319	5.5	2025

Sources: Mc Namara, R.S (1985)

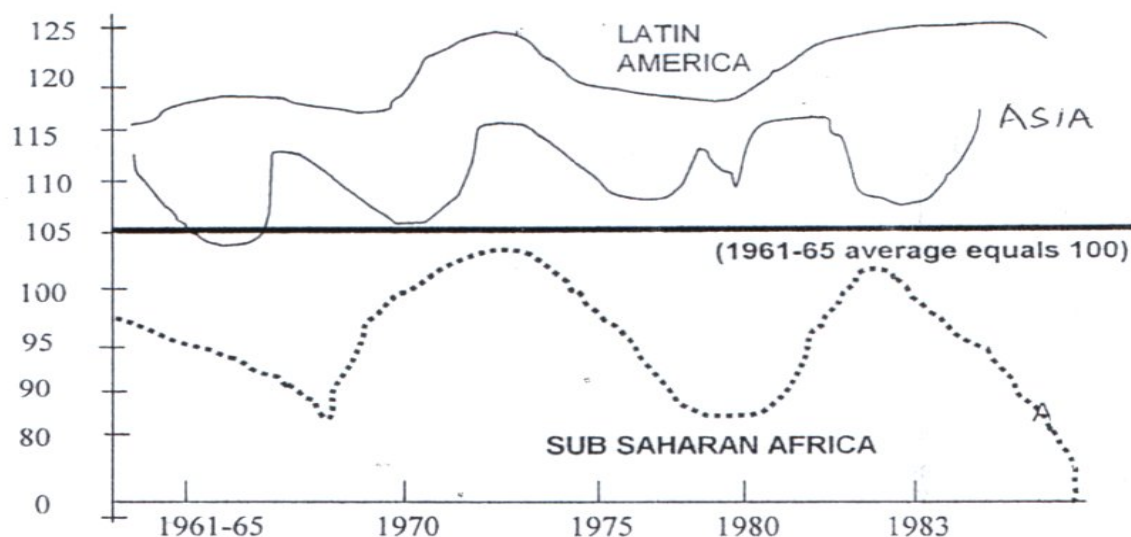
NRR refers to Net Reproduction Rate

When NRR = 1, fertility is at reproduction level.

This rapid population growth in the Third World is seen as compounding the problem of providing food, jobs, shelter, education and mitigating absolute poverty. Absolute poverty is also referred to as subsistence poverty. Ideally, it is a universally acceptable standard establishing the basic or minimal level of healthy livelihood known as the poverty line (Anah, 2006:238). The present levels of food production in Africa are not encouraging enough to allay these fears. Figure 1 indicates the disparity in food production between Latin America, Asia and Africa since 1960, while per capita food production in Asia has shown an upward trend since 1960 though lower than what obtains in Latin America, in Sub-Sahara Africa, food production has witnessed a downward trend since 1960

Figure 1: Per Capita Food Production Trends in Asia, Latin America and Africa 1961-1983

By 1983, the per capita food available had decreased by 80% of what it was at



Source: Roger Whitehead (1989)

independence in 1960. It is this rapid increase in population within the context of low food production, mass unemployment and abject poverty that has increased the concern over rapid population growth in the Third World. At the insidious level, there is mutual suspicion between the North and the South. While the latter suspects that population control programmes are really a ploy to limit her development efforts and eventual impact on the world, the former suspects that the catastrophic effect of population explosion in the South will inevitably affect the North adversely. Both fears are germane and interrelated in the light of global politics. This is more so against the backdrop of a history punctuated by slave trade, colonialism, imperialism and globalization all of which have worsened the conditions of the South while improving that of the North.

The belief that world hunger is caused by over population and attendant scarcity has been faulted by Lappe and Collins (1979). They are of the view that hunger exists in the midst of plenty. The world food production both globally and even in areas associated with hunger and starvation is enough to nourish every body. Citing examples with India where 'surplus' grains are put under guard while millions of people starve, and Mexico where majority of rural children are malnourished while livestock raised for export consume more grain than the entire rural population of the country, the study reveals that during the 1970s when drought and famine ravaged the Sahelian region of West Africa, surveys by the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization showed that almost all the countries in this region produced enough food to feed its population. It

also reveals that Bangladesh, one of the most densely populated regions of the world produces enough grains to provide each person with more than 2600 calories a day. Yet more than half the families in Bangladesh consume less than 1500 calories per person daily. This is because even when food is available, the factor of food entitlement plays an important role in who gets what. In some cases people starve because of their lack of access or command over food producing resources. This situation is further explained by Lappe and Collins (1979:21) thus

It is not then, the growing population that threatens to destroy the environment but other forces, land monopolizers that support non food and luxury crops, forcing the rural majority to abuse marginal lands; colonial patterns of cash cropping that are reinforced by elites today; and a system that promotes the utilization of food producing resources simply according to profit-seeking criteria. Cutting the world's population in half tomorrow would not stop any of these forces.

Similarly, at a conference organized by Britain's Overseas Development Institute in 1985, Sen debunked the popularly held view that food production and population growth are the sole causes of famines. Sen presented evidence that world food output has been growing considerably faster than world population. Using Ethiopia as his example, Sen pointed out that, between 1969-71 and 1980-82, food output in Ethiopia per head fell by 18% as reported by the World Bank in the world development report 1984. Though food output per head also fell by 25% in Algeria, 26% in Portugal, 29% in Hong Kong, 30% and 38% respectively in Jordan, Trinidad and Tobago, none of these countries experienced famine except Ethiopia. Sen's explanation is that the livelihood of Ethiopians and Africans in general depend on food production that is not protected by other means such as a diversified employment base into non food production areas. According to Sen (1985:39)

There are many important problems concerning food, hunger, malnutrition, starvation and famine. Hunger must be seen as part of a social economic and political problem.

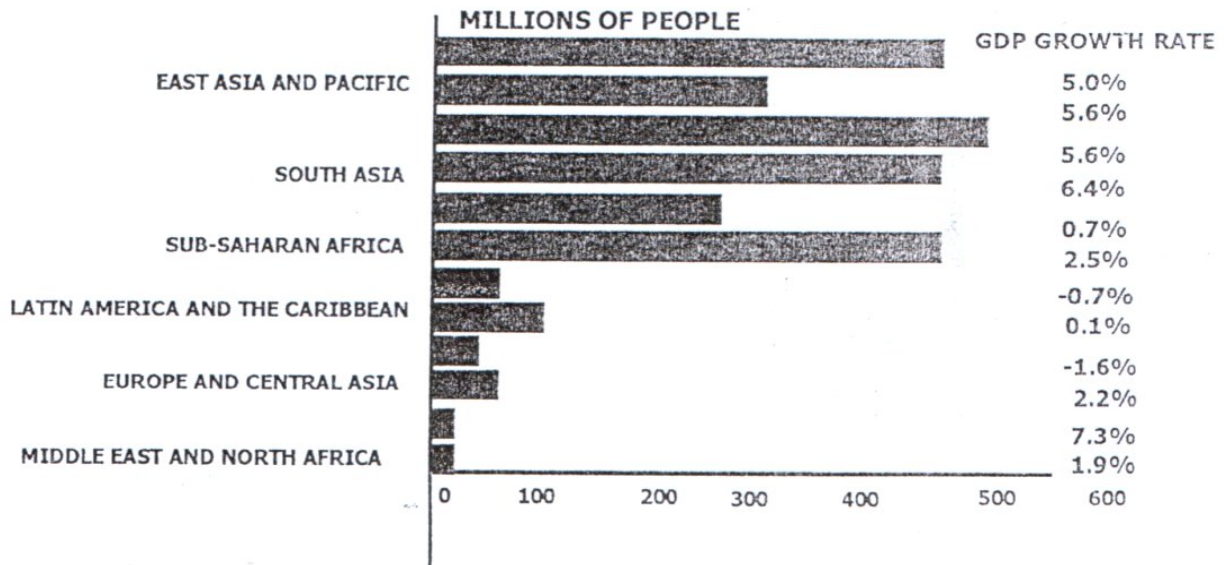
Since the socio-economic and political problems facing Africa cannot be put into proper perspective without recourse to the continent's history of slave trade, colonialism, neocolonialism and imperialism, these historical facts should not be discounted in a discussion on the relationship between population growth and poverty in Africa. Anikpo (1984) highlights the effect of these historical facts on Africa by articulating the centre/periphery syndrome of capitalist development in Nigeria. This syndrome has its origin in the integration of Nigeria into global capitalism by being a provider of such raw materials as groundnut, palm produce and cocoa for European industries.

Investment capital for the production and export of the commodities and the administration of the colonial government came from the metropole, in this case Britain. At independence, this configuration was hardly changed. The Nigerian economy has remained dependent on the Western metropolitan centres for investment capital. Thus independent Nigeria still witnesses the centre/periphery effect of capitalist

underdevelopment which moves ideas, models, ‘experts’, technology and capital from the centre to the periphery of global capitalism. In the same exploitative process, the centre appropriates a disproportionate percentage of the human and natural resources and surplus produced in the periphery enclave to the benefit of the centre. The implication of excess resources being drawn out of the periphery than is returned in input is that periphery production underwrites metropolitan consumption. This manifests in abject poverty and the poverty trap in Africa as more people are rendered hungry, homeless and unemployed on a daily basis on account of this unequal relationship between the North and the South (see figure 2) The effect of this exploitative relationship is noted by the Report of the Independent Commission on International Development Issues (1980-32) thus:

The North, including Eastern Europe has a quarter of the world’s population and four-fifths of its income; the South including China has three billion people three quarters of the world’s population but living on one – fifths of the world’s income. In the North the average person can expect to live for more than seventy years; he or she will rarely be hungry and will be educated at least up to secondary level. In the countries of the South, the great majority of people have a life expectancy of closer to fifty years; in the poorest countries, one out of every four children dies before the age of five; one-fifth or more of all the people in the South suffer from hunger and malnutrition; fifty percent have no chance to be literate.

Figure 2: 1.2 Billion People Still Living Below Poverty Line, on less than \$1 a day with Numbers on the Increase in sub-Saharan Africa



Source: Adapted From WORLD BANK, 2004.

This supports the widely held view that pressure on the land caused by population explosion has led to environmental degradation in the third world. Factors other than population pressure contribute to environmental degradation. The burning of some highveld grassland in Swaziland, Southern Africa and the generally practiced slash and burn agriculture in Nigeria and other parts of Africa may bring about treelessness and subsequent erosion if the fallow period for such forest is reduced. Soil erosion is presently one of the most serious of all the environmental problems faced by the human race. The exposure of the natural relation cover leaves the topsoil at the mercy of adverse weather conditions and other human factors. Desertification, which is the spread of desert-like conditions to areas where they may not occur naturally, is brought about by various types of human pressure on the environment.

Myers (1989:25 &26) is of the view that

The developed world plays a major role in tropical deforestation... The most notable instance of developed world consumption of tropical hardwoods is Japan, which takes three-quarters of timber exports from the region undergoing the most rapid deforestation, Southeast Asia

However, it is significant to note that 2/3 of Japan is covered with good quality forests. These forests are kept under protected status. This is because Japan wants to take advantage of 'cheaper' imports from the Third World. In the same way, Britain imports 90% of her timber needs mostly from the tropics. Developed world consumerism continues to have adverse effect on the ecology and economy of less developed countries, thus pauperizing them further. In what Myers (1989) refers to as the hamburger connection North American demand for cheap beef has led to a spread of cattle rearing in Central and Latin America at the detriment of food crop production or forest cover. There is also the cassava connection. This bears greater relevance to Nigeria where cassava is the staple food for a sizeable proportion of the population.

Cassava is in high demand as foodstuff for livestock in the European Economic Community because of its rich caloric content. To build up their 'beef mountain' the EEC consumes 80% of the internationally traded cassava. Most of this supply comes from Thailand where cassava is not a traditional food crop and sells at comparatively cheap prices. Within a 10-year period (1973 - 1982) the supply from Thailand rose from 1.5 million metric tons to more than 8 million tons. Presently about 5.5 metric tons annually guarantees Thailand 90% of global cassava exports. A growing number of small-scale farmers have abandoned traditional food crops to grow cassava for export in Thailand. This is also at the expense of the natural forests (Myers, 1989:33).

Climatic change on a global scale has been found to account for shortfall in food production. It is on this basis that participants at the Earth Conference on 'Sustainable Development' held in Johannesburg, South Africa recently predicted that Nigeria and other countries most vulnerable to this climatic change could suffer cereal production losses of about 30% of projected production targets over the next eight decades. In the past two decades about 10% projected production targets have been lost. The principal cause of the climatic changes is an anticipated increase in green house gas. Concentrations of green house gas in the atmosphere result in increase in global temperatures generally referred to as global warming. The United Nations warns that

wabminf water are causing coral reefs to die while toxic and nutrient runmffs have produced a rash of algal blooms. Yet the countries thad have greateb influence in the United Nations contribute most to global warming.

Greenhouse gas is a common nomenclature for a group of gases comprising sulphur cmmpounds ald carbon dioxide generated from the combustion of fossil fuelÑ, bush burjing and industrial emissions. The intepnatinnal community under the 'Kyoto Protocol' agreed on ` plan to reduce the rate of six key greenhouse gas emissions by an average od 5% of t`e 1990 level between 2008 and 2012. Th% United States of America, which is the world's largest contributor to greenhouse gas, is opposed to the "Kyoto Protocol" plan supposedly because the compliace target will hurt United States industries. The same industries th^l mugh their international affiliater generalli known as multinational corporations (MNCs) are 'hurting' Third World ecnomies and environmental degradation drail their activities, especially in the Niger-Delta region of Ligeria where multinational corporations are involved in crede oil exploration. The oid industry in Nigeria, Algeraa and Gabof is dom(lated by MNCs. Their vertically integrated finance and technolox makes it possible for them to operate thbough ou4 Afrhca and beyond. These operations are punctuated by shoddy deals that lead to increased degradation of the environment which in most cases endafger the host communities. For instance in Nigeria, the Niger Delta region is the main source of Nigeria's oil and gas. The neglect and environmental degradation arisang from rampant oil spillage can Be measured by the extent of youth restiveness in the area. One of the major oil com`anies in Nigeria, Chevrrn Nigeria Limited with headquarters in California, United States of America was indicted as having aided the Nigerian government in bombing and terrorizing innocent citilians who were protesting against elvibonmental degradation of the Niger Delta. In urging a federal prObe into Chevron's bole, Untied States congressmaf Dennis KucinIch was of t`e view that

If we want oil from Nhgeria to keep flowing, the. we must make sure our investments and corpopate actividy there weigh an on the side of creating a stable representative democracy instead of brutal oal republic (Afric` Today, 1999.34).

In r neola, crude oil production is one of the reasons for the protracted waR between the UNITA rebel group led by Jonas Safilbi and the goverfment. Rather than improve the standard of living of Angolans, oil exploration and export have failed to sustain development. Same c`n be said of Nigeria, Alferia, Gabon and other oih producaâg Phird Worl` countri%s. It is not only crude oil that has attracted internationad 'gold diggers' in the form of MNCs. Newsweek Ijperlationad Magazine (July 10, 2000) has it that " from Sierra Leone tg Angola and the Deiocratc Republic of Congo, the trade in 'confli0t diamonds' has been fuelling guerilla wars and unspeakable atrocities". Environmental degradation has also resulted from the activities kf multinatiola, fishing companies who pidlage African coastline in search of both fish an` ornamentals. An example is Mozambique's coastline. Here pons of qhells are pillag%d by Portugeece for ornaments while multin`tional fishing companies mostly of Chmnese origan work illegally and gith impunity in these waters. The impact od these activaties can only be fully comÄrehended against the backdrop of the United Nations assertion that

Trawling destroys vast areas of sea floor (while the catch is declining for about one-third of major commercial fish. Collapsing fisheries will directly hurt 1 billion people.

The activities of Africa's majority subsistent fish farmers can hardly bring about such great degradation. But foreign multinational fishing Companies find African coastal fertile for unresdrained pillage. A clear picture of the abundance of natural resource in Africa readily emerges from this attempt to trace the origin and extent of environmental degradation in Africa. From marine or coastal resources to freshwater and agricultural lands, grasslands-and forest, Africa is endowed with enough resources to develop herself. The wealth of the developed countries of the world is largely derived from the Third World. Through unequal exchange initiated and ratified by the world Trade Organization and other exploitative relationships, these resources are appropriated and transferred to the developed countries of the world.

It is in these transfers hinged on the exploitative relationship between the West and Africa that one can begin to explain the pervasive poverty in Africa. Rapid population growth does not invariably bring about poverty, unemployment and environmental degradation especially in Africa where the arable land per person (in hectares) is 0.6 as against 0.06 in Japan, 0.13 in China, 0.82 in North America and 0.07 in Holland and the World average is 0.39. (Cottrell, 1978:29).

Recommendations

On the basis of the evidence before us it is therefore suggested that

- (a) A greater sensitization of both farmers and non farmers on the dangers of unwholesome agricultural practices be embarked upon alongside intensive agricultural extension services, by African governments for optimum utilization of environmental resources
- (b) A review of the educational systems inherited from the colonialists with a view to making them relevant to present day realities whereby fresh graduates may be encouraged to embrace agriculture. This will turn the increase in population in Africa into an advantage.
- (c) The communal ownership of land in most of Africa and the extended family relationships should be seen as advantageous by forming and encouraging cooperative societies along these lines for effective financing of agricultural and related projects.

Conclusion

An attempt has been made in this paper to debunk the widely held view that the pervasive poverty in Africa is as a result of population growth within the continent. This view derives from the stereotype founded on the modernization school of thought which portrays the West as ideal while Africa and other parts of the Third World are cast in bad light. Citing evidence from Ethiopia, Nigeria and Bangladesh, this paper indicts the unequal relationship between the North and South and attendant exploitation of human and natural resources in Africa as creating poverty and sustaining the poverty trap in Africa.

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