



**Christian Views on Family Planning and Sustainable Development Goals:
The Nigerian Experience**

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Abstract

The idea of family planning through contraceptives among people of different religions differs from country to country and even within a particular religion, from denomination to denomination. It is in this direction that this research examines the nature of family planning. It highlights Christian views towards contraceptive use among the people of Nigeria. The research also aims at picturing how poor family planning can ruin development via population explosion. It finally yearns to identify and suggest family planning types that can be adopted for a proper method of population control to enhance sustainable development in Nigeria.

Keywords: Christian Views, Family Planning, Sustainable Development.

Introduction

Global population levels are increasing rapidly over the decades. This trend has significantly limited the success of the millennium development goals (MDGs) and had since transferred it to the sustainable development goals (SDGs) thereby threatens the attainment of the SGDs. Therefore increasing access to family planning services is vital to achievement of the sustainable development goals. Research has it that when families are advised to adopt family planning methods using some contraceptives, it is meant to check fertility within the society (Rah, Shamim, Arju, Labrique, Rashid, 2008). In Africa where having a large family is a thing of pride especially in Nigeria, family planning has been neglected. It looks as if there is no policy guiding the Nigerian family. The issue is blamed on religious beliefs culture, educational attainment and other such variables.

In Nigeria, the Christian group with its complex African family background and their doctrinal principles finds it difficult to imbibe this policy. There is a need therefore to understand African culture and Christian dogma to enable government create an enabling environment where family planning policy in accordance with the development goals will be complied with by all Christian in Nigeria. This will create rooms for the achievement of sustainable development in Nigeria. Christians do not believe in the use of contraceptive to control birth, so they hold tenaciously to the believe that birth control is against all religious and moral laws. By this act, it has been difficult to control population growth. When births are not controlled, resources are over used; the sizes of the family can no longer fit into either family or government's ability to take care of her members. This has adversely affected the smooth attainment of the sustainable development goals in Nigeria.

Why Family Planning?

There has been an assumption world over that human population will grow to over 8 billion people by end of the middle of the 21st century. In reaction to this assumption Engelman (2011) declares that, the assumption is wrong because human population can be lowered by what the author described as "coercive population

control". The author went further to mention that with the availability and accessibility of modern contraception methods, the average number of children born to each woman worldwide will not be much. By this method, population growth will be curbed. Ajomera (2016) defines family planning as the act of controlling family size and not only the use of contraception. The author views the following as significance of family planning in sustaining human development:

- It is important for the health of a mother and her children as well as the family's economic situation.
- It also save medical costs of pregnancy and birth and the high cost associated with the actual bringing up of a child
- It saves money for the education of children, provision of shelter, clothing and food.

In another direction, Tayolor (2014), remarked that family planning allows a woman to figure out which method to control reproduction knowing both the advantages and disadvantages of different family planning methods. It helps a woman to control when to be pregnant. It is the hormonal way of controlling birth by using pills, injective birth control, birth control patches and implants, condoms, contraceptives sponges, diaphragms and spermicide. But the natural family planning only involves refraining from sex following the monitoring of the menstrual cycle (Conde-Agudelo, et al., 2012; Fotso, et. al, 2013; Yalçın et al., 2014).

World Health Organization (2015) summarized the need for family planning as seen below:

- (i) Some family planning methods prevent HIV and STDs transmission.
- (ii) It reduces the need for abortion especially the unsafe abortion.
- (iii) Family planning reinforces the people's right to determine the number and spacing of their children.
- (i) It can prevent death of mother and children when pregnancy is prevented.

Studies have shown that family planning is one facet targeting universal access to sexual and reproductive health among the sustainable development goals (SDGs). Family planning involve the politics, policies formulated, programs of actions, services, information availability and dissemination, believe, attitudes, practices, and commodities and contraceptives, that give women, men, couples, and adolescents the ability to avoid unintended pregnancy, deciding when and where and at what duration to have or give birth to their child (Ganchimeg, et al., 2014; Fall, et al., 2015). Study by Starbird, Norton and Marcus, (2016) found that every day, approximately 830 women die from pregnancy and childbirth problems. The authors further observed that nearly all (99%) of these maternal deaths occur in low-income countries. More than half of the deaths occur in sub-Saharan Africa, while one-third occurs in South Asia. In addition, in 2015, 5.9 million children died under 5 years of age (Starbird, et al., 2016). These authors further opined that family planning has some significance especially when women space and time their pregnancies to ensure healthy outcomes, some of these significance according to these Starbird, et al., (2016) include:

- Spacing and timing pregnancy to occur at least after age 18 months improves adolescents' growth and development and reduces the risk of poor outcomes for their children stunting, low birth weight, and preterm birth.
- Spacing pregnancies also gives mothers more time, energy, and resources to breastfeed their infants.
- When pregnancies are planned, research shows that mothers can breastfeed for longer periods of time and breastfeeding practices improve, leading to improved nutrition.

Christian Views on Family Planning and Sustainable Development.....

- Spacing pregnancies helps women replenish essential nutrients. Studies have found that “strong evidence” exists for women’s folate depletion at 3 to 12 months postpartum, a deficiency linked to the risk of low birth weight in the next pregnancy.
- Spacing pregnancies at least 24 months apart (the equivalent of 3 years between births) is linked to reduction of a key measure of malnutrition, stunting among children under 5. Children born after a 2-year interval or less, compared with a 4-year interval, are 27% more likely to be stunted and 23% more likely to be underweight.
- Family planning helps women bear children at the healthiest times of their lives when they are psychologically, physically, emotionally, and economically ready for a pregnancy and thus most likely to survive, stay healthy, and have healthy children. Through strengthened, integrated service delivery and improved counseling for women and girls, especially on the risks of short birth intervals, high parity, and advanced maternal-age pregnancies, family planning should be playing a larger role in child and maternal survival and in adolescent health and well-being.

Christian Views on Family Planning

Stover and Ross (2010) found that it is believed that when discussions are initiated on access to sex and reproductive health and rights, Christians often differ in their various views. This is because it has to do with the modern way of contraception. The Holy Bible puts it this way “God blessed them and said to them, be fruitful and increase in number, fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen. 1:28; KJV). By this, new children are considered a great blessing from God, why then should contraceptive be used. The Holy Bible (RSV) further buttress the above fact thus “sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from Him” (Psalm 127:3-5 [KJV]). Cleland, Conde-Agudelo, Peterson, Ross and Tsui (2012) posited that the implication of the assertion from the bible above is that controlling birth by preventing pregnancy to occur or terminating an unborn foetus is another way of destroying a blessed heritage and a reward from God. Ahmed, Li, Liu, Tsui, (2012) observes that “even though the world is experiencing a sexual revolution, Christians have faithfully presented a common wisdom about sex which constitutes sexual morality”. Christians are aware that society has very little respect for the Christian moral norms regarding sexual relationships (DaVanzo, Hale, Razzaque and Rahman, 2007).

Studies have shown that religion is part and parcel of the culture of every society. It has a prolific influence on the matters of morality, ideology and decision making, which concern every human being at some point in their life. Although the different religions often lack a united view on matters such as contraception and abortion, there is sometimes some dogmatic overlap when general religious principles are subject to the influence of local customs. Racial mix among different population flow adds further complexities to societal views about reproductive health issues. A case is the present rise in population in the dramatic increase in refugee influx, which raises questions about the health care of immigrants and the effects of cultural and religious differences on reproductive health (Srikanthan and Reid, 2008; Starbird, Norton and Marcus, 2016; Hakim, Seidman, Kubba, Kishen, Di Carlo, 2016). Different views are held by different religious groups, about family planning and female reproductive policies, this is so because religious beliefs on family planning in Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Hinduism have grown from different backgrounds and perspectives. Understanding these differences

may result in more culturally competent delivery of care by health care providers (Ahmed, Ahmed, McKaig, Begum, Mungia and Norton, 2015).

End Time World Television Network (2016) analysing the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church affirms that the Catholic Church has been opposed to contraception since the second century. In the same vein, Klimon (2008) made some references to many church fathers who condemned the use of contraception by women to effect birth control. The catechism of the Catholic Church (2009) specifies the fact that “all sex acts must be both unactive and procreative. At the long run, the natural become morally permissive in some circumstances as they do not usurp the natural way of contraception (John, 1994).

The Biblical information concerning family planning is the standard by which all Christians draw their references. The scripture sees no justification for destroying an unborn child, it has no reason to submit in order to warrant a woman prevent or delay birth by any other means except by God’s design over it. According to Oderinde in Anyacho (2004) Christians arguments against birth control include:

- (i) It is to disobey God’s command to propagate the race (Gen. 1:28).
- (ii) When conception or pregnancy is prevented from occurring naturally, it is a criminal intent to kill the unborn child who is a heritage and a blessing from God.
- (iii) Adopting birth control is another way of neglecting children’s responsibilities.
- (iv) The Bible condemns a man who practices a form of birth control (Gen. 38:9).
- (v) It is wrong to use birth control
- (vi) It is wrong to threaten an evident existing race.
- (vii) It is wrong when the population of a race is not increasing towards its maximum.

In a study to elucidate the religious and cultural influences that may affect the acceptance and use of various methods of contraception, including emergency contraception by Srikanthan and Reid, (2008) found that religious and cultural factors have the potential to influence the acceptance and use of contraception by couples from different religious backgrounds in very distinct ways. Within religions, different sects may interpret religious teachings on this subject in varying ways, and individual women and their partners may choose to ignore religious teachings. Cultural factors are equally important in couples' decisions about family size and contraception. The mix in this difference of views and beliefs is influenced by the different background which different religious adherents have before moving into such religious sect. Pinter, Hakim, Seidman, Kubba, Kishen & Di Carlo (2016) found that most of these religious views are observed when new immigrants are faced with the challenges of acclimatizing to a new society and a new way of life, they may anchor strongly to traditional, religious and cultural expectations regarding family, sexuality, and fertility. While health care providers must be cautious not to attribute stereotypical religious, social, and cultural characteristics to women seeking advice about contraception, they do need to recognize that different value systems may influence contraception decision-making in couples of different faiths. Kozuki, Lee, Silveira, Victora, Adair and Humphrey (2013) however submitted that increased cultural awareness needs to be tempered by the understanding that each patient encounter is unique. The values that an individual woman holds may not be in keeping with the official teachings of her religion or the cultural norms reported by other members of the same culture (Malarcher, Spieler, Fabic, Jordan, Starbird and Kenon (2016).

Parameters of Sustainable Development Goals

Nigeria is passing through unstable situations, policies of all sorts, instabilities of all kinds from the religious institutions, economic sphere, politics, and behavioral pattern and so on. Dada (2010) expresses doubt when the country will achieve sustainable development in line with the mundane goals amidst all these problems. To this researcher, sustainable development goals have the following parameters connecting family planning with the SDGs:

- (i) Electricity or uninterrupted power supply
- (ii) Supply of portable drinking water flowing in every house, hamlet, village
- (iii) Road within each town and outside
- (iv) Well maintained and lasting railways
- (v) Sustainable airways comparable to the US and Britain
- (vi) Uninterrupted food supply
- (vii) Youth empowerment and development
- (viii) Stability of the country's monetary system
- (ix) Neat and enviable politics
- (x) Meaningful and result oriented education opportunities of levels.

Kozuki, Lee, Silveira, Victora, Adair and Humphrey (2013) observed that if Christian views on family planning do not change from employing the natural method to more effective modern methods, then the above cannot be achieved. The author observed that this is because many women do not understand the principles behind natural family planning (the Billings Method of family planning) and get involved with an unplanned pregnancy. In reaction and response to this assertion, Brown, Ahmed, Roche, Sonneveldt and Darmstadt (2015) opined that this will result to overpopulation, where the population will now compete for the available resources. Therefore, Government will not be able to cater for the needs of this extended human population as we are experiencing at moment.

Studies have shown that family planning reduces the incidence of maternal and child death during and after pregnancy and child birth. When proper family planning methods are used, human population will be managed with respect to the available resources, where people should be able to live within the carrying capacity of the supportive ecosystem (Malarcher, Spieler, Fabric, Jordan, Starbird and Kenon, 2016). The 2015 UN report of population estimates and projections found that, population growth in the poorest countries will make it harder for those governments to eradicate poverty and inequality, improve the provision of basic services.” (United Nations (UN), 2015). The challenges for poverty reduction strategies and family planning are clear.

At the household level, some studies caution against the widely held view that large families are poorer and fail to find links between household size and poverty (Lanjouw and Ravallion, 1995; Miller, (2010). Other studies take a different approach to examining family planning's contribution to poverty reduction. These studies focus instead on family planning's role in creating human capital. A 2010 study found that a family planning program in Colombia reduced women's completed lifetime fertility by approximately one-half of a child and explained a relatively low 6% to 7% of the fertility decline between 1964 and 1993 (Naik and Smith, 2015). “Despite its modest role in reducing lifetime fertility,” the study concluded, the ability of family planning to fight poverty cannot be easily dismissed. The study found that

women with access to family planning as teenagers gained 0.05 more years of schooling, were 7% more likely to work in the formal sector, and were 2% less likely to cohabit with male partners. In addition, young Colombian women with access to modern contraception experienced substantial socio-economic gains because contraception allowed them to postpone their first births and determine their life course. The study concluded that these estimates may place family planning among the most effective (and cost-effective) interventions to foster human development (Malarcher, Spieler, Fabic, Jordan, Starbird, Kenon, (2016).

All these can only be achievable when proper family planning methods are adopted; for this to be possible, religious leaders should be active participants in the dissemination of proper and effective family planning information made available to the church in order to enable them make informed decisions concerning the best family planning methods that can be adopted by church members. What roles can the church and families then play in bringing about a change of attitude, belief and to enable these families who are adherents of their churches to adopt these new methods of family planning in order to gain or achieve sustainable development.

As noted in a recent brief on the impacts of family planning on nutrition, under-nutrition, which includes stunting, underweight, wasting, and vitamin deficiencies, contributes to nearly half of all childhood related death of mother and child. This means that about 3.1 million children under age 5 die each year from malnutrition-related causes (Rutstein and winter, 2014). The breastfeeding method of family planning—the Lactational Amenorrhea Method (LAM), considered a modern method of family planning yields all of the nutritional benefits of exclusive breastfeeding, and thus can directly influence newborn and infant nutritional status (Malarcher et al., 2016).

On newborn and child health, a wealth of studies conducted in both rich and poor countries, using diverse data sets, have found that spacing pregnancies at least 24 months after a live birth (or about 3 years between births) is associated with lower newborn, infant, and child mortality (Conde-Agudelo, Rosas-Bermúdez, Kafury-Goeta, 2006; DaVanzo, Hale, Razzaque and Rahman, 2007; Cleland, Conde-Agudelo, Peterson, Ross, Tsui, 2012; Zhu, Rolfs, Nangle and Horan, 2013; Kozuki, Lee, Silveira, Victora, Adair and Humphrey 2013). Other studies, focusing on contraceptives, despite mixed results have concluded that family planning helps women space their births and “is protective against short intervals (Ahmed, Ahmed, McKaig, Begum, Mungia and Norton, 2015). Current analyses indicate that spacing births reduces the risk of death in infancy by up to 10%, and for children under age 5 by 21% (Rutstein and Winter, 2014).

Questions remain on family planning’s effects on children after they are born. A recent study among infants in Kenya found that a preceding birth interval of less than 18 months was associated with a twofold increase in mortality risk (compared with a birth interval of 36 months), while succeeding intervals of less than 20 months were associated with a 245% increase in early childhood mortality, compared with last births (Naik and Smith, 2015). In another study, children in Afghanistan with a preceding birth interval less than 18 months or greater than 60 months had significantly higher risks of dying due to diarrhea, sepsis, and low birth weight than children with a preceding birth interval of 24–35 months (Malarcher, et. al., 2016). Finally, a systematic review found evidence for folate depletion, vertical transmission of infection, and transmission of infectious disease between siblings as mechanisms that may explain the adverse perinatal, infant, and child health

outcomes associated with short intervals (Cleland, 2012). From these authors position, it is worthy to note that religion have very significant influence of Christian's adoption or uptake of family planning, when these is not done, the use of resources are indiscriminately done so much so that their sustainability are compromised and sustainable development is then consistently impaired.

Effect of Christian View on Family Planning in Achieving Sustainable Development Goals

Ahmed, Ahmed, McKaig, Begum, Mungia and Norton (2015) found that both natural and sustainable development must deal firstly on human development before the physical development. The problem of poor information management on family planning and the aberrations carried about by most religious groups has rather created more problems than solve them. The church and other religious place of worship should be a source of information dissemination, but unfortunately, "the holier than thou" dictum has created more problems in the society today. Modern techniques introduced with current policies are always challenged by the believe of most religious group, the use of condom, contraceptives, diaphragm, etc has always been discredited by these religious leaders. There can be no physical development without the human development. Man's failure to develop himself by keeping to the policy of family planning in the Christian religious perspective has earned us a negative impact on sustainable development. Engelman (2011) observes that there are many barriers to birth control; one among them is ignorance on the part of certain religious and political leaders. The author calls for a public understanding of the benefits of birth control to curb population growth and reduce unnecessary pressure on the limited and scarce resources.

The following are some of the benefits as noted by Moses (2016):

- (i) The chances of unplanned pregnancy cannot be avoided
- (ii) The negligence given to a proper family planning is the cause of our present challenge such as poverty, poor education, health facilities etc.
- (iii) It is the cause of the current environmental problems
- (iv) Increase in infant and maternal mortality rate
- (v) Divorce is on the increase because of sexual disturbance (worries)
- (vi) The chances of contacting HIV/STDs (Sexually Transmitted Diseases) are always open.

Moses (2016) concluded by calling on religious leaders to re-amend their views and educate their adherents on the modern family planning that will enhance the achievement of the sustainable development goals in Nigeria.

The Role of Family Planning on Sustainable Development Goals

No policy can succeed without making objectives to reflect on a sustainable development, for family planning to succeed the education of the populace, including Christians and Muslims must be done. It is not only the job of the government, but those of NGOs, religious and circular leaders as well as our traditional rulers to prepare a good background for it. They must be involved in it practically. UN (2005) analysed the following ways as roles of family planning in achieving sustainable development:

- (i) It enables girls and women to decide for themselves when to have children and how many to ease their human and mental development.
- (ii) It secures ones right to unrestricted access to counselling and medical care in the field of sexual and reproductive health which is the basis for people's fundamental rights for sustainable development

- (iii) It is an important aspect of Millennium Goals factoring in improving mental health to the benefit of national development.
- (iv) It helps both individuals and government and how to manage their resources so that children will grow up healthily with a good future and be productive to national development.
- (v) Family planning cuts down the number of abortions strengthen the role of women in society thus making them partners of a progressive society.

UN (2005) added more on these roles that “family planning has paved way for the reduction of new HIV infections and maternal and unborn deaths”. It is made clear that it has also catalysed increased leadership and commitment from governments and strong support from all partners including the United States Agencies.

Conclusion

From the literature reviewed so far, it has been established that religion plays a very prominent and significant role in the adoption of family planning among the different sect of religious beliefs, hence for sustainable development to be achievable, there is the urgent need for attitudinal change among church and other religious leaders to enhance their follower re-orientation towards sustainable, efficient and effective family planning in the family, this will definitely reduce family size, reducing human population and healthy living within the carrying capacity of the supportive ecosystem.

It is a well known reality that many people hold different opinions about family planning. This is as a result of cultural, religious or ethnic background. No matter these views, family planning has to do with birth control which is the awareness to child spacing. Christian view on it from the history of the church disapproves it completely. As the world keep changing, a new look should emerge other than the natural family planning. But with its attendant demerits and its effects to population growth and the spread of diseases, there is need for the church to re-examine her stand and accept the modern methods. Sustainable development goals has its parameters but cannot be enhanced without an effective family planning. Lack of recognition of a modern family planning has impacted negatively on the country so that population explosion the country is facing, infant and maternal death, abortions, new HIV spread, etc. Having examined these impacts, it has become necessary to agree with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals that family planning is central to sustainable development in Nigeria. Here comes a clarion call for Christian communities to rise up to these challenges and educate their adherents in order to check population explosion in Nigeria and achieve sustainable development goals.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are geared towards creating awareness as wells as making all religious leaders especially the Christians folk to embrace family planning and educate their members.

- (i) Since sustainable development cannot do without family planning, societies should embrace it not minding cultural, religious, ethnic or political affiliations and dogma.
- (ii) In this new era towards the 22nd century, there should be the recognition and enforcement of reproductive rights as essential to national development.

Christian Views on Family Planning and Sustainable Development.....

- (iii) Since women represent half of the population in Nigeria, discrimination and other gender stereotyping should be de-emphasised, knowing full well that they are gradually becoming known as key agents of change in society.
- (iv) Equal access should be given to all girls and women towards voluntary family planning via empowerment and technological training. This will help them to raise healthy and stable families.
- (v) Churches and mosque should mount awareness creation program to encourage the women folks to take up family planning, but this should be a collective decision between the woman and her husband.
- (vi) General studies, citizenship education, civic education, national value among subjects taught in all our school systems should expand the curriculum content to cover topics of family planning.

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Christian Views on Family Planning and Sustainable Development.....

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