

Debate on population growth in Africa at the 5th African Population Conference in Arusha, Tanzania

REPORT

- Topic of debate:** Is population growth a scourge or a blessing in Africa?
- Chair:** Professor Bertha Koda, Director - Institute of Development Studies, University of Dar es Salaam
- Main Speaker 1:** Dr. Patience Stephens, Team Leader - United Nations Programme on Youth, UN Secretariat
- Main Speaker 2:** Professor Francis Dodoo, Director - Regional Institute for Population Studies, University of Ghana
- Date:** 14th December 2007

The debate on population growth in Africa was part of the 5th African Population Conference that took place in Arusha, Tanzania. The five-day conference was organized by the Union for African Population Studies (UAPS) with her partners. This report is on the debate that was organized by the IUSSP Scientific Panel on Population Growth and Human Welfare in Africa. The aim of the debate was to stimulate a discussion on population growth in Africa by actively involving participants of the conference. The major question was whether the population growth is a scourge or a blessing in the Africa.

The debate was attended by 150 scholars including academics, researchers, government officials, policy makers, staff from NGOs, etc.. Dr Nyovani Madise, chairperson of the IUSSP Panel on Population Growth and Human Welfare in Africa, invited Professor John Cleland, President of IUSSP, to give opening remarks. Professor Cleland briefly spoke about the IUSSP and encouraged participants who are not members of the IUSSP to join the Union. He outlined the reasons for establishing the IUSSP Panel on Population Growth and Human Welfare in Africa, and mentioned that the debate is part of the Panel's activities. He introduced the chairperson of the debate, Professor Bertha Koda. Professor Koda outlined the rules of the debate and introduced the two main speakers (Dr Stephens and Professor Dodoo).

Dr Patience spoke for *population growth is a scourge in Africa*. She defined scourge as “a whip which is meant to inflict pain or punishment and which can cause wide or great affliction”. In her presentation, she gave some figures to support the argument that population growth is a scourge. The figures include: the trend of population size and growth for the period 1950–2050; a comparison of dependency ratios between Africa and Europe; the growth in the number of African women of childbearing ages (15-49) for the period 1950 – 2050; and a comparison of the number of annual births and deaths between Africa and Europe for the period 1950-2040. She argued that increasing births and declining deaths in Africa depleted resources. She emphasized that African governments are committed to development but high population growth has been an obstacle to that development. Areas where high population growth has done damage include: poverty, food security, climate change, ecosystem sustainability, employment, and healthcare. She urged participants to acknowledge the damage caused by population growth in Africa. In her final words, she argued that population growth is the major factor responsible for many of Africa’s problems and noted that the development of China and India was accompanied by lowering fertility levels.

Professor Dodoo argued that *population growth is a blessing in Africa* appealing to participants to reason based on their understanding of African society. He began his talk by rephrasing the debate question from population growth to high fertility: Is high fertility good or bad for Africa? Population growth is caused by high fertility and /or low mortality, but the benefits of lowering mortality are not questionable. He emphasized that high fertility is a rational choice for Africans, though the world is trying to convince Africans to behave contrary to their preferences. “Indeed, listening to my esteemed adversary’s position, I started to ask myself whether so many Africans who want so many children could be so wrong about what they want?” He attacked those who believe that Africans have higher fertility because of ignorance on how to lower their fertility. According to Prof Dodoo, the high unmet need for contraception observed for the continent is mainly due to the fact that many Africans responding to surveys want to please the interviewer, and thus report wanting fewer children than they have, because wanting smaller families is what is expected of them. There is often a discrepancy between people’s stated and true preferences. Prof Dodoo mentioned various benefits for having larger families in Africa. Among these include: old age security; population replenishment to offset increased mortality due to HIV, and that a larger population size gives a country more weight and influence in global markets. In his final words, he stressed that most of the problems in Africa have nothing to do with population growth.

During the discussions period, the audience gave their views on whether population growth is a scourge or a blessing in Africa. Points raised during the discussion include:

- How will some countries such as Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali which currently have small populations (around 12 million), be able to handle the pressure on resources required to feed and care for populations projected to reach 40-50 million in 2050 at current growth rates?
- Deterministic models that show that population growth will cause unemployment, migration, etc., are misleading.
- The prospects for feeding Africa in the future are not good hence population growth is a scourge
- The West developed by lowering population growth, Africa should learn from this example
- If the population drops suddenly, we will have a problem of an ageing population.
- We need to worry about the quality of our children before we allow people to have many children
- It is a human right for Africans to make their own decision about fertility
- Reducing population growth cannot be a solution to the problems in Africa
- Population growth can be a blessing if we consider people as a resource
- Our problem might not be high population growth but infrastructure and unequal distribution of resources
- Population growth can be a blessing if you look at it positively.

At the end of the discussion, a vote was taken by raised hands. After counting the votes, the chairperson declared that there was a tie. There were an equal number of participants who voted that population growth is a scourge as those who voted that population growth is a blessing.

Report by Akim J Mturi