BARRIERS TO POLICY CHANGE AND A SUGGESTED PATH FOR CHANGE

Yijia Jing

BARRIERS TO SIGNIFICANT POLICY CHANGE

I agree with Xizhe Peng that the reform of the one-child policy is not a panacea for all the threatening demographic problems. However, its significant adjustment is a central and foundation-laying task that new population policy cannot bypass to deal with the problems that have been caused or exacerbated by the one-child policy. A substantial change in the one-child policy will not just embark on the fundamental transformation of China’s population policy, but also lend support in resolving various related socioeconomic issues. As the one-child policy has been kept almost intact for decades despite the emergence of many dangerous signals and serious critiques, it is important to diagnose the reasons that may hinder the decisionmakers from taking decisive action.

The Limit of China’s Total Population

A major opposition to relaxing the one-child control is that due to China’s huge population base, a low population growth rate still leads to a significant expansion of the total population, which may exceed China's resource and environmental carrying capacity. Serious desertification, increasing air and water pollution, and poor food safety are all deemed as related to China’s overpopulation. Yet current estimates of China’s population limit are often based on static or wrong assumptions. Given natural and environmental resources, China’s population limit depends on its labor productivity, path of industrialization, pursued life styles, distribution of wealth, and many other factors that are dynamic and subject to the intervention of public policies. Compared to Japan, the United Kingdom, and France, China’s population density is much lower. The ingrained fear of population growth tends to ignore the reality that human resources have been and will continue to be China’s most important national strength.

Population Rebound

Another barrier is the worry that a serious population rebound will follow. The underlying assumptions of this warning are that Chinese families have an average fertility desire much higher than the real total fertility rate, and that the suppressed fertility desire of Chinese couples in their early forties and late thirties will burst out when the policy is relaxed. These assumptions are either wrong or exaggerated.
in other countries, China has faced a clear trend of decreasing fertility desire due to its modernization transformation. A baby boom, even if it appears, will not be strong and sustained. It is simply good policy to release the repressed desire for a second child, as any delay will only engender more social costs for the future.

Policy Dependence

The one-child policy has created policy inertia and locked-in effects. According to an official document issued in 2009, the family planning system had 509,000 public employees at year-end 2005, as well as 7.2 million part-time employees working in urban residents’ committees and rural villagers’ committees (National Commission of Population and Family Planning [NCPFP], 2009). Further, long-term policy implementation has formed a coordinated network of governmental agencies, hospitals, and enterprises with vested interests in the continuation of the one-child policy. Policy change will result in loss of power, jobs, and economic benefits. Meanwhile, policy change may lead to challenges to the government by citizens who suffered from the old policy, for example, by being forced to have an abortion.

A SUGGESTED PATH FOR CHANGE

Participatory Policy Deliberation and Decisionmaking

Reproductive freedom has become a critically important step for the Chinese to fully realize their socioeconomic freedom after thousands of years of state control over individuals and after over three decades of fast liberalization. As the one-child policy relates to the fundamental fortune of every family and the whole nation, its adjustment needs to engage all of the important stakeholders to guarantee its legitimacy and practicability, and to optimize its long-term impacts. Public debates, public opinion polls, and scholarly research should be encouraged. Channels of participation, such as public hearings, in decisionmaking processes should be created and easily accessible. The new policy has to reflect a national consensus regarding the appropriate balancing of individual-collective interests and of intergenerational interests.

Incremental Reform

With a clear and decisive vision to finally let citizens reproduce freely and responsibly, a gradual process of policy adjustment is suggested. An incremental reform first asks for reforms, the sooner the better. It is a trial-and-error process, so a two-child policy should be adopted first. While equal rights should be a fundamental principle of the new policy, there can be variations in policy implementation to level off the baby boom. For example, it may first apply to couples with at least one spouse as a single child and to some selected provinces or counties, and then quickly spread to all citizens.

Adjustments to Policy Implementation and Coordination

A mission shift from control to service demands a reform to the institutional system of population policy. Following China’s super ministry reform agenda, the National Commission of Population and Family Planning, as the world’s only ministry with population control as its single purpose, may be integrated into the Ministry of Health, which will then be responsible for coordinating population issues. As population issues are multiple and complex, interagency networks of policy,
collaboration, and governance should be formed by including agencies such as the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security.

CONCLUSIONS

China’s one-child policy has been an unprecedented policy experiment in human history. Despite its significant achievements, the policy has induced equally significant potential problems. As problems of the one-child policy have been widely noticed and suggestions for adjustments are available, the leadership transition of China in 2012 and 2013 may open the policy window for decisive actions. Change agents have to be aware that the new population policy should not just be based on utilitarian calculation, but also on the recognition of human rights and equity.

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REFERENCE


UNDERSTANDING CHINA’S DEMOGRAPHIC DIVIDENDS AND LABOR ISSUE

Xizhe Peng

One of the major concerns about the one-child policy is its negative impact on the current and future labor force in China. People have talked about the Lewis Turning Point (for example, Cai, 2010) and the end of demographic dividends. Some of these arguments, however, can be misleading.

The working-age population (ages 15 to 59) can be treated as the potential labor force supply. It is true that the continuous decline of China’s fertility level over the past 30 years has partially resulted in the recent decline of the proportion of the young labor force. Nevertheless, there is no major change in the total size of the labor force. At the moment, 68 percent of the Chinese population is of working age, and the proportion will remain above 65 percent at least for the next decade, and above 60 percent until the early 2030s (see Figure 1). In fact, China currently has an abundant labor force supply. In other words, the window for harvesting the