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FEATURE

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MEASURING THE VALUE OF CHILDREN

by ROWAN SHIRKIE

Why do people have children?

This is the question Asian researchers have set themselves as they look for new approaches to one of the most sensitive and urgent concerns of development: how to slow down rapid population growth. It has, in fact, been increasingly realized that family planning programs and socio-economic development programs designed to encourage reduced fertility cannot be fully effective unless they are founded on a comprehensive knowledge of the social, economic and psychological reasons behind parenthood.

These reasons may differ from place to place and time to time. In 1972, the International Development Research Centre (Canada) and the Ford Foundation jointly supported a cross-national "Value of Children" study in rural and urban areas of Japan, Korea, the Philippines, Taiwan, Thailand and Hawaii (USA) that reveals that some reasons for having -- or not having -- children are very nearly universal.

Although it may be argued that it is impossible to quantify the value of children, and that parents may not necessarily make conscious decisions about family size, few of the more than 5000 parents surveyed in the six countries indicated that they had never thought about the reasons for choosing their family size or believed that it was only a matter of fate.

The parents have perceptions of the satisfactions and costs brought by children and these influence their desire to have few, or many, children. The study seeks to identify ways in which the social circumstances that determine these perceptions could be changed to allow parents to satisfy their aspirations

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with fewer children. In fact, say the researchers, bringing about changes in the general social circumstances and in individual values and motivations could become an important stimulus to increased contraceptive practice.

The need for such a "beyond family planning" approach had been realized at the World Population Conference, held in Bucarest in 1974, where delegates formulated a plan of action calling for economic development and better income distribution as a means to affect population trends. They had also acknowledged that both direct and indirect action were necessary to enable society to choose its best growth rate now and for the future.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the preliminary results of the study, now entering its third phase, show that emotional benefits of children are foremost in the minds of parents, particularly parents living in urban areas. The love between parent and child and the joys brought to the household by children were said to be major sources of happiness and satisfaction in their lives. While the study notes that there is no equivalent to these feelings, the reports published to date suggest that alternatives to childbearing may bring acceptable similar benefits. Occupations that involve direct contact with children, for example, or new living patterns where the responsibility for the care of children is shared by a larger community of adults may become valid alternatives to individual parenthood. Outlining these possibilities and making known the benefits that can evolve from smaller families -- closer husband-wife relationship, for instance -- could become an important part of population programs, say the researchers.

Parents in rural areas, on the other hand, stressed the economic benefits and the security that children brought. Often considered to be the "poor man's capital", children provide labour in the fields and household, are a source of additional income and, perhaps more important, can care for their parents in old age. As economic conditions improve, however, the economic value of children decreases. To stimulate this "devaluation" process, researchers and planners have often suggested implementing programs of old age pensions, housing allowances and health care which would provide the same measure of security. Parents, they say, might then limit family size, therefore providing better opportunities for fewer children who would, in turn, presumably have greater earning potential.

Among the policy options suggested by the researchers are greater educational and employment opportunities for women, thereby improving their status in society. In this way, they say, the desire for male offspring may be reduced and women would have genuine alternatives to childbearing.

The social and psychological satisfactions of parenthood were also shown by the study to be important considerations. In many cultures, adulthood and parenthood are strongly linked and recognition as an adult follows from becoming a parent. For some people, say the researchers, children are often the only way they can demonstrate competence, exercise authority or express themselves. As these values and beliefs are deeply rooted in culture and society, changing them is a long term process. To begin to effect such changes, the study recommends education and mass media programs emphasizing alternative means of reaching these goals -- careers, further education, other activities involving individual growth and development.

If there are satisfactions to having children, there are also costs. Parents in all countries and from all social classes gave straight economic costs as the primary reason for limiting family size. Even so, few of the parents were able to confidently estimate how much they actually spent on feeding, clothing, housing, healing, and educating their children. Most felt that they could afford larger families and that, in the long run, they would stand to make economic gains from children. The study suggests that providing parents and prospective parents with accurate information on the actual economic costs of having and raising children would allow them to plan their ideal family size with more certainty.

Parents also ranked the emotional costs of children very highly, and the study further suggests that emotional costs are most important (and often more important than economic costs) for couples who are considering having their first child. Parents reported that they did not fully anticipate the worries and strains, discipline and behavioural problems their children brought. These sorts of costs also appeared to be more acutely felt where adequate housing was in short supply. The less living and playing space available, the more the frictions and aggravations increased with family size. (Some countries, such as Singapore, have taken these costs into consideration in adopting public housing policies. Priority for additional space is not given for families with

more than two children.) Programs to sensitize parents and couples to the emotional costs of children are again the study's suggested means of influencing changes in the family-building process.

Finally, the debit side of children includes the restrictions they place of the parents' lives. The time and resources spent on children generally mean less for other activities. Urban parents ranked these "opportunity costs" as highly as emotional or economic costs, particularly women who have had to abandon or interrupt their careers. Educating young couples about the advantages of delaying the birth of their first child -- accumulation of savings, job advancement and mobility -- could have some impact on family growth rate and size, say the reports.

The approach taken in the Value of Children study takes into account the needs and hopes of people as individuals, parents and family members, as members of a community and of a society. In asking "Why do people have children?", the researchers have followed a course of investigation that has taken them back to the essentials of human behaviour and psychology. In order to find an answer to the human population problem, you must begin by understanding humans, they say.

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