

The Revival of Population Control and Technocratic Family Planning in the 21st Century

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In 2019, the population establishment¹ met in Nairobi for the 25th anniversary of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) held in Cairo. The Nairobi Statement listed “new issues” for population programs to consider, “including climate change, growing inequalities and exclusion within and between countries, migration, the youth bulge and the [prospects of demographic dividends, and increasing demographic diversity](#).”

Even as it continues to formally refer to an ICPD rights-based framework of sexual and reproductive health, ICPD25 marks a consolidation of problematic post-Cairo trends in strategic knowledge production as well as programmatic focus. Its main features are a return to a simplistic neo-Malthusian crisis discourse and support for a stand-alone family planning agenda, including a concerted effort to promote controversial long-acting reversible contraception (LARC). Concerned by these trends, a transnational feminist network has recently made a “renewed call for [feminist resistance against population control](#)”.

While echoing a past of population control, the current approach takes specific and new forms. In Bendix and Schultz (1918) we identify three interrelated programmatic changes²:

First, the concept of ‘population dynamics’ (or ‘demographic diversity’), which focuses on national age structures instead of on ‘population size and growth’, allows for seemingly neutral criteria for pro-natalist or anti-natalist agendas and thereby for a distinction between desirable and undesirable population groups. The notion of population dynamics is embedded in a global rehabilitation of demography as a framework for the formulation of political problems. Population Dynamics in such demographization is presented as a common global phenomenon for all national economies. The continuity of neo-Malthusian approaches and anti-natalist programmes in many countries in the global South (and particularly in sub-Saharan Africa), which is embedded in the legacy of colonial relations and racism, can thereby be presented as politically neutral. The national population age structure is used as the master frame to compare ‘high fertility’, ‘transitional’ and ‘ageing’ nations. Different economic potentials are then deduced from such categorization. This perspective abstracts from any social, economic or other power relationships within and across different age groups, and does not take into account how global capitalist relations define access to income and resources across the world.

Second, the pursuit of a ‘demographic dividend’ fuses ‘population dynamics’ with a simplistic economic analysis. The argument is that countries in ‘demographic transition’ with a high percentage of adults can translate their advantage into a ‘demographic dividend’ (i.e. dynamic national economic growth), if they support the young population with adequate education and health services, and implement neoliberal economic policies to ensure a strong job market (Bloom et al., 2003). The demographic dividend concept is highly reductionist in that it disregards social inequalities as well as global capitalist dynamics. It suggests, on the one hand, that countries with a favorable age composition due to decreasing birth rates and a low percentage of older people can almost automatically benefit from the dividend. On the other hand, the



Feminist activists protest outside Bayer on International Women's Day 2020

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characterization of young people in countries in demographic transition evokes concerns about 'dangerous,' 'overpopulated' world regions: if their 'human potential' is not fostered and economized sufficiently, young people might threaten their countries' stability. The problematic 'youth bulge' concept sees young men as potential perpetrators of violence and also as potential threat to the Global North when linked to anti-immigration discourses (Wilson 2017).

Third, targets are centrally back on the agenda and in a market-oriented way. Already in 2012, the Family Planning Summit prioritized mass dissemination and the promotion of LARC in 69 of the world's poorest countries. Summit organizers, including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the UK Department for International Development, rallied non- and for-profit organizations, donor and recipient country governments, multi-lateral aid agencies and pharmaceutical companies around a global target: to get 120 million new users of modern contraception by 2020 as part of their '120 by 20' campaign.

The resultant global coordinating body, [Family Planning 2020](#) (FP2020), now strongly influences global population programs. A technocratic approach which was criticized as 'contraceptive inundation' with regard to the 1960s (Warwick, 1982) is again gaining momentum, institutionalized through public-private partnership networks and focused on stand-alone family planning programmes and, within these, on the dissemination of provider controlled LARC with possibly harmful health effects. One key element of FP2020 is the Implant Access Program; it aims to provide LARC to women in the Global South and to poor women in Africa in particular. The program encompasses two public-private partnership initiatives. One is a coalition of governments, development agencies and the Gates Foundation with the US-based pharmaceutical company Merck & Co in order to distribute its product Implanon. The second one includes the German company Bayer and its hormonal implant Jadelle. Jadelle is the new version of Norplant, a hormonal implant against which women's health movements protested globally in the 1990s because of adverse health effects and the dependency on skilled health personnel for removal. The Jadelle Access Program's contract guaranteed to Bayer that the Gates Foundation would purchase 27 million Jadelle implants. Thus, FP2020 established a supply driven and target oriented population policy by pressuring the development community to distribute the implants (Hendrixson, 2018). In 2018, the initiative claimed "dramatic increases in implant use" since starting the program.

The revival of a population control agenda thus also goes hand in hand with a concerted strategy by pharmaceutical companies to conquer contraceptive markets in the global South.

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Endnotes

1By 'population establishment' we refer to the network of national development agencies, population think tanks and private foundations, multilateral agencies and other actors that make up the transnational network which governs international population programs.

2One aspect of current trends we cannot address here is the problematic vision of explaining climate change by population numbers and the neo-Malthusian "specter" within the discourse on the Anthropocene (see Ojeda et al. 2019)

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