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Population Policy for FSM

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A Look at the Figures

Population growth in Micronesia has been very rapid since the end of World War II. At a yearly growth rate of about 3.5% for most of that time, the population has tripled in the last 50 years and now stands at about 105,000. This growth is all the more startling because for the first half of this century and most of the last century the population remained steady or declined.

{Graph showing Chuuk and Pohnpei pop since 1900}

There are clear signs in the latest census figures that the high growth rates since the war are finally tapering off. The annual growth rate over the last five years has dropped to 2.1%. The birth rate has fallen off since 1980 from 42 to 33 (per 1,000). The average woman in 1980 had a total of 6.5 children, but today the figure is down to 4.7. The median age, which was once 16, is now a little over 18. This indicates that there are not as many children being born as there once were.

The population pyramids–visual representations of the age and sex make-up of the total population–tell the same story. The number of young children is not as great as we might have expected, presumably because the birth rate is starting to decline. This is especially noticeable for Kosrae and Yap. There are also hollows in the sides of the pyramids for some states, indicating that many of those in their 20s and 30s are missing. We may assume that they have left their island to study or find jobs abroad.Although the FSM population will continue to grow in the years ahead, it will probably not grow nearly as fast as it has since the war. Projections based on the census show that the yearly growth rate will drop to 1.7% within the next 15 years. This is due to the declining birth rate as much as emigration to Guam and Saipan. It appears that the worst of the population explosion is over.

What is happening in FSM can be explained simply by reference to a worldwide model with three phases. In the first phase, both births and deaths are high, so there is low population increase. Then, death rates are lowered through modern health care while birth rates remain high. The result is rapid population increase, such as we have experienced in FSM in the last 50 years. Finally, in the third stage, birth rates fall so that the population levels out. We in FSM may be starting to enter this stage now.

Is There a Population Problem?

Many people in FSM, while accepting the high population growth figures, flatly deny that this is a problem. Those who hold such a view are not just always villagers who have been brought up to think "the more kids the better." Their number includes highly educated people who regard the population problem as just another imposition of a foreign thought mode and who hearken back to their own cultural values that affirmed the importance of a large family. Indeed, one of the participants said that Pohnpei needs more people today, not fewer.

Others see the rapid population growth in FSM as but a part of a much larger, worldwide problem that everyone must face. For thousands of years our planet was sparsely inhabited; only in the last century or two did the population really begin to spin out of control. It has escalated from a billion to over five billion in the past century. We cannot ignore our responsibility to the other humans with whom we share the planet.

Some see the problem not as too many people, but as an imbalance of people and the limited resources they have to draw from. Population becomes a problem when people face the prospect of scarcity of food and other resources in the future. One person put it this way: a can of sardines that two people may have shared in the past now must be divided among four. Others object to this position on the grounds that island people depend ultimately on what the land produces and, with a little effort, it is capable of providing for many more than the present population.

To answer the question "How many is too many," the amount of land must be taken into account. At this point, then, population density becomes an important factor. In FSM the population density varies greatly from state to state. Kosrae's and Yap's, at 176 persons per square mile, is not much higher than Hawaii or California. Pohnpei's (250 per sq. mile), while greater than its two sister states, is only half that of the Philippines. The population density of Chuuk (993 per sq mile), on the other hand, is very high by world standards. It is even higher than Japan's, one of the world leaders. This may explain why the people from Chuuk have moved out of their state in much larger numbers than people from other parts of FSM.

But land is not the only point at issue. People's rising expectations also enter the equation at some point. Everywhere in the FSM today, more and more people are seeking jobs and looking for involvement in the cash economy. Yet, there are not enough jobs to go around now and the shortfall is expected to be even larger in the future. Government services, especially in the areas of education and health, will also be stretched beyond its capacity to satisfy public demands in years to come. The government has barely enough money to provide for needs today. What will it do when trying to support a much larger population?

Families may be able to provide for themselves in the future, but can the FSM government support a population that may double in the next 25 or 30 years? The nation is obliged to do more than simply feed its people; it must educate them, provide utilities for them, offer them medical services when they are sick, and protect them from crime and natural disaster. Hence, population policy is not principally a health concern (although it has been treated as such by FSM in the past), but a matter of conserving limited resources in the interest of

national development.

Confronting Traditional Values

One of the participants told us of a 70-year-old woman who had given birth to 19 children, 14 of whom survived. Most of us can probably name several women who have had more than 15 children during their child-bearing years. This is not at all surprising because the traditional attitude towards family size is "the bigger the better."

A large family was valued for many reasons. In the first place, children were regarded as producers rather than consumers. The cost of feeding them was negligible at a time when most people grew their own food. More children meant a larger labor force that could produce more food and bring greater recognition to the whole family. A large family also meant increased likelihood that the parents would be better cared for in their old age. If some of the children moved away and neglected their parents, others might be counted upon to show their filial love. In addition, more children increased the chances that one or more might get paying jobs and bring in added support to the family. Family size was like buying raffle tickets: the more you have, the better your chance of winning the grand prize. In short, a large number of children was a potential source of wealth, not a quick road to poverty.

Those who support a population policy endorsing the limitation of family size should recognize that their project is counter-cultural, flying directly in the face of traditional values as it does. Unless this fact is understood from the outset, planners will presume that the people comprehend the benefits they stand to gain from a population control policy. However sound and forward-looking a population policy may seem, it depends on the support of the public for its successful implementation. Proponents of limitation of population ally themselves with the forces of modern development against traditionalism. Like those of many other special interest groups, they seek to change a set of basic cultural attitudes and practices in the name of modernization.

The biggest obstacle to limiting family size is cultural, not religious. Large family size is a cultural value that cannot be dispensed with lightly.

What can be done?

Even some of those who see population growth in FSM as a major concern wonder whether a national policy is needed. Is the problem one that should be addressed at the national level, or should it be taken up by the states? Can and should the government attempt to intervene to limit family size? If so, what goals would it set? Should it target a certain family size–perhaps four per family–as the ideal? Just how does the government propose to accomplish these goals?

The first and most important thing to be done, in the minds of most of the participants, is public education on the population issue. This means more than just inserting a unit in the high school curriculum; it means reaching the adults in the community, even in the villages,

to communicate the urgency of the population problem in the eyes of the government. It also means taking seriously people's own attitudes on ideal family size and trying to find motives that will change their behavior.

Women should be targeted in any public education program, since the success of family planning depends in great measure on them. They should also receive more opportunities for formal schooling since, as one person explained, education opens them to the possibility of finding personal fulfillment in more ways than simply by raising children. Even if women's attitudes changed, however, they might not be able to get the paying jobs they desire due to the poor condition of the economy.

Another possible strategy is for the government to offer incentives for limiting family size. The reverse side of such a strategy would be to create disincentives for having large families. One person proposed the example of another country in which families are provided with government housing provided they comply with national norms on family size. In that country families with more than three or four children are evicted from better government housing and forced to move into less desirable quarters. Many would not accept this kind of practice on principle, however. They feel that the government, while it ought to educate people on the desirability of small family size, should not force the issue. The right to decide on the number of children belongs to the family, and the government should not intrude on this right. They are opposed to the sort of draconian legislation that countries such as Singapore and China have enacted to control the number of births.

Population control is a difficult but not impossible task. What has been done in other parts of the world can be also be accomplished in FSM. One person remarked that 50 or 60 years ago most Americans embraced many of the same values as Micronesians today regarding family size, but their values have changed. Urbanization and the workings of the economy, along with other factors, have brought about a revolution in the attitudes of Western nations. Why can't we expect that the same forces will work to revolutionize values in Micronesia? Indeed, the population data from the 1994 census shows that the revolution has already begun.

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