Population and Sustainable Development: The Critical Role of Good Governance

Sustainable development is a distinct possibility, but one that demands the political will to put into effect radical changes

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Many articles in the popular press and in academic journals decry the doomed state of our planet. In one recent journalistic account, “The Ends of the Earth”, the author (Kaplan, 1997) journeyed to see for himself “the corrosive effects of overpopulation and environmental degradation in the Third World”. What he found, not surprisingly, was consistent with what he had expected, based on the oft-cited statistical indicators of development — or more accurately, of the malaise of development — decay, disorder and depression. Similar indicators suggest that the news from the Pacific is not

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good either. Demographic trends particularly are invoked as harbingers of
doom for these island countries and territories. The well-rehearsed scenario
is a future condemned by overpopulation of under-resourced towns and
depopulation of the outer islands; by agricultural communities beggared by
the pressure of numbers, the degradation of their environmental resources,
and the loss of their most productive members; by the inability of basic
education and health services to make headway against the growing
numbers of potential clients; and by economic stagnation that is deepened
by the emigration of talent and the absence of jobs for the remnant of a
low-skilled labour force (see, for example, Cole, 1993).

Official statistics are prone to distort the realities they describe and to
help to substantiate a particular interpretation of reality. But let us say, for
argument’s sake, that the figures and the reality they project are correct. On
the face of it, the easiest conclusion is that there is little chance other than
the Pacific islands soon becoming an impoverished backwater of the global
economy. But at least two things are wrong with this prognosis. First, it is
driven principally by the attention given narrowly to technical relationships
between population, the economy and the environment, such as the much
vaunted connections between growth of population and gross domestic
product (GDP), and the relationship between population density and
environmental pressure. All apparently empirically defensible connections
— apart from the fact that not one goes undisputed. Much less attention is
given to the political relationships which link population with the social
order (Taylor and Pieper, 1996) and, in particular, to McNicoll’s (1980,
1993) ideas about alternative histories and the links between populations
and their political domains. Yet, as this article argues, it is in this political
domain where the greatest potential lies for a radically improved outlook.

Second, pessimism is a very poor guide to more viable prospects. The
debate over what actions are practical is deeply divided, particularly
between those who propose that economic growth must take precedence
and that greater affluence will eventually benefit everyone, and those who
believe that economic growth is both necessary but in itself insufficient if the
true goals are equitable development, social cohesion and individual
well-being. A good deal of concern has been aired over the social
consequences of the latest round of economic theories — labelled
impressively as “reforms” or “structural adjustments” — but these
interactions are complex and the negative impacts subtle, yet significant
(Taylor and Pieper, 1996; Tapinos and others, 1997; ESCAP, 1994). What
these policies require, at base, is a restructuring of the state, given a feeling
that the tradition of macro-economics shows scant concern for poor people
and social processes (Taylor and Pieper, 1996). Although economic reform is not the focus of this article, it is crucial to acknowledge that much discussion about governance in the current development literature is aligned with these particular economic theories.

The one point on which all parties apparently agree is that development should be “sustainable”. This word, one of the most overused in policy documents and international resolutions, is also one of the most vague and there are various interpretations of what is meant by it. The Asian Development Bank (ADB, 1996), for example, refers to “sustainable economic development” in line with the Bank’s concern about the overexploitation of natural and environmental resources and its view that living standards will improve fastest through greater prosperity. The United Nations Development Programme has entitled its mandate “sustainable human development”, by which it means an equally weighted combination of human development, environmental management, economic growth and good governance, with strong emphasis given to distributional equity (e.g. Anand and Sen, 1996). This euphemistic language might invite some cynicism, particularly among those who readily see the human element in the Pacific situation, but not any sustainable one. The problem, too, is that the debate over economic growth and human development can, and has, raged back and forth without either side making any progress towards their goals. In fact, those who proclaim economic growth as the first priority for the Pacific in one breath usually bemoan the weak sources of this growth in the second.

There is certainly little that is new in proclaiming the necessity for human development and the schools and medical services that are implied, nor economic growth, nor better environmental management. Good governance, too, is an oft-recycled idea, but one to which new attention is being given, it now being seen as possibly the primary means of achieving sustainable development. By “governance” is meant the institutional landscape within which political, social and economic activity takes place, the frameworks of rules and procedures that help govern such activity, and the organizations that carry it out (Taylor and Pieper, 1996). Much of the talk about governance, however, refers only to the second part of this definition, i.e. specifically to government, and little attention is given to the ways in which the institutional landscape links to development in general. Recent demographic literature, however, makes the connection between the state and development quite clear, and from this emerges a dynamic agenda for change.
The agency of the state in population dynamics

In recent years, some theorists and historians have demonstrated the powerful agency that the state has upon demographic change (e.g. McNicoll, 1980; Greenhalgh, 1990; Jewsiewicki, 1987; Hunt, 1988; O’Brien, 1987; Organski and others, 1984; Chung, 1991). For instance, while in theory high fertility was a universal characteristic of traditional societies, there is strong evidence that in some places it was provoked by economic and political changes connected with the expansion of capitalism and through state-run programmes to foster “modern” ideas about the behaviour that befitted good wives and mothers (e.g. Jolly and MacIntyre, 1989; Van Binsbergen and Geschiere, 1985; Manderson, 1989; Smith, 1983). Many theories of fertility change have been predicated on culture, on attitudes and on knowledge, but it is equally apparent that changing social institutions drive behavioural change by altering the circumstances of people’s lives. Fertility behaviour is closely connected with structures of opportunity, which often originate in state policies and operate on fertility through their impact on individual life-courses (McNicoll, 1980). During the twentieth century in Fiji, for example, it could be demonstrated that widening opportunities for a community of Fijian women, particularly through state-directed policies affecting their chances for education, employment and mobility, were closely reflected in their fertility behaviour (Chung, 1991).

Population policies always have been predicated on the assumption that the state has power to modify demographic behaviour. Many family planning programmes, for example, rest on the general premise that “traditional” people, unsure of their real needs, can be directed towards more appropriate behaviour and thereby their “development”, or that individual conduct can be modified to benefit the larger group. However, the real power of the state is not exercised so directly. Rather, the demographic behaviour of people is powerfully influenced by institutional incentives or constraints, which encourage or inhibit certain actions, often without intention. Just as there may be explicit policies to influence demographic trends, so there are “hidden” policies set in motion by existing state activities and, more generally, by the general style of local development.

In any history, it is always tempting to recount events as if their patterning were inevitable. But given the agency of the state in patterning change, we can justifiably consider what might have been — or could be — if colonial and post-colonial policies had been quite different; if structures of opportunities had been wider and more equally distributed. And if we
can raise the possibility of alternative histories, so can we also raise the possibility of alternative futures.

**Population growth: what hope for accommodation?**

Much of the concern over population growth has been provoked by ecologists or environmentalists, who warn of the impact of absolute population numbers on environmental sustainability. Although this is indisputable at some point, beyond that much of the accompanying discussion is sterile, for the momentum of rapid population growth means that it will be with us for some time, barring some cataclysmic event. The critical question is not whether it should or should not be accommodated, but *how* this accommodation can best be done. As the case of Tarawa in Kiribati demonstrates, links between population growth and ecological stress are affected not only by demographic and environmental circumstances, but also by social, legal and economic institutions. Modifying these institutions can open the possibility of a better future.

South Tarawa, the country’s capital, is one of the most crowded places in the South Pacific. From 25,000 people in the early 1990s the population is expected to grow to between 35,000 and 46,000 by the year 2010. The lower figure can be attained only if immigration and fertility rates are sharply curtailed; the higher figure assumes that current patterns of growth continue unchanged (Chung, 1993). Population density currently averages 1,600 people per sq km, but is much higher in some localities, such as the islet of Betio, where there are 5,400 persons per sq km. The concentration of people on the South Tarawa atoll grew rapidly in the 1960s and 1970s but, even though the rate of growth has slowed since, almost twice as many people live there currently than did so 20 years ago. The population of South Tarawa still increases at an average of 3.1 per cent a year, or about one third faster than the national rate.

Many of the pressing environmental problems in Kiribati come from congested conditions on the one atoll of Tarawa, from the combination of increased population, urbanization, infrastructural development such as causeways and the airport, changes in technology and increased consumption. Poorly planned land use and overtaxed systems of water reticulation, sewage and waste disposal have together had serious environmental, economic and social consequences for South Tarawa. Crowded, unsanitary conditions contribute to a high incidence of diarrhoeal diseases and a death rate for children high by Pacific standards. Important disease vectors are inadequate sewerage, uncollected domestic garbage,
stray dogs and flies. While reticulated water supplies are safe, demand for clean water far exceeds supply, a situation made worse by wastage from deteriorating distribution mains and illegal connections, about which the financially strapped Public Utilities Board is able to do little. Many households use water from unprotected and unclean wells, while settlements encroaching onto water reserves threaten further pollution of groundwater. Living conditions are particularly poor on Betio. When cholera broke out in 1977, communal toilets were built; however, by the early 1990s with three quarters of those toilet blocks unserviceable through misuse, and an even larger population, the threat to public health had become immediate (AİDAB, 1993). If current patterns of resource and land management remain unchanged, population increase is certain to exacerbate them with congestion, public health, water supply, waste management and environmental degradation.

The challenge of accommodating population increase on South Tarawa is therefore immediate and the forerunner, it might be assumed or argued, of the future scenario for other densely populated islands in the Pacific. The growth of South Tarawa’s population has been of concern to Kiribati for some time and its government already has in place well-proven policy measures — outer island development, resettlement, decentralized employment, family planning programmes - directed at modifying trends in the national population. But barring some unforeseen event, South Tarawa’s population will not be contained by any of these policies, at least not over the next decade or two. A ban was placed on immigration in the 1950s, even while most new facilities — high schools, teachers’ college, a new hospital and administrative centre -were built there, so that there was an influx of settlers from other islands after controls on movement were lifted in the early 1960s. Not only is the political cost of closing South Tarawa to all new immigrants unimaginable nowadays, but also, even if adopted, such a measure would not contain its growth, for immigration now accounts for only about one quarter of the growth; the larger part comes from births among the local population. The programme to increase settlement of Line Islands and Phoenix Islands was inspired partly by the need to alleviate congestion on South Tarawa, but the programme is too small and too gradual to have any appreciable effect on its population growth. Encouraging lower fertility can benefit the health and well-being of women and children, but the adoption of the necessary measures takes effect slowly. Even if fertility were to decline decisively and soon, the large number of young people in the population would mean that Tarawa’s population would continue to grow under its own momentum for at least another generation.
The situation on South Tarawa is not simply the result of population growth, but of the lack of deliberate or effective government policy to counter it. These problems were accurately forecast in the late 1970s by a demographer, Sheila MacCrae, whose projections were incorporated into the 1979-1982 National Development Plan (Government of Kiribati, 1978) and by a series of United Nations Development Advisory Team for the Pacific reports on settlement conditions based on detailed field examination. These reports touched on the real issue: that crowding on South Tarawa reflected not only its growing population, but also a wasteful, fragmented and disorderly use of land. Tellingly, these reports did not bring any action to improve settlement conditions on the atoll, one reason for which is common to many places. Since the 1960s the broad thrust of settlement planning has been to stop the growth of main towns and cities. This emphasis on preventing urban growth has seemed to argue against investing in urban services in case more migrants would be attracted to town, or providing services to squatters in case that legitimized their claims to land. In South Tarawa — as in cities across the world — the result has been a proliferation of sub-standard, overcrowded housing with inadequate services, a far cry from the urban plans that were never implemented.

The second reason is also common to many places, although the specifics are uniquely linked to the politics of land ownership in Tarawa (Lodge, 1987). In Kiribati’s 1990 census, 83 per cent of the people on South Tarawa said that their home island was elsewhere, even though more than half of them had been born on South Tarawa. Thus, many non-Tarawan residents are not migrants in any real sense, but reflect previous movement by parents or grandparents. There is a small land market, but in general, this is tightly controlled by Tarawans. On Betio, the most crowded islet, much of the land is leased by the government for civil servant housing, yet the widespread informal subdivision of lots is effectively ignored, as is the growing number of squatters. To this must be added areas of derelict land on government leases; the result is a highly congested, haphazard arrangement of sub-standard houses and other buildings. Any move to regularize tenure is fraught with difficulty in both modern and traditional law. The current situation, which grows ever more entrenched and complex, is characterized by divided ownership, highly fragmented holdings, scattered rights and disputed boundaries (Namai, 1987:39).

The fundamental cause of urban congestion in South Tarawa is therefore not simply population numbers, but political, legal and cultural practices which defuse the political will to improve settlement conditions. Crowding could be alleviated by better management. Overcoming the
current reluctance to use land more efficiently and improving settlement standards are essential if an inevitably larger population is to be accommodated in the future.

The employment crisis: what hope of resolution?

One of the conundrums of economic growth in the Pacific is the tightening bottleneck of employment in the formal sector. In 1991, only 370,000 such jobs were available in the South Pacific area, while the potential labour force stood at approximately 1.8 million people (UNDP, 1994). The gap between demand and labour supply is widening, driven by three processes: rapid population growth, shifts in population age-structure and a growing demand for cash incomes. These trends translate into demands for wage employment that are increasingly difficult to meet, a situation not likely to improve in the near future. There is little, if any, evidence that island countries, should they continue with current policies, will be able to create a sufficient number of paid jobs to satisfy anticipated growth in the labour force. Consequently, the semi-subsistence sector, particularly in rural areas, not only will carry the burden of absorbing most of the labour force, but will also provide their livelihood. Although slow rates of employment growth are acknowledged to challenge the sustainability of Pacific island economies and societies, in most countries labour force appraisal and planning is extraordinarily weak.

For some time, increased opportunities for self-employment and employment in the informal sector have been proposed as ways to stimulate and distribute economic activity more evenly. However, many practical problems lie in the way of putting these policies into effect. Despite a decade or so of stated commitment to private-sector development, in most countries a weak, private and very narrow informal sector continue to act as significant barriers to employment growth. Many foreign investors are discouraged by encountering a tangle of red tape — difficulties which have been identified many times over, but still are insufficiently addressed by the various government bureaucracies involved (Price Waterhouse, 1998).

The business and legal environments are particularly hostile to small-scale and informal enterprises, with outdated legal and administrative requirements placing many obstacles in the way of small business operators. For example, licensing acts, which govern permits to operate a business or to locate it in a particular place, are often administered in ways that are confusing, frustrating and defeating to individual entrepreneurs. The Public Health Act of Fiji, for instance, prohibits any place ever used as sleeping
quarters from being the location to manufacture, prepare, pack, or store articles for sale. Many small traders use their homes for business purposes instead of renting premises and thus run the risk of being outside the law. These regulations may not always be applied, but if strictly enforced at any time they make many small businesses vulnerable to abrupt closure and discourage investment in their growth (UNDP, 1997).

Systems of formal schooling continue to direct young people primarily to wage employment in the towns, another generally recognized issue on which little progress has been made in the Pacific. That parents and children most value academic success and white collar work is hardly surprising; in many countries, pay scales throughout the labour market reflect identical values. Policies to diversify employment skills through education are defeated by the institutional structure of this market. White-collar employment in Fiji, for example, is supported by wage orders which ensure that even skilled workers in some trades, such as the garment industry and the building and engineering trades, earn wages marginally above the poverty line should they happen to be the sole income earner for their household (Government of Fiji and UNDP, 1997:80).

Patterns of unemployment and underemployment in island countries are therefore not random nor inherent to human society. Rather, they reflect the institutional structure of both the labour market and the society within which it is imbedded. Consequently, it is not demographic trends that contribute most to levels of unemployment, but rather the legal, economic and social framework situated largely within and able to be changed by government agency.

The spread of poverty: what hope of avoidance?

The growth of population and the depletion of resources are often claimed to be principal factors in the growing incidence of poverty in the world. Again, it can be argued that this connection is not inevitable, but often reflects a failure or absence of government intervention, since it is possible to eradicate poverty if there is sufficient political will.

Between 1977 and 1991, there was a small trend towards more widespread and deeper poverty in Fiji (Government of Fiji and UNDP, 1997:45). Since then, no statistical data are available to measure whether or not this situation has changed, but those involved with welfare programmes believe an increased demand for their services indicates that it has worsened. While the incidence of poverty only rose slowly over 15 years, the cost of
the government’s lack of intervention increased sharply, both in terms of the social and human costs of living in poverty and of the monetary costs in closing the poverty gap. Considering only the latter, the cost of closing this gap escalated from approximately F$11.5 million a year in 1977 to F$45.9 million a year in 1991, representing 1.9 per cent and 5.4 per cent of GDP respectively (Government of Fiji and UNDP, 1997:111).

Another sign of increased poverty in Fiji is the spreading areas of “squatter” or informal housing in all towns, with the number of people in informal housing rising more rapidly than the urban population as a whole. In 1995, a survey in the town of Ba, Viti Levu, found the squatter population to have grown tenfold since 1986 (Gibson, 1995:12). A recent national survey estimated that at least 20 per cent of all urban households live in informal situations and, as a result, are at risk of poor health, insecure tenure and other consequences of poor housing (Walsh, 1996). The Fiji Poverty Report concluded that this expansion of informal living situations demonstrates the unmet need for affordable housing, which persists despite the government’s long involvement in low-cost housing programmes and, in particular, the failure of these policies to assist low-income families. In the process, many such households have become impoverished, having either to pay unaffordably high rentals and to economize on other necessary expenditures, or to continue to live in sub-standard conditions. To this extent, poor housing is a cause of poverty and a reflection of institutional failure, not a symptom of individual misfortune (Government of Fiji and UNDP, 1997:87).

The same arguments apply to other indicators of poverty, be they the failure of children to complete primary school or the inability of women to find paid work to support families. A recent study in Fiji of children who did not attend school concluded that in many cases poverty was the direct cause (SCFF, 1998). Although there is no tuition fee for primary education, a child’s family must bear many other costs. Despite Ministry of Education strictures, some schools charge an array of supplementary fees that cover almost any possible form of activity and send home children who cannot pay. The inability of many households, those headed by women in particular, to support themselves adequately is related to the gender segregation of Fiji’s labour market, which reflects prevailing sexist attitudes and the absence of legislation to ensure equal pay for work of equal value. As a result, many occupations are effectively the preserve of men, so that the difference between “men’s” jobs and “women’s” jobs finds women generally lower paid, lower ranked, less secure and less often promoted. The Fiji Poverty Report established that half of all women heads of
low-income, urban households worked in one of only two jobs: as a domestic servant or a garment factory worker (Government of Fiji and UNDP, 1997:61). These are not inevitable aspects of human society; instead, they demonstrate the absence or ineffectiveness of community and state interventions to counter poverty.

**Moving forward on more optimistic grounds**

Just as most attention is given to the technical or “scientific” relationships between population, the economy and the environment, so too are most population policies conceived to lie within this realm. Population-environment interactions in particular are usually considered in quantitative terms, as follows:

The size of a population and its growth determines the magnitude of needs to be fulfilled and therefore the magnitude of development that should be undertaken and the rate of such development.... The particular characteristics of a population determine the scope and range of needs that are to be met and therefore the character and scope of the development processes that need to be pursued (Kismadi, 1994:38).

Remedial policies and programmes are usually proposed along similar lines. A common plan is to define the relationships between population and environment in concrete terms, carefully monitor their progress using the technologies of specialized scientific disciplines, and develop the administrative capacity to manage this integrated planning and monitoring (Brechin and others, 1994) a strategy that is akin to constructing an elaborate structure from which to watch the ship go down. Other writers, however, regard the integration of population, environment and development policies as an expensive luxury that ill-befits developing countries such as India or China (Panadiker, 1994:33). Another conventional line of policy is to control the process of change in some way, such as to restrain the movement of people in order to avoid acute imbalances in natural resource stocks (UNFPA, 1991:112), but these types of plans have almost always failed fast.

This article has commented on the insufficient attention that is given to the relationships between the dynamics of populations and the political realm, and on the great potential therein for radical change. These dynamics include the changing distributions of urban populations, and of people’s jobs and incomes. As a recent report on urbanization in the Pacific concluded, “Governments need to consider urbanization as a crucial part of
the national economic development process and adopt a positive and proactive approach to urban growth by taking measures that enable towns to grow in an orderly way” (ESCAP, 1999:36). Addressing the impact of gender and education on the distribution of jobs is fundamental to encouraging employment growth. Governments that intend to stem the growing incidence of poverty need to consider whether state institutions, such as the school system or public housing, actually redress or exacerbate patterns of disadvantage.

The institutional perspective that this article has proposed brings the state under greater scrutiny for its influence upon change. This is a very different matter from the statist controls and monitoring devices that conventional population policies propose. From this perspective, sustainable development becomes a distinct possibility, but one that demands the political will to put into effect radical changes.

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