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[Women gather to receive contraceptives in Malawi](#)

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Why We Don't Need Coercive Population Control

Jake Earl

In his recent post on this blog, "[When and How Will Growth Cease?](#)" Jason G. Brent argues that humanity should immediately begin discussion and debate about the merits of implementing coercive population control policies on a global scale. Although Brent's position overlaps with one that my co-authors and I have defended [elsewhere](#), his argument fails to support its conclusion.

Brent's argument begins by noting that economic and population growth will inevitably end due to the fact that Earth has finite resources. Human beings have some control over when and how growth will end, and Brent sees only three policy options: (1) do nothing and allow growth to wind down on its own schedule, (2) implement voluntary population control worldwide, and (3) implement coercive population control worldwide. Brent claims that we should assess growth policies according to how likely they are to allow humanity to survive for the longest time on Earth with a "reasonable" quality of life. Doing nothing fails to live up to this standard, since unabated growth risks a global catastrophe within a few hundred years. Voluntary population control is better than nothing, but Brent contends it is deeply uncertain whether it would be sufficient for preventing a humanity-ending disaster. Since coercive population

policies are more likely to be effective than strictly voluntary ones, Brent concludes, we should at least be having a serious public debate about whether to implement coercive population control.

I grant Brent's claim that economic and population growth cannot continue forever in Earth's closed system, but there are significant problems with his estimates of how bad continued near-term growth will be. For example, take his assertion that 100 years at 3% growth per year in the United States (and assuming comparable growth in other nations) "would result in the collapse of civilization." His reasoning ignores the fact that the damage growth does to Earth's life-supporting systems depends on what drives the growth. Economic expansion driven primarily by improved efficiency and productivity in combination with resource-saving practices and technologies need not destroy civilization, even if we hit the [current U.N. projection](#) of 11.2 billion people on Earth by 2100.

Humanity faces real challenges from continued economic and population growth (e.g., they are drivers of dangerous climate change), but I doubt that anyone could show with much certainty that they are steaming us toward a civilization-ending disaster within the next 150 (or 250, or 350...) years. It matters politically and morally that we not give serious consideration to new coercive policies unless we have good reason to believe that such policies are necessary to avoid some terrible state of affairs. One reason we don't need to consider a global scheme of coercive population control is the lack of substantial evidence for an impending growth-driven cataclysm.

A second reason is that Brent unfairly assesses the alternatives to coercive population control. Even if we assume that the human population should shrink (and not merely stop growing) by 2100, this could be accomplished with non-coercive policies. Demographers have estimated that simply eliminating unintended births would lower Earth's projected end-of-century population by [2-3 billion people](#), and this could be accomplished with exclusively voluntary policies. If such a reduction would be inadequate or too unlikely, there are other ways to reduce fertility without coercion. As my co-authors and I have noted, people can be influenced by media and by economic incentives to reduce the number of children they otherwise would have had. It is likely due to similar [cultural and economic changes](#) in developed nations that have led to their falling fertility rates in recent decades. Along with improvements in gender equity, healthcare access, and family planning education, non-coercively influencing attitudes and choices about family size could be a powerful tool for reducing population growth.

It seems, then, that we lack credible evidence of an impending growth-driven collapse of civilization, and that even if we had such evidence, we are capable of significantly reducing (or reversing) population growth without coercion. Coercive population control on a global scale does not, at this point, deserve serious public discussion. Indeed, such discussion could even harm people unnecessarily by undermining their sense of security in their bodies or by causing distrust in non-coercive fertility reduction efforts.

I suspect that the problem with Brent's argument originates in his standard for evaluating policies: "*What size of the economy and population would permit humanity to survive on this planet for the longest period of time?*" Not only does this standard fail to consider whether a growth policy would violate people's moral rights, it also fetishizes the survival of the human species as such. Presumably, it would require us to select a policy yielding 1 billion barely happy people on Earth for the next 10,000 years over a policy yielding 10 billion extremely happy people on Earth for the next 9,000 (or 9,999) years. Even if Brent were to fix his empirical premises, there would yet be problems with the moral mathematics of his view.

This post was written in response to Jason G. Brent's article [When and How Will Growth Cease?](#), which was shared via the MAHB Blog last week.

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