

## Comment and analysis

# No place for piety

Population control is vital to global stability, so why has the US cut support for international family planning, asks **Jeffrey Sachs**

IT IS more than 200 years since the church and state were officially separated in the US, but anyone with an eye on American foreign policy under the Bush administration knows that this basic tenet of the Constitution is under threat. The religious right, it seems, has found the ear of the White House to an unprecedented degree. This is especially true when it comes to US policies on international development, which are riddled with evangelical opposition to family planning and the use of condoms to fight HIV/AIDS.

Concerns over population growth might seem like a throwback to the 1960s, when the number of human beings appeared to be growing unchecked. Since then world population growth has slowed from 2.1 per cent per year to around 1.3 per cent, and the prospect of the world's population levelling off late in the 21st century is now conceivable.

Yet in many of the world's poorest regions and in the politically explosive Middle East, population growth remains extremely high. The population of sub-Saharan Africa, now at 667 million, is expected to increase to 1.085 billion by 2025, according to the UN Population Division's median projection, and the population of the Middle East from 205 million to 302 million. By contrast, Europe's population is expected to decline from 726 million to 696 million over the same period.

The rapid growth in Africa and the Middle East reflects continued high total fertility rates (TFRs) in these regions. The TFR measures the total number of live births during a woman's childbearing years. In sub-Saharan Africa, the TFR is around 5.4, and in the Middle East around 3.5, in contrast with 1.4 in Europe and 2.1 in the US. (The population stabilises in the long-term when the TFR matches the replacement rate of around 2.1.)

The high fertility rates in Africa and the Middle East have at least three

major adverse consequences.

First, higher TFRs go hand in hand with lower rates of economic growth in poor countries. When poor families have many children, the parents cannot invest adequately in the health, education and nutrition of all of them. Frequently, only the eldest son receives adequate investment, and the remaining children are much more likely to fall into chronic poverty.

Second, rapid population growth puts direct stress on limited environmental resources. In Africa, the growing population contributes to rising demands for fuel wood and farmland, which is leading to dramatic rates of deforestation. This, in turn, is causing multiple environmental catastrophes, including soil erosion and more frequent flooding. In the Middle East, scarce freshwater resources are under increasing stress.

Third, a rapidly growing population is probably an important factor in the crises of governance throughout sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East, including violence and terrorism. Populations are extremely young, with a high proportion of young men. In Saudi Arabia, home of most of the 9/11 hijackers, the median age is 21, as opposed to 37.7 in Europe. For every individual under 25 in Saudi Arabia, there are only 0.7 adults between 25 and 59, compared with 1.5 in Europe. This represents a worrying lack of adult supervision for young people there.

Why should a high proportion of young men be such a concern? Sociological studies have repeatedly shown that men between 15 and 24 are the greatest source of criminality and violence. This group makes up 18.1 per cent of the Saudi population, for example, in comparison with 13.9 per cent of Europe and 13.8 per cent of the US. In sub-Saharan Africa, 20.2 per cent of the population are men aged between 15 and 24, and this is likely to rise further because of AIDS.

Despite these dangerous consequences of high fertility and rapid

population growth, the US has nevertheless slashed its funding of family planning agencies. In 2002, the Bush administration cut off funding for the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) on the grounds that the agency was supporting coercive family planning practices in China. Incredibly, the White House continued to withhold funding even after the State Department declared that the charges against the UNFPA were false. This summer, Congressional supporters of family planning attempted to overturn the ban, but lost on a vote of 216 to 211.

The special tragedy here is that the UNFPA has long shown how effective family planning is as a tool for reducing fertility rates and spurring economic development. Fertility rates can decline sharply when family planning is combined with policies for the empowerment of women, girls' education, and improved healthcare for mothers and children. This happened in Bangladesh, for example, where the TFR fell from 5.6 in 1975 to 3.5 in 2000.

If the US really wants to fight terrorism and global instability, it should take note of such possibilities, rather than allow the religious right to set the direction of the nation's development policies. ●

**Jeffrey Sachs is director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University in New York**

**"US policies on international development are riddled with opposition to family planning"**