FAMILY, CHILDREN, AND THE PHILIPPINE FUTURE*

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INTRODUCTION

The question of population growth and its impact on Philippine society is important, complex, and in need of serious and dispassionate reflection. Neither the simplistic image of a pie of fixed size (the economy) being divided into ever smaller pieces by a growing population, nor the equally simplistic argument that every new mouth to feed means two more hands to work really faces up to the complexity of the issue. Unfortunately also, the issue has been politicized, with a hardening of positions and at times the use of unworthy tactics and arguments that appeal more to prejudice and emotion than to reason.

As I mentioned the complexity of the issue, I am reminded of how easily one may be misunderstood and misinterpreted. Some years ago, for example, I wrote an article for the weekly Veritas, entitled “Population Growth is Not the Villain,” with the “the” underscored; in it I tried to make the point that population growth was one but only one of several factors that made economic development difficult. When the article appeared, the underscoring was omitted from the title, which read “Population Growth is Not the Villain,” suggesting a very different message from that which I had intended.

I shall attempt to consider the question of population growth from the viewpoint of a sociologist. Accordingly, I have chosen

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to focus on the family and in particular on children, in the context of socio-economic change and its impact on the poor. The family is one traditional focus of sociologists. It is also the institution which, more than any other, transmits cultural values and forms the personalities of the next generation — in this case the Filipinos of the third millennium.

Thus, in this paper I am not primarily concerned with the Philippine economy as such, and whether a slower rate of population growth would be beneficial for economic development. Rather I ask whether smaller families would reduce some of the strains which families among the poor now experience, and would permit a more adequate formation of the children who will be the citizens of the Philippines tomorrow.

INTERNATIONAL AND COMPARATIVE DATA

By way of putting the Philippine picture into context, it may be useful to look briefly at a recent international and comparative study of the effects of rapid population growth on family and child welfare.

Cynthia B. Lloyd has authored a book chapter entitled “Investing in the Next Generation: The Implications of High Fertility at the Level of the Family.”¹ In it she assesses the “conventional wisdom” which emphasizes the strain which a large number of children may put on family resources, and the consequences for the children themselves. Thus, an “extensive analysis of fertility surveys from a range of developing countries conducted from the mid-1970s to the late 1980s shows that the average relative risk of child death for children born less than a year and a half after the previous birth is roughly double the risk of death for children born two years or more after the last child.” This is seen as stemming from a weekend condition of the mother resulting in low birthweight for the later child, on the one hand, and competition among siblings for limited nutritional and other resources, on the other.²

Likewise "[d]ata from many parts of the developing world provide evidence that young children with more young siblings have poorer long-term nutritional outcomes than children who have fewer young siblings."³

The same is true in general of educational attainment. "Out of a sample of 14 studies of children's current school enrollment, 28 separate sets of empirical results on educational attainment, and 7 studies of dropout or completion rates, measures of children's educational participation or progress in school, as well as the level of parental investments in schooling (in terms of expenditures) were found to be usually, but not always, negatively associated with the number of siblings."⁴ One reason for the poorer school attendance of children from larger families may lie in the fact that, in the Philippines and elsewhere, "children with more siblings are likely to work more hours on average, particularly when they are among the oldest, than children with fewer siblings."⁵ Finally, there is evidence from the Philippines and Thailand "showing greater declines in expenditures per child than in expenditures per adult as household size increases."⁶

The same author goes beyond the "conventional wisdom" in pointing out that, while the relationships which it postulates between family size and child welfare are generally supported by the empirical data, this is not universally the case; moreover, the strength of these relationships varies from study to study, and it is not always quantitatively important, a point made also by another of the contributors to the same volume.⁷ Lloyd goes on to suggest that other factors intervene, namely: the level of socioeconomic development of the society; the level of social expenditures by the state; the local culture and the role which the extended family plays in providing child support; the stage of the demographic transition. At the same time, she points out

3. Ibid. 184. The author notes that the measure used here for stunting or long-term chronic malnutrition is height for age; also that evidence from the Philippines indicates that the effect of number of siblings appears to be less for short-term malnutrition as measured by weight for height.
4. Ibid. 185.
5. Ibid. 193-94.
6. Ibid. 185.
the challenges faced by children growing up in a modernizing world in which a high premium is put on education.

In larger, more traditional families, the authority structure within the household is more likely to be male-dominated and less child-oriented in its expenditure pattern. Parental time and resources are more constrained, limiting the resources available for investments in each child and reducing parents’ ability to assist their children in taking advantage of new opportunities. These family resource constraints have negative implications for children’s health and educational attainment and increase children’s current and future obligations to their families.8

THE PHILIPPINES: CHILDREN AT RISK, FAMILIES UNDER STRESS

THE BROAD PICTURE

We do not have, to my knowledge, broad-based data from the Philippines directly linking child welfare to family size. At the same time, we should not easily assume that the relationships found in many other nations of the developing world do not hold true here, particularly as we have a high birthrate by international standards, and large families particularly among the poor, as well as relatively high infant and child mortality.9

In any case, available data, as well as common observations, point unambiguously to the fact that the nation is producing large numbers of children who are not being adequately provided for within existing social and economic structures; moreover, that despite the remarkable resilience of the Filipino family, many families are in fact under severe stress, due in part to the number of children to be supported and educated.

8. Lloyd, 197.
9. A survey of low-income households conducted in 1992 found that 56.8% of them had six or more members, compared to 42.8% of all families at the time of the 1990 Census. These low-income households had a higher percentage of members aged 0-14 than the Census population (49.5% vs. 39.6%). Of the ever-married women aged 15-49 years in the survey, 16.7% had experienced at least one child death. Alejandro N. Herrin and Rachel H. Racelis, Monitoring the Coverage of Public Programs on Low-Income Families: Philippines, 1992, Integrated Population and Development Planning Project, National Economic Development Authority, 1994, Tables 47-49.
Thus, in 1990, 15% of Filipino children were born with low birthweights, slightly higher than the figures for our neighbors, Indonesia (14%) and Thailand (13%) and well above Malaysia’s 10%. Our infant mortality (children who die before their first birthday) rate was 45 per thousand in 1993, better than Indonesia’s 71 but well above Thailand’s 27 and Malaysia’s 13. Under five mortality rates (children who die before their fifth birthday, per thousand live births) followed the same pattern: 111 in Indonesia, 59 in the Philippines, 33 in Thailand and 17 in Malaysia. Similarly, 40% of Indonesian children under five years of age were moderately or severely underweight, compared to 34% of Filipino children and 26% in Thailand.  

With regard to education, the World Bank study cited above remarks that “while simple literacy rates are high, at around 90 percent of the population, over one-quarter of Filipinos ten years old and above are functionally illiterate.”

The prospects for the future are scarcely better, with increasing school dropout rates and the low and declining quality of public education, particularly in the poorer and more rural regions. The survey of low-income families cited above found that among these families 7.6% of boys and 6.1% of girls aged 7-12, and 29.2% of boys and 19.5% of girls aged 13-16 were not attending school.

A survey conducted by the International Labor Organization and the National Statistics Office (NSO) in July of 1995 and followed up in May of 1996 covered a nationwide sample of 21,000 households and looked at the working status of children aged 5-17 years. The “fact sheets” released by the NSO indicate that about 15% of Filipino children had worked during the past year, two-thirds of these in the rural areas. Of the 3.7 million children working in 1995, 69.8% reported attending school in school years 1994-95 and 1995-96; hence 30.2% were out of school. More disturbingly, about 2.2 million of these children

11. World Bank, A Strategy to Fight Poverty: Philippines, 34. See also “Gov’t alarmed by increasing ratio of school dropouts to total population,” The Philippine Star, 1 July 1996, p. 36.
12. Herrin and Racelis, Monitoring, Table 2.
were reported working in hazardous environments due to the physical conditions of work, temperature and humidity of the workplace, or exposure to hazardous chemical and biological agents. Six out of ten of these children reported that they return exhausted from work. Yet, the majority (54.0%) wish to continue working, mainly to improve the living conditions of their families.

That low-income women are aware of the pressures of large families is indicated by the Herrin-Racelis study. About 80% of ever-married low-income women professed not to want more children than they already had; this is well above the 51% of currently-married women reported in the 1993 National Demographic Survey as not wanting more children.\(^\text{13}\)

A CLOSER LOOK

On a Christmas morning some years ago, I was on my way to Payatas, out by the garbage dump in Quezon City, for my morning Masses. The joyful hymns of the Midnight Mass were still echoing in my ears when I saw something which seared itself into my memory — and should sear itself into the consciences of our society. There, on Christmas morning, were child scavengers working the dump — up to their knees in garbage on the day of all days which should be sacred to children.

Many a time thereafter, as I celebrated Mass in a chapel near the dump, I would notice scavenger kids perhaps twelve years old come swaggering in their rubber boots — the symbol of their occupation — up to the sari-sari store opposite the chapel, to buy a coke or a cup of coffee. They were proud, one sensed, to be doing a man's work; but I wondered what the future could hold for them. Fr. Norberto Carcellar, C.M., once told me that when asked what they would like to do when they grew up, some could think of nothing more meaningful or glamorous than being a garbage-truck driver.

To fill out this picture somewhat, I recently obtained some data on the child scavengers at Payatas, aged 8-18.\(^\text{14}\) A con-

\(^{13}\) Ibid. 78.

\(^{14}\) The data were kindly provided by Sister Teresa, F.C.J., who works with the Child Rehabilitation Program of the Vincentian Missionary Social Development Foundation.
ervative estimate of their number is 700, though the reality may be twice that. About 50% of them are out of school, working on the dumpsite most of the day and often into the night — boys and older girls as well; for this each can earn between 70 and 120 pesos a day. Those attending school scavenge five or six hours a day and earn between 50 and 65 pesos. The great majority of these young people, in the area of 90%, live with their families, who are scavengers themselves.

The Child Rehabilitation Program of the Vincentian Missionary Foundation currently reaches about 250 of these children, and is helping about 130 of them to attend school; it remains to be seen whether this will lead to jobs outside the dumpsite or, as has been the case with many who attended some school, and many who in the past have had contact with the program, they will eventually return to full-time scavenging. The Program is also concerned about the teen-age girls who are kept home from school to mind their younger siblings while their parents scavenge. Eventually many of these drop out of school entirely, return to the province, or become househelpers, vendors, or prostitutes.

There are other images as well: a young and haggard mother at the door of her miserable hut in Payatas with a desperately sick child in her arms, her scavenger husband and his barkada playing cards inside, totally unconcerned; street children huddled behind billboards at night, sniffing glue; beggar children; child prostitutes; teen-age criminal gangs.

The cinematographer Edita Carolino has recently produced two documentaries on working children, devastating in their impact: children working in a slaughter-house in Cebu; on sugarcane haciendas in Leyte and Negros; child stevedores loading bags of cement in Dapitan; children working in a stone quarry in Mactan, in mine-tunnels in Davao del Norte, in a fireworks factory in Negros; children being recruited in Ormoc, for what will turn out to be prostitution or slave labor in Metro Manila factories. The pictures and recorded interviews with the children and their parents are heart-wrenching: the twelve-hour shifts in the slaughter-house; the dangers of work underground in the mines, and of constant exposure to mercury; the beautiful little girl who lost a finger cutting cane; the child stevedores carrying “sunud-
sunod” 40-kilo bags of cement up the steep gangway of a ship while the adults do the lighter work; the interviews in which both the children and the parents express their anguished desires that the young people study, but the fact that sheer economic necessity obliges them to work in order to help the family — and their younger siblings.

Finally, there are the “street children” who in recent years have become more and more evident in our major cities. They are a shifting, often floating population estimated to number between 100,000 and 150,000 nationwide. The majority of them are also working children; the majority also live with their families, contrary to a common impression. A 1989 study suggested that about 70% go home to their families at the end of the day, while 25% live on the streets with friends or relatives, and about 5% are completely alone and abandoned.15

Relevant to our particular concern is a fact revealed by a four-city study of street and working children conducted by the Philippine Social Science Council, namely that they came from relatively large households averaging 6.5 members.16

Another study traced the characteristics of three types of “street children.” The street-based working children are often from families who had migrated some years before from the rural areas; the families are reasonably supportive; the children may study as well as work, go home at night, and their earnings contribute perhaps one third or one quarter of the total household income. Children on the way to becoming true street children come from homes where discord is more evident, may be dropping out of school and going home less frequently, contribute less willingly to the family finances, and tend to be more exposed to drugs, solvent-sniffing, and criminal gangs. Finally the true street children tend to come from families of recent migrants, often evicted from their previous homes; they have experienced greater discord and tension in their families;

they go home rarely, study less regularly, only a minority contribute to the family finances; they are more heavily exposed to drugs and violence, unprotected and often subject to exploitative sexual activity.¹⁷

DYNAMICS OF THE SITUATION

It would appear from the foregoing that the root problem which besets a very high percentage of families in the Philippines is poverty. The problem is aggravated in many cases by the large number of children to be supported and educated, and probably by the toll which closely-spaced childbirths take on the health and energy of the mothers. The result is seen in the tragic situations which we have explored above, in which children are economic assets in that the older ones can help support their younger siblings, but in so doing they sacrifice their own opportunities for education, their future, and sometimes their health or even their lives.

A few points may be made with regard to the dynamics of the situation, mainly to suggest that the problem is structural and will not be remedied overnight. Fundamental perhaps is the fact that the agricultural frontier of the country is now closed: there is little fertile land left to be opened up at reasonable cost and without disastrous effects on the environment. As a consequence of this fact, and of population growth in the rural areas, farms are getting smaller as the land passes from generation to generation; the percentage of all farms under one hectare in size increased from 11.53 in 1960 to 35.15 in 1991.¹⁸

Declining farm size plus government neglect of rural development has produced streams of migrants to the cities, migrants often unprepared for urban employment. There they have come up against the reality of “jobless growth” in the economy and soaring land prices which put legal housing far out of their reach.¹⁹ Migration and in-city births plus high land values have meant the proliferation of squatter colonies which are now

estimated to house nearly 40% of the urban population. The poorest of these squatters live in circumstances of overcrowding and lack of sanitation which insult human dignity, make family life well-nigh impossible, produce added tensions within families and communities and push the children out into the streets.

In the urban areas even more than in the countryside, education is seen as the way out of poverty for the next generation, and parents — particularly mothers — will go to extreme lengths to provide it for their children. Thus, a small study of 150 departing overseas contract workers revealed that financing the children's education was the most frequently cited motive (80.7%). Yet this "solution" too has its down-side, in children growing up with only one parent at home, infidelity of spouses and broken families.

And the future? Entrance of the Philippines into the World Trade Organization means that an even higher premium will be put on efficiency in the economy, in order that our goods may compete in the international market and even in the domestic market against imports. For this, education is essential — not necessarily highly theoretical education but functional literacy and solid technical skills for the many plus a phalanx of highly trained technical and management people. Yet many of the young people who have been the focus of this paper are not getting the education, and indeed the related health and other services, which will enable them to become productive members of the Philippines of the next century. What we see instead is the formation of a permanent and hereditary proletariat of

20. One of the few things which will bring tears to the eyes of tough and normally cheerful mothers at Payatas is the impossibility of providing a proper education for their children. I have also known personally one devoted father whose concern for his children drove him into a criminal gang and led to his early death by salvaging.


22. A survey conducted in Southern Tagalog by the Center for Women's Resources among 185 OCWs revealed that 25% of them admitted to having had extra-marital relations while abroad; half of the women respondents believed that their husbands were doing the same in their absence, and 25% reported that their children had dropped out of school or were doing poorly in their studies. See Juliet Labog-Javellana, "Opl: Ban philandering OCWs," Manila Daily Inquirer, 10 August 1996, p. 4.
unskilled labor, its members competing with one another for a steadily dwindling number of unskilled jobs. Or perhaps the bank robbers, kidnappers, “Sparrow units” of the ABB, embittered at society and trained from childhood in anti-social attitudes and behavior?

CONCLUSION

The prospect for many families is indeed a bleak one, made so in part by the large numbers of children and closely-spaced births among the poor. Yet the whole blame cannot be placed on the rate of population growth; there are other “villains” as well, starting with government economic and social policy, and the public’s reluctance to pay taxes. The situation might well be different if our tax collections were higher and the added income invested in human resource development for the next century rather than in wasteful Countryside Development Fund and Congressional Initiative Allocations for the next election.

Indeed, in dealing with the problem of poverty, Ahlburg among others has argued that “governments should use the most direct policy instruments available, including policies to increase access of the poor to land, credit, public infrastructure, and services, particularly education and health.”23 The same author continues as follows:

Family planning programs may help reduce poverty, but the effects may be small and take a long time to be felt. Even intergenerational transmission of poverty is better addressed through changes in government policies and expenditures on child health and education than through family planning programs. . . . Still, family planning programs are a useful complement to such direct policies. They are generally easier to implement, relatively inexpensive, and their effects tend to be cumulative, that is effects on health will enhance later education and productivity.