

Cursing condoms

Efforts to slow global warming will never work if conservatives of all kinds keep blocking women's access to contraception, says **William Laurance**

THE Vatican calls them "evil", "sinful" and "intrinsically disordered". Satanic rites, perhaps? Child molesters? Actually, something far more prosaic: condoms. Equally condemned is any other artificial contraceptive – even as a means to check the spread of HIV.

The global impact of the Catholic church's antagonism to contraception has been magnified by the resurgence of moral conservatism in the US, under the administration of George W. Bush. The US used to be the world's biggest and most effective donor for condoms and other contraceptives, but Bush slashed funds for such services, and replaced them with ideologically inspired programmes proffering abstinence as the sole means of reproductive planning for the unwed.

Faced with these draconian measures, many non-governmental health organisations now refuse or are excluded from US funding, and their programmes are suffering as a result. In Panama, where I live, and where the median income is around \$15 a day, condoms are a luxury item.

This US policy has drawn much criticism, particularly because of its tragic implications for the spread of HIV. But we shouldn't forget that contraception is crucial for addressing many of the other major challenges that face humanity today. Our planet, already staggering under 6.5 billion people, is expecting to add another 2 billion by 2030, and perhaps 2 billion beyond that by 2050. Nearly all of them will be born in developing nations.

Consider just four implications. My colleague Joseph Wright, a tropical ecologist, has demonstrated a strong inverse relationship between human population density and forest cover in tropical countries. As nations grow in numbers, they lose their forests, and the most populous countries, such as the Philippines, Honduras and Madagascar, have become severely denuded. This threatens the survival of countless plant and animal species.

Razed rainforests are also an



enormous source of greenhouse gases, dumping around 5 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere annually. Indeed, without implausibly deep cuts in per capita emissions it is inconceivable that efforts to slow global warming will succeed as long as the population keeps expanding.

Population growth also worsens human strife. Several recent studies have shown that a key predictor of armed civil conflict in developing nations is not their predominant religion or the region in which they are located, but the fraction of the adult population between the ages of 15 and 29. Rapidly growing countries are flooded with unemployed and disenfranchised young men. Far too often, they become prime fodder for crime or war, or even recruitment into a terrorist cell. Gunnar Heinsohn, an expert in genocide research at the University of Bremen, Germany, argues, for example, that a critical difference between two Muslim countries, war-torn Afghanistan and peaceful Tunisia, is that Afghanistan's

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birth rate is four times as high. Throw as many soldiers and dollars at Afghanistan as you like, he suggests, but the country will be roiled by conflict until its mushrooming population stabilises.

Finally there is the politically charged issue of immigration. According to the United Nations Population Division, the US population will swell by well over 100 million people by the year 2050, largely because of the millions of Latin American immigrants it receives each year. Western Europe faces similar pressures but with the complication that many of its immigrants are Muslims from North Africa, the Middle East and south Asia: they do not always assimilate as easily into western societies as many Latin Americans. Immigrants contribute positively in diverse ways, but large numbers can also exacerbate economic, environmental and social pressures.

Fortunately, rapid population growth is soluble. There is a simple means to slow it: educate women, especially about their reproductive health. On average, better-educated women defer having children until their early 20s. They have fewer children overall and fewer unwanted pregnancies. More of their children survive, and they are healthier and better educated in their turn. The women and their families are also much better off economically. Giving women the option of contraception is the single most important factor in achieving the "demographic transition" in which a nation's population growth slows, longevity increases, and it starts to balance its numbers of young and older people.

It's hard to say whether the upper echelons of conservative faiths will ever stop condemning contraception. But it's certain that with a different leadership, the US could become part of the family-planning solution, rather than part of the problem. Before the next US presidential election, the candidates should say where they stand on family-planning issues – and US citizens should remember this when they vote. ●

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