

Media role in mitigating the philippine population problem politics essay



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In a country where the Catholic Church's position is taken as a major factor in policy decision making, population control legislation has progressed ever so slowly. Progress that managed to be made, suffer from public acceptance and its proponents in government widely seen as practically committing political suicide. But there is a silent majority that sees the myriad of problems that this unabated rise in population brings: poverty, unemployment, lack of education, crime - realities they are already experiencing in their daily lives, a reality that they hope the government would address through effective population control policies. If the Church's position cannot be swayed, is media doing its role in educating and information dissemination? Is it being an agenda setter or acting as an effective check and balance, or is it also being caught in country's intricate web of politics and power relations?

In order for me to begin to analyze this problem, I found it necessary to acknowledge and establish that there is first and foremost, a population problem in the Philippines. I also need to establish that although there are possible solutions to this situation, the Catholic Church's position on the use of artificial family planning methods is what makes the national government seemingly impotent in implementing an effective population control policy. To open my analysis, I refer to the studies made by Alejandro Herrin and Ernesto Pernia which states that the Philippines' current levels of fertility and population growth stunts the country's economy. I chose to rely on their findings and figures as their intensive study on this issue is fairly recent (being published in 2003), and from that period up to the present, no major change has occurred as far the country's population control policies are

concerned. In fact, the issue of population control is currently being deliberated in Philippine Congress, with the Philippine legislature currently trying to pass the Reproductive Health Care and Population Development Bill (Senate Bill 3122 and House Bill 5043), its proponents hoping that this would address the country's population woes. As expected, the proposed bill is currently facing stiff opposition from the Catholic Church[1]as well as from various pro-life groups.[2]

Alejandro Herrin and Ernesto Pernia in the aforementioned 2003 study concluded that " feeble economic growth and transformation, exacerbated by rapid population growth, have been responsible for the Philippines' poor performance in human resource development and employment over the past two to three decades." [3]The authors argue that the country's " slow economic growth has generated only meager resources for investment in health, nutrition and education," and that these are not enough to meet the demands brought about by high fertility.[4]The country's slow economic growth for example, results in limited job opportunities, and this, coupled with a steadily growing labor force feeds into the country's growing problem of unemployment and income inequality, which in turn, coupled with the rise in population density in urban areas, worsen problems of crime[5]as well as becoming a factor that contribute to the cultivation of a culture of corruption. [6]Corruption, in turn, worsens the already weighty problem of poverty[7]and inequality, completing the vicious cycle that seemingly keeps the country in a destitute trap. Herrin and Pernia further stress that not only is there a need to seriously address the population problem, but that there is also a need to address this problem while attending to the " structural weakness in the

economy” at the same time. They recommend that in order to remedy this situation, “ a strong population policy must be made an integral part of the country’s development strategy,”[8]and proposes a policy framework based on “ decomposition of future population growth in terms of its main sources – namely unwanted fertility, the preference for a large family size and population momentum.”[9]

It should therefore be noted that although Herrin and Pernia acknowledges the population problem, the current rates of population growth and fertility are not the problems per se; it is seen more as a factor that compounds the current economic situation which, in turn, keeps the national government from taking advantage of the possible dividends that the maturation of this population could bring. This level of population growth and fertility might be advantageous for a country that is in a stage of development where it has the necessary resources to harness this demographic dividend, but in the Philippine setting, these growths are seen more as a liability than an asset.

We do add to the labor force annually, but because of limited resources, there are not enough employment opportunities locally to accommodate most of these new entrants in the labor force, and this keeps unemployment and underemployment rates high.[10]The fact that a substantial percentage of employed workers in the country are laborers or unskilled workers is also a cause of concern.[11]Parts of the labor force that do manage to find employment outside the country on the other hand, settle for blue-collar work, or accept high-risk jobs.[12]One might argue that the country is in fact already reaping some form of demographic dividend through labor-

migration, but looking at the country’s most recent population pyramids
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(1990-2005)[13], one could also argue that the possible economic gains from labor-migration only went into the acquisition of resources for the care of the bigger population of children – health care, daily needs (food etc.), education, child care (nannies). Cost of caring for the elderly and debt repayment incurred before going abroad, eats up into this supposed economic gain as well. Not much goes into investment or savings that can be translated into capital that could fuel much needed growth.[14]

The Catholic Church Opposition

Simply looking at one study alone (Herrin and Pernia), one can easily see that the Philippines indeed has a population problem, or at least a realization that unabated growth in population rate and fertility rates may be linked to various societal dilemmas the country is currently experiencing, such as: rising poverty, inequality, unemployment and slow economic growth. So why is it that there is this opposition by the Catholic Church to mitigate this problem, and concomitantly, why is it that the Catholic Church's position on this issue is regarded with such weight?

The Philippines is a predominantly Catholic country, with around 80% of its population being Catholics. The Filipinos' values, morals, much of the norms and beliefs in the Philippines have been shaped by more than 300 years of being subject to Christian indoctrination under Spanish rule. Just like any other religion in the world, the Catholic Church upholds particular values and mores that are not subject to change or even reconsideration – values based on sex and marriage are one of those. Sex before marriage and “living together” before marriage are deemed morally wrong; sex within marriage

on the other hand is considered a gift, that is meant to unite the couple and presupposes the creation of life.[15]The Church has always stood firm on their stand with regards to artificial methods of contraception for married couples, stressing that controlling one's sexual urges is a personal responsibility, and that the couple has the right to choose and decide their family size - again guided by their responsibility, as parents, to provide for their children; abortion is especially frowned upon.

Just how strong is religion in upholding these beliefs? If the study done by Evelyn Lehrer entitled " Religious Affiliation and its Relation to the Economic and Demographic Decisions People Make," were to be our basis for analysis, we would infer that religion indeed have a huge influence on the people that practice them. Lehrer states that " people tend to take into account religion in whatever interrelated decisions they make over their life cycle (emphasis added)," further stressing that " for behaviors that pertain to married couple households as opposed to individuals, religion matters because it is a complimentary trait within marriage, affecting many activities that husband and wife engage in together." [16]

Herrin practically echoes Lehrer's argument in his assessment of the Philippine setting by stating that " perhaps the single most important factor influencing population policy making [in the Philippines] since its formulation in 1969, and may partly explain its ever shifting focus, is the persistent and consistent opposition of the Catholic Church hierarchy to the government population policy of reducing population growth as well as its promotion of artificial family planning methods." [17]Historically speaking, it is alleged that it was the " Marcos administration's intention to promote family planning" in <https://assignbuster.com/media-role-in-mitigating-the-philippine-population-problem-politics-essay/>

the country that actually “ stimulated Philippine Catholicism to strengthen the commitment of the faithful to the Catholic hierarchy’s view on the subject.”[18]From that period on, the Catholic Church in the Philippines has continued to adapt a hard stance on these issues, even if other predominantly Catholic countries around the world (and even some of the predominantly Muslim countries in Southeast Asia who tend to have stricter religious beliefs) have long accepted artificial contraception as well as their government’s population control policies.

The Catholic Church in fact was instrumental in deleting a provision on population control in the Philippine Constitution when it was amended in 1987, following the ouster of then President Ferdinand Marcos; I don’t believe they will change their position any time soon and put back something in the Philippine Constitution that they fought hard to take out. If any institution wants to change the current accepted beliefs with regard to starting a family, deciding to have or not to have a child, and how many children to have, one should always take into consideration the Catholic Church’s position (in fact, Catholic values in general), and work through the Catholic way of thinking and belief systems. This is exactly what former Department of Health Secretary Juan Flavio Velasco did in the mid 90’s. Flavio, being a devout Catholic himself (though he did advocate artificial birth control methods), did not go on record as claiming to be against the Church’s position, but just went on and did his job as Health Secretary and pushed for an effective family planning campaign,[19]which was having substantial results until his success as Department Secretary propelled him to the Philippine senate where he served two terms.

This then leaves us with the second part of the question; why is it that the Catholic Church's position on this issue is regarded with such weight? I believe McQuillan has given us an idea of why this is the situation in the Philippines, when he stated that "...religious values ... are likely to play a critical role in shaping demographic behavior ...when churches are able to build a network of religious institutions that play a formative role in the lives of members and to exercise influence over civil institutions in society as well (emphasis added)."[20]Lehrer further adds that this is not only true on the issue of fertility as McQuillan argues, but that it also extends to other "demographic and economic outcomes." [21]I believe both Lehrer and McQuillan are on spot, at least in the case of the Philippines, as history does back up this argument. Aside from the fact that the Catholic Church do play a huge role in shaping Filipino beliefs through education (Catholic schools) and through regular sermons delivered during mass (weekly Church service), the Catholic Church also holds sway (at least morally as "spiritual advisors") over the country's leaders who happen to be predominantly Catholics[22]. The Catholic Church also plays an active role in politics as "watchdog" and critic - the Catholic Church was at the forefront of the two People Power revolutions, the first toppled the Marcos dictatorship, and the second removed Erap Estrada in office on charges of corruption and for "moral grounds." [23]Another political role of the Church is as "kingmaker." Proof to this is the number of visitors the Cardinal gets during election period, all hoping to get the Catholic Church's highly regarded endorsement. In fact, this "vote-courting" practice even extends to other Christian denominations in the country that have similar; if not more rigid; position on abortion, birth control and family planning. Any actor in Philippine politics would definitely

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think twice about advocating these population control measures and going against the strongly held beliefs of the Church,[24]as doing so would be tantamount to committing political suicide.

Government Action and Inaction

Aniceto Orbeta in an ADB discussion paper points out that the Philippines “ has been credited as one of the earliest adopters of a strong population program in Asia, [yet] today it still has not resolved the population problem, while her late adopting neighbors have successfully addressed the problem and [have since] turned to face other problems.”[25]Given the above mentioned constraints presented by the Catholic Church, and a society that largely adheres to Catholic values, what has government managed to accomplish as regards family planning and population control?

Then President Ferdinand Marcos was one of the 17 heads of states that signed the UN Declaration of Population on December 1967. The UN declaration in essence emphasized that “ the population problem must be recognized as a principal element in long-range national planning if governments are to achieve their economic goals and fulfill the aspirations of their people.”[26]With this idea in mind, the government then embarked on studies in order to come up with policies and programs to address concerns about the “ negative implication of rapid population growth on the attainment of social and economic objectives.”[27]Studies at that time point out that “ free exercise of fertility decisions of couples is not consistent with the common good,” government therefore saw the need to intervene in

fertility decisions as a matter of policy - family planning was deemed the necessary intervention.[28]

The Catholic Church would have been outraged at that time, but policy statements during that period reassured the Church that whatever population program would be adopted, government would see to it that the “religious beliefs and values of individuals would be respected.”[29]The Catholic Church was apparently lulled into a false sense of security, trusting government to keep its word only to find out that it has been working to legalize contraceptive sterilization, which the Church was strongly opposed to. In a 1973 pastoral letter, the Church allayed fears that “the government is following the patterns of adoption of artificial contraceptive methods from less radical methods to more radical sterilization and even abortion.”[30]

Marcos, in the early years of his dictatorship embarked on massive infrastructure and development programs; that period also saw rapid industrialization and urbanization. Because of this and because of concerns that high population growth rate would undermine the government’s economic development efforts; population control policies; as evidenced by various studies, policies, decrees and executive orders at that time; became a major area of concern. Testament to this was the fact that the role of the government in population would even be enshrined in the 1973 Constitution.

“It shall be the responsibility of the State to achieve and maintain population levels conducive to the national welfare.” (Article XV, Section 10). [31]

Looking at the list of population control and family planning policies of the Marcos regime in Herrin's paper,[32]I cannot help but notice that at that period, the government was only looking at the negative aspects of population and fertility growths,[33]and consequently was only focused on curbing these unwanted growths to achieve their envisioned positive economic gains. Policies aimed at developing and harnessing positive consequence of population growth (demographic dividend), such as population's positive effect on production, technical progress and innovation[34]were apparently not taken into consideration (at least not in the policy documents highlighted in Herrin's work). Had the government considered the positive aspects of population growth back then, who knows what programs and policies might have been instituted and pursued to take advantage of this demographic dividend. Again, I point to how government at that time approached the problem of growing unemployment after the late 70's oil crisis, where the government as a response to the problem decided to pursue overseas migration as a temporary stop-gap measure - labor-migration have since become an institution in Philippine society, and is now viewed as probably one of the major sectors that is keeping Philippine economy afloat.[35]

Whether population growth decline in the early 80's was due to the government's adoption and implementation of an effective family planning program; or if it was mainly an effect of progress, moving from an agricultural to industrialized modes of production; or of urbanization; or possibly because more women started to enter the workforce, translating into smaller and smaller family size;[36]or whether it is an effect of all these

factors working in unison, I have yet to see a study on. But assuming that the decline did result from a conglomeration of these factors, it would be safe to say that the government's policy responses to the problem of growing population and fertility rates were effective and timely. But now, we can only speculate what the effects of those programs would have been to Philippine society and economy had those population control policies not been discontinued.

In 1986, Ferdinand Marcos was ousted through the EDSA People Power Revolution (a movement which I pointed out earlier as having the backing of the Catholic Church), and since that time, the country's population control program went to a screeching halt. A year after Marcos was ousted, the provision on government's role in population control in the 1973 Philippine Constitution was scrapped, and the Constitution (1987 Constitution) that replaced it now carries the Catholic Church's pro-life, pro-choice position. [37]Herrin emphasized this fact when he stated that " while there was a strong fertility reduction objective during the Marcos era, there was none during the Aquino administration (emphasis added)."[38]Family planning, from being seen as an effective means to reduce fertility and population growth became a mere " health intervention," one with " possible fertility consequences."

The administrations after that tried to come up with proposals to curb population growth and high fertility rates but they have always encountered stiff opposition from the Church and from pro-life organizations.[39]The Fidel Ramos administration tried to revive fertility reduction policies through the family planning program by incorporating it under the umbrella of "
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Reproductive Health”[40]under the Department of Health. Despite scrutiny by the Catholic Church, it was able to progress, until its main proponent, charismatic Health Secretary Juan Flavier, won a seat in the Philippine senate. Then President Joseph Estrada also called for an “ aggressive family planning program to reduce fertility in its PPMP Directional Plan 2001-2004”[41], but this program never saw fruition, as Estrada was ousted in another Catholic Church-backed People Power Revolution. Finally, we have the current administration’s, policy statement (or non-statement) on family planning[42]and Herrin tells us that in essence it says that family planning is “ primarily a health intervention and as a means to help couples achieve their fertility preference,” a statement that does not imply a goal of reducing fertility and population growth rates.[43]The current proposed bills from the Senate and the House of Representatives seem to show promise but these bills are currently being opposed by the Catholic Church and Church-backed pro-life and pro-choice groups.[44]

Government if it has the will, can always implement population control or population management policies if it wanted to (even with Church opposition as evidenced with the Flavier program), but there is also this problem of the length of time leaders stay in office, and since the department heads are coterminous with the President that appointed them, family planning and population control policies tend to have short life spans as well - there just doesn’t seem to be any way to achieve a continuous program for population control in the Philippines. Currently, the country’s population growth rate[45]and fertility rate[46]are declining despite the lack of a solid government family planning or population control program.[47]This decline

could primarily be a direct result of the factors outlined by Debraj Ray in his book:[48]urbanization[49], the rise in share of women's share in the labor force[50]and information being more and more accessible to people even in the rural areas through media,[51]through formal education channels and through NGO's who are working to uplift the lives of people in the countryside. But policy makers in the country still insist on the adoption of a comprehensive population control and management program that would further reduce these rates to levels that are at least similar to those of the Philippines' Asian neighbors; levels that they believe would be more conducive to the attainment of the country's MDG's.[52]

I argue that though legislation may indeed contribute a whole lot as far as institution of radical measures to meet the desired levels of fertility and population growth, the mechanism to institute such change even without legislation is already in existence and simply needs to be tapped. I believe that the key to this problem lies in making the necessary "information"[53]available to society in order to effect the necessary changes. Herrin and Pernia for example point us to problems that had to do with misconceptions about contraceptives that are available to the public. Such mis-information includes supposed side effects and other health-related issues that artificial contraceptives might have[54]. Sex education is also one aspect of family planning and population control that doesn't need to wait for passing of the current legislation on debate to be implemented and is one area where the Catholic Church is not opposed to.[55]

The effective utilization of natural birth control methods only require information dissemination[56]in order to be practiced by the families that <https://assignbuster.com/media-role-in-mitigating-the-philippine-population-problem-politics-essay/>

need them to abate unwanted fertility or to achieve their desired family size. A society that is more informed about current and future economic prospects; a society that is informed about the various choices and options they have as far as security in old age welfare, job opportunities and health care would intuitively make more rational decisions as far as fertility is concerned. But I also believe that people tend to be irrational as well, and a lot of that irrationality has something to do with culture, values and beliefs that are deeply ingrained in them - again, to change that, "information" would be the key.[57]

Media's Overlooked Role in Population Control

I want to stress the need to take into consideration the role of "information" here, as I believe that this is an area that has not been given proper attention in all these debates regarding population control and family planning issues. It may be true that the Catholic Church have some "moral" sway as far as decisions in forming a family are concerned. The National government believes that to be able to effectively implement population control programs, it needs legislation that would effectively render Catholic Church opposition to contraception and population control moot and academic, but I believe that this not be the case. Through all these, the national government has failed to consider one institution that might be as powerful (or even more powerful) as the Catholic Church in shaping individual decisions that has to do with fertility and size of family - mass media.

This neglect could be because of the national government's limited perception of media and its possible roles in the implementation of population control programs. Yes, the media has been used before. The Marcos government has used print, radio and television to advance their population control campaign[58], so did former Health Secretary Juan Flavio, all of whom claim to have had positive results.[59] But the thing is that these campaigns blatantly urged families to advocate not just the natural family planning methods but the artificial methods as well, which did not sit well with the Catholic Church.

Advertising campaigns also require funding as they need to buy much needed airtime (in the