A Nonbearing Account

by Professor Noel Perrin

Sometime in 1987 world population hit five billion. Sometime a little before 2000 it hit six billion. Sometime around 2010, 7 billion... Obviously growth like this can't continue in- definitely. We'll run out of parking space for all the cars. We'll run out of flight paths for all the airplanes. We'll eventually run out of essentials like food. A country like Nepal has already run out of firewood.

But how do you stop the relentless in- crease of humanity, currently proceeding at the rate of almost two million a week? Well, the interesting idea I've heard is to do it with money. More specifically, bank accounts. One for every woman in the world. Forget the rest of the world for a minute: here is how the plan would work in the United States. Every girl, when she reached puberty, would notify her local population center. (These sunny offices had better be staffed entirely by women- well-paid ones, too.) At that moment a financial clock would start ticking.

If the girl went the next year without having a baby, she would get a government check for $500, placed in the bank account the center now opened for her. She could take it all out and spend it on angora sweaters, if she wanted. She could leave it in as the beginning of a fund for college. Whatever she liked. The next year, if she still hadn't had a baby, the government would increase the sum by a hundred, so that her second check would be for $600. The year after, $700. A young woman reaching the age of 20, and still not having had a child, would receive a check for around $1,200. No fortune, but worth having. Avail- able without any discrimination of any kind. A Miss du Pont, an ordinary kid in Topeka, an intending nun, a teenage prostitute, all would get their checks.

Suppose the young woman wants a child, though. There's nothing to stop her, except a little financial self-interest. If at 21 she proceeded to have a baby, fine. Let's have a baby shower. The government payment, however, would abruptly drop to zero. But then, if she did not have another baby the next year, back would come a check for $500. If she went two years, she'd get $600, and so on up the modest pay ladder. A pleasant little extra income for the sex that has historically been underpaid.

Great bargain: What would all this cost? In the case of women who never do have children, plenty. Start at 13 with a check for $500 and by the time you reached menopause at 53, the check would be $4,500. To that point, you would have received a total of almost $100,000. A lot of money. But still a bargain. A great bargain. The same $100,000 is about half the cost of bringing up one abandoned child in New York City. It's less than a fifth the cost of bringing up one psychologically disturbed child in a group home in the District of Columbia. The total cost the first year would be about a billion dollars in payments to girls, maybe two/three billion to set up the centers. The total cost the fifth year would be around $10 billion. The cost wouldn't level off for about 40 years-and when it did, it would still be under what we now pay as welfare. And most of the money would flow back out immediately to stores or get turned over somewhat later to happy bursars at colleges.

Do I possibly exaggerate when I say that when the plan was in full operation, and every woman in the country between puberty and menopause receiving her check, the cost would still be less than that of the current welfare system? I don't think I do. Try looking in the Statistical Abstract of the United States. The current figure is $770 billion a year-$298 billion in state and local money, $472 billion from the federal government. That table covers many things, including VA hospitals. So turn to a more modest table, the one called "Cash and Noncash Benefits for Persons With Limited Incomes." Here the total is $114 billion, all federal money.

Such a plan would be much harder to implement in, say, India, where most people don't have bank accounts and where the government would be hard pressed to find the funds. But it wouldn't be impossible. Such payment could be the first-ever democratic foreign aid-putting money directly in the hands of women, rather than in the pockets of businessmen and bureaucrats. Furthermore, India has already found ways to pay men to have vasectomies.

Of course there are problems with such a plan.. Men will object to all this money going to women, money being power. There are bound to be accusations of racism, even though the offer would be voluntary, universal and totally color blind. There being no precedent (though there's plenty of precedent for the opposite case: governments paying women to have children), it would be hard to get started. The more stolid type of politician will call the plan impossible, utopian, dreamy, absurd.

But consider the alternatives. One, of course, is to go on exactly as we are-adding a billion people every few years until there is no more tropical forest, no more oxygen-carbon dioxide balance, no more space, and our world collapses in disaster. Another is nuclear war. A third (the likeliest, I expect) is mandatory birth control, starting one country at a time, with all the repression that implies. The repression is already there in China. And with the rigid immigration restrictions imposed by those countries that have started early against those that start late. Maybe even with population wars. How much more graceful to do it all with checks.

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Questions for discussion

1. Would this plan work in the United States?

2. If the plan could work, would it be a good idea? (is it fair, is it moral?)

3. Would you recommend this plan?

4. How would you change this plan to make it better?