

The Media, Public Opinion and Population Assistance: Establishing the Link

By Thomas Schindlmayr

Since the 1950s, donors have funded population activities in developing countries as part of their foreign aid programs. This support, or population assistance, has fluctuated considerably over the decades. Several factors in individual developed countries, which are the primary sources of foreign aid, have contributed to the variations in the sums available for population assistance. These influences can be grouped into two types: those coming from the society at large and those from within the donor government.

Of the many societal factors, the media are arguably the most important, for they are “the conduit, the pipeline, the funnel regulating the flow of communication between the policymakers (and therefore the policy itself) and others in the political system who might seek any different policy.”¹ How are media attention to global population issues, public opinion and donor funding for population assistance linked? This article explores that question, by first presenting a synopsis of trends in global population assistance and then examining the issue-attention cycle as a means of explaining how issues attract the notice of the media and the public, as well as why media reporting, public opinion and government responses to global population issues differ.

Much of the evidence presented here comes from the United States, because it has been the main source of leadership and re-

sources for population assistance and because, unlike many other donor nations, it has well-documented democratic processes and global population concerns. Additionally, gauging public opinion is difficult, because polls on such issues have been infrequent and the phrasing of their questions has lacked consistency. This is especially true outside the United States, in countries where the institution of opinion polling has historically been less established.

Population Assistance Trends

Several measures can be used to analyze trends in global population assistance. Although dollar figures in current and constant terms are probably the most obvious, they are not necessarily the best indicators for determining a country’s commitment to population assistance, as countries differ in their available resources. A more meaningful indicator is the share of official development assistance (ODA) going to population assistance. This measure takes into consideration variations in the overall size of donor countries’ aid budgets. Moreover, it excludes other sources of population aid, such as nongovernmental organizations and development banks. (Development bank loans are not, strictly speaking, foreign aid, because they need to be repaid, albeit usually under generous financing arrangements.²)

As a proportion of ODA, donor countries’ primary funds for population assistance have fluctuated widely since the late 1960s (Figure 1).³ Through much of the 1970s, population assistance represented more than 2% of ODA; it reached its zenith of 2.3% in 1974 and 1976. It fell below 2% in 1977 and stayed so until 1995; in the 1980s, it averaged only 1.3%. Of particular interest are the increases in funding for population assistance before the international population conferences organized by the United Nations (UN) in 1974, 1984 and 1994, and the declines in the years fol-

lowing the first two of these meetings. The large rise in 1995 is due mainly to the attention given to the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) and, more importantly, to changes made in the United Nations Population Fund’s (UNFPA’s) definition of population assistance to incorporate the wider reproductive health agenda.*

The United States has been the main donor country for population assistance since first offering support in the 1960s. Before 1974, it provided more than 75% of all donor government contributions to population assistance.⁴ Although the U.S. share has since declined, it was still nearly 50% during the 1990s. The major donors in 1997 were the United States (43%); the Netherlands (10%); Germany and the United Kingdom (8% each); Japan (6%); the European Union (5%); Norway (4%); Australia, Denmark and Sweden (3% each); and Canada (2%).⁵

The Issue-Attention Cycle

In 1963, Cohen asserted that in the reporting of foreign affairs, the media are largely a handmaiden of the government.⁶ Three decades later, O’Heffernan refuted that notion by demonstrating that the “mass media-foreign policy relationship is a continuing dynamic of interdependent mutual exploitation.”⁷ In his view, national governments use the media to explain and justify their foreign policies; likewise, the media have forced the visibility of international issues, giving them a sense of urgency and allowing the views of nonstate actors to gain legitimacy. Yet how does a concern in the community become an issue?

In a review of public attitudes toward environmental matters, Downs proposed

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*In 1977, UNFPA defined population assistance to include population policy and dynamics; data collection and analysis; family planning; population education and communication; and support activities. Following ICPD, UNFPA altered the definition to include basic reproductive health services; family planning services; prevention of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV and AIDS; and basic research, data and population, and development policy analysis. (Sources: UNFPA, *UNFPA Conversion to the New Standard Classification for Population Activities*, New York: UNFPA, 1977; UNFPA, *Global Population Assistance Report 1992*, New York: UNFPA, 1994; and UNFPA, *Global Population Assistance Report 1996*, New York: UNFPA, 1998.)

the notion of an issue-attention cycle.⁸ Arguing from the premise that public attention rarely focuses on a single concern for long before boredom with the topic sets in, Downs suggests that all issues go through a five-stage cycle. In the “preproblem stage,” a problematic issue has been identified by experts or interest groups, but has yet to capture public attention. Unfolding events lead the public to become aware of the issue in the “alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm stage.” Associated with this revelation are discussions about society’s ability to deal with the issue. Politicians and the public become aware of the costs involved in dealing with the concern during the “realizing the cost of significant progress stage.” Waning interest and public boredom set in during the “gradual decline of public interest stage,” as either the issue appears too daunting to deal with or solutions are found. Finally, in the “post-problem stage,” the issue enters a twilight zone of limited attention and a possible intermittent recurrence of interest.

Downs does not preclude the possibility of an issue’s going through the cycle again; rather, he suggests that an issue may sporadically recapture public interest once it has reached national prominence. Institutions, programs and policies created in response to the issue remain as legacies of a time when they initially captured public attention, and they continue to have some effect once that attention has shifted elsewhere. Further studies show that the issue-attention cycle is applicable to concerns other than the environment, and that there is a relationship between the cycle and governments’ organizational activities.⁹

Population Concerns and the Cycle

Global population issues appear to have gone through the issue-attention cycle thrice: from the mid-1960s, when population growth in developing countries was first brought to the attention of the Western public, until the 1974 Bucharest Conference; around the 1984 Mexico City Conference; and in the early 1990s, in the lead-up to the ICPD. Given the global attention that UN conferences generate, donors are eager to present themselves as good members of the international community, who are fulfilling their international commitments. Once the hype is over, however, governments can cut funding without the fear of highly publicized repercussions, and they frequently do.

In the 1940s and 1950s, American demographers began to view population

Figure 1. Primary funds for population assistance as a percentage of official development assistance for donor nations, 1961–1995



Note: Boxes denote years of international population conferences. Source: reference 3.

growth as impeding economic development and to argue that policy interventions such as family planning were necessary.¹⁰ However, calls by these demographers for foreign aid to implement birth control policies in countries in the early stages of development were sidelined, as religious and societal prejudices against birth control made such support by the United States unthinkable.¹¹ Other donor countries expressed little interest in offering population assistance during this period, with the notable exception of Sweden, which began support in 1958.

In the mid-1960s, famines in South Asia and environmental concerns linked with overpopulation helped population issues capture media attention and subsequently public opinion. At this point, world population issues progressed from the preproblem stage to the stage of heightened alarm, characterized by apocalyptic prognostications and the advocacy of rigorous measures, referred to hereafter as the population hysteria. The media played a crucial role in this transition by illustrating examples of Malthusian tragedies and highlighting the perceived consequences of population growth. Much prominence was given to Ehrlich’s views on the “inevitable population-food crisis.”¹² His thesis proved to be “one of the most potent factors in creating popular

support for large-scale efforts to control population growth in the Third World during the sixties and seventies.”¹³ Media attention of this kind did much to push communal awareness of population questions and donor nations’ engagement in these issues to new heights, and undoubtedly had a bearing on the actions taken by governments.

An assessment of the population debate in American popular magazines between 1946 and 1990 indicates a significant rise in the number of articles on population issues during the years of the population hysteria. For instance, in the 1950s, an average of 11.7 reports appeared on population growth annually in *The New York Times*, but this figure increased to 40.4 in the 1960s and to 42.0 in the 1970s. The number of articles peaked in 1970, around the time of the Earth Day celebrations, and again at about the time of the 1974 Bucharest Conference.¹⁴

More important, the emphasis of these reports shifted. During the 1950s, many articles reported on rapid population growth either without offering further analysis or by stressing its advantages. By the early 1960s, however, the proposition that “population growth is harmful” had solidified itself in the popular literature; at the height of the population hysteria in 1966–1970, more than 80% of articles about population

growth propounded the view that it was “threatening,”¹⁵ while the remainder offered no specific commentary. In *The New York Times*, for example, 93% of news stories, 100% of editorials and 86% of letters published on population growth in the 1960s identified population growth as “dangerous.” This sentiment was still common in the 1970s, when 77% of news stories, 82% of editorials and 61% of letters expressed this view.¹⁶ As Simon points out: “Overall, the general pattern that emerges is that from the mid-1960s to the end of the 1970s, ‘population’ made news.”¹⁷

Opinion polls of the time underline this heightened feeling. Polls conducted in the 1960s show an increased awareness of global population growth¹⁸ and rising support for foreign aid to developing countries for birth control (Table 1).¹⁹

This shift in attitudes reflects, among other things, changing practices in contraceptive behavior in the United States, particularly among young women. And perhaps surprisingly, much of the shift occurred among Catholics. In December 1959, 40% approved of offering foreign aid for birth control to countries that asked for it, but by August 1968, 68% were in favor. Among Protestants, 58% approved in December 1959 and 71% in August 1968.²⁰

Other reviews of American public opinion polls confirm this shift in attitudes during the population hysteria. Concern over population growth rose as the decade progressed, and overall, Americans were more concerned about population increases globally than in the United States. In 1959, just 21% of Americans stated that they were worried about global population growth. By 1965, 62% thought global population growth was a serious problem, and this proportion rose to 71% in 1967.²¹ At the time of the 1974 Bucharest Conference, 60% of Americans still thought overpopulation was a serious problem.²²

Canadian opinion polls also reveal a heightened concern about world popula-

tion growth during the 1960s and early 1970s. A May 1960 Gallup poll found that half of Canadians had not “heard or read anything of the ‘population explosion,’” and 57% of those who had “were not worried about this population increase.”²³ In contrast, a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) poll conducted in January 1971 reported that 66% felt that world population was growing too quickly, and a majority thought that the “goal should be either to keep it at its present level (60%) or to decrease it (29%).” The CBC concluded that Canadians were aware of a “population explosion,” but they considered it relevant only to developing countries.²⁴

Global population issues received significant media attention in 1974, owing to the UN-declared World Population Year and the Bucharest Conference, where a group of recipient states challenged the assumptions held by population agencies and Western donor governments.²⁵ Media focus on population issues gradually declined, however, in the late 1970s and into the early 1980s. Population growth issues had seemingly entered the fourth and fifth stages of the issue-attention cycle. Opinion polls showed that the proportion of Americans who perceived overpopulation as a serious problem declined from 60% in 1974 to 44% in 1978.²⁶

The issue-attention cycle for population issues was again set in motion, albeit briefly, in the lead-up to the 1984 Mexico City Conference. The number of articles in 1984 addressing population issues rose sharply over the previous year, only to fall thereafter. However, for the better part of the 1980s, media attention to population issues was minimal, and articles portraying population as a major problem declined.²⁷ For example, the annual number of reports on population in *The New York Times*, declined from 42.0 in the 1970s to 8.2 in the 1980s; for *The Washington Post*, the corresponding numbers were 22.7 and 15.2, respectively.²⁸

American support for population assistance rose from 2.6% of ODA in 1982 to 2.8% in 1984 and 3.1% in 1986, but declined to 2.3% in 1988.²⁹ Although much of the decline late in the decade can be attributed to the “Mexico City policy,” which saw the Reagan administration’s defunding of several international population agencies, the media’s changing sentiments toward population issues enabled the policy to remain in existence. Interestingly, although the policy was announced under the gaze of the world’s media, the major blow to international or-

ganizations—the defunding of UNFPA and the health and family planning programs of the World Bank and regional development banks—occurred after the conference, possibly as a means of limiting the fallout.

Opinion polls from the 1980s reveal a heightened attention to population issues around 1984. In the United States, 56% of respondents in that year thought that overpopulation was a serious problem, up from 44% in 1978 and 52% in 1982.³⁰ However, information on public support following the conference is inconclusive, owing to the limited number of polls available. A poll conducted in 1988 shows that 61% of Americans viewed overpopulation as a serious problem.³¹ However, this poll is likely to have been influenced by, among other factors, the role of abortion politics and the “gag rule” in the presidential election. Meanwhile in Canada, just 4% of the people mentioned poverty or overpopulation as the most important problem facing the world in the late 1980s, behind such issues as the arms race or nuclear war (24%), world peace or war (15%), and world hunger (14%).³² Thus, population issues apparently concerned relatively few Canadians. In 1991, 65% of Americans perceived overpopulation as a serious problem, one of the highest proportions ever.³³ This level of concern may reflect the attention surrounding the preparations for the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro and the renaissance of population and environment issues in the 1990s.³⁴

Population issues again went through the issue-attention cycle in the lead-up to the 1994 ICPD. The conference inspired numerous feature articles on population and reproductive health matters in major newspapers, popular magazines and other media outlets. Along with the empowerment of women and reproductive rights, the issue of rapid population and its consequences was again a focus of many reports.

Opinion polls suggest that at the time of the ICPD, and immediately thereafter, population growth and support for reproductive health activities in developing countries were matters of widespread concern in donor countries. The first Japanese public opinion survey on population issues, conducted in 1990, found that 68% of men and women thought that developing countries should try to control their population growth, and 58% of these were in favor of Japan’s offering assistance.³⁵ By the next poll, in 1995 (one year after the ICPD), 71% thought that developing

Table 1. Percentage distribution of respondents to U.S. opinion polls, by attitude toward U.S. support of birth control in developing countries, according to date of poll, 1959–1968

Date	Approve	Disapprove	No opinion/ do not know	Total
Dec. 1959	54	29	17	100
Apr. 1963	65	21	14	100
Fall 1965	58	34	8	100
Fall 1967	64	30	6	100
Aug. 1968	72	20	8	100

Source: reference 19.

countries needed to control their population, and of those, 83% agreed that Japan should provide support.³⁶ Over the same period, Japan first increased its support for population assistance (from 0.57% of ODA in 1991 to 0.74% in 1993), then reduced it (to 0.65% in 1995).³⁷

Europeans also demonstrated public support for population issues following the ICPD. In a 1996 poll conducted in 13 nations, 14% of Europeans said that the most pressing global problem was HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases; 12% said population growth. Nearly two-thirds (63%) supported making family planning services available in developing countries, and 29% stated that foreign aid should be used for family planning education and services.³⁸

Media attention has shifted elsewhere in the years since the ICPD, and the cycle is now in its latter stages. A 1999 Gallup poll, for example, found that only 48% of Americans said they were worried about population growth, down from 68% in 1992.³⁹ By 2000, only 8% of Americans thought overpopulation was the most pressing global problem of the 21st century.⁴⁰

If the aim of The Hague Forum, held in February 1999 as part of the post-Cairo process, was to revive population and reproductive health issues in donor countries as a way of making donor governments keep their financial promises made at Cairo, then the forum seems to have been a failure. It received minimal media coverage, being overshadowed by such events as Bill Clinton's impeachment hearing, the Anwar trial in Malaysia and the Kosovo crisis. Certainly, no sustained debate on population and reproductive health occurred. Perhaps five years is insufficient time for the global social, political and economic environment to have changed enough to allow for a revived discussion of global population and reproductive health concerns. In the meantime, the U.S. government cut funding,⁴¹ and the international community has failed to honor its financial promises.⁴²

Conclusion

Through their wavering interest in global population questions, the media have played an undervalued role in determining global funding trends for population assistance. The evidence suggests a link between donor governments' funding for population assistance and media coverage of global population issues in developed countries. The population assistance trend illustrated in Figure 1 mirrors the course of the issue-attention cycle on pop-

ulation and reproductive health concerns. The media helped generate the heightened interest in the 1960s and contributed to the nonchalant view taken by the general populace throughout most of the 1980s and 1990s.

The relationship between public opinion and media coverage is also strong. Despite the dearth of public opinion polls on population matters, those that do exist suggest a high degree of support for population assistance when the media focus on population matters. Equally, public enthusiasm for population assistance wanes after the media circus has moved on, but at times other influences, such as debate about abortion or the environment, may prompt individuals to think about population issues. Being conscious of public opinion, politicians in developed countries frequently react to the wishes of societal actors if they generate sufficient media attention. Not surprisingly, therefore, donor government support for population assistance increased in years of heightened media attention and public support.

Of course, influences on population assistance funding from within donor governments can outweigh those of societal actors, especially in the absence of the media. Both the Reagan and the Clinton administrations, for example, were resolute in their approach toward population assistance. Yet media attention may still have been a factor in determining the timing and the extent of changes they made to population assistance commitments.

Institutions either created or expanded during the issue-attention cycle of the 1960s and 1970s—such as UNFPA, The Alan Guttmacher Institute and the International Planned Parenthood Federation—remain at the forefront of public attention to population and reproductive health concerns. History suggests that decennial international conferences provide the necessary stimuli to reactivate the cycle, while funding becomes increasingly uncertain in the interim. Being at present in the latter stages of the cycle, these institutions need to sustain the seemingly limited media interest and be prepared for when the cycle is sparked again.

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