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TWO SUCCESS STORIES

Chapter 2: Stopping at Seven Billion

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◀ **Lester R. Brown, *Outgrowing the Earth: The Food Security Challenge in an Age of Falling Water Tables and Rising Temperatures* (W.W. Norton & Co., NY: 2005).**

Some countries with fast-growing populations that face fast-shrinking water and cropland availabilities per person fail to slow their population growth and, as a result, experience spreading hunger and political instability. Other countries see the handwriting on the wall and move to quickly slow their population growth.

The good news is that countries that want to reduce family size quickly can do so. Two of the best examples of this are Thailand and Iran. These two middle-sized countries have been remarkably successful in slowing population growth, although they have very different cultures and economies. While Thailand's farm economy is rice-based, Iran's is wheat-based. Thailand is humid and subtropical, while Iran is semiarid and temperate. One nation is predominantly Buddhist, the other Muslim. 34

Thailand's success can largely be traced to one individual, Mechai Viravaidya, who eventually became known nationwide simply as Mechai. During the 1970s Mechai saw that if Thailand did not rein in its population growth, it would eventually be in serious trouble. He recognized early on that family planning, reproductive health, and contraception were topics that people needed to feel comfortable talking about. 35

One of his first goals was thus to promote the discussion of population and family planning issues. He gave talks to any group who would listen. He worked with educators to get population examples in elementary school math books. He wanted even Thailand's children to understand the consequences of prolonged exponential growth. 36

He popularized the condom, one of the first contraceptives available in Thailand, and promoted its manufacture and distribution. He helped people understand the role of condoms in preventing births and disease. Schoolchildren played games with condoms inflated as balloons. Taxi drivers in Bangkok had condoms in their cabs, offering them to their passengers for free. At a 1979 conference of Parliamentarians on Population and Development that I attended in Colombo, Sri Lanka, Mechai boarded a bus to the meeting site and went down the aisle with a small box filled with condoms, offering them to various members of Parliament—men and women alike—teasing them about the colors they wanted or the size that would be best for them. He was thoroughly entertaining—and certainly disarming—which is no doubt why “Mechai” is now slang for condom in Thailand. 37

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Mechai's enthusiasm could not be curbed. The bottom line was that he mobilized the resources of the Thai government to introduce family planning programs throughout the country. In 2000, Mechai was elected to the Senate by the people of Thailand. 38

Today, women in Thailand have access to a full range of family planning services. Instead of a population growth rate of 3 percent a year—or twentyfold per century—Thailand's annual population growth rate is 0.8 percent. With the average number of children per woman in Thailand now less than 2, it is only a matter of time until Thailand's population stabilizes. Its current population of 63 million is projected to stop growing at around 77 million by 2050, an increase of 22 percent. This compares with the projected growth of 38 percent for the United States by 2050. 39

Iran's dramatic gains in reducing family size have come more recently. In scarcely a decade, Iran reduced its population growth from the world's highest of nearly 4 percent a year to just over 1 percent. The country's roller-coaster population policy began when Ayatollah Khomeini replaced the Shah in 1979. One of the first things Khomeini did was to dismantle the family planning programs the Shah had introduced in 1967. Khomeini then advocated large families. Between 1980 and 1988, Iran was continuously at war with Iraq, and Khomeini wanted large families to produce more soldiers. His aim was eventually to field an army of 20 million troops. As women were urged to have more and more children, the population growth rate hit 4.4 percent in the early 1980s, close to the biological maximum and one of the highest ever recorded. 40

A decade later, Iran reversed its population policy by 180 degrees. The country's leadership had crossed a threshold, recognizing that their record population growth was burdening the economy, destroying the environment, and overwhelming schools. They then started a family planning program to reduce family size. 41

Overnight they launched a new program that quickly became one of the most comprehensive efforts to slow population growth ever adopted in any country. This program was not left to the family planners alone. The government also mobilized the ministries of education and culture to help convince the public of the need to shift to smaller families and to slow population growth. 42

Iran Broadcasting played a prominent role, releasing a steady drumbeat of information encouraging smaller families and extolling their benefits. Radio and television broadcasts informed people that family planning services were available. Indeed, it let them know of the 15,000 new "health houses" available in villages to provide family planning guidance and services. The national female literacy rate climbed from roughly 25 percent in 1970 to over 70 percent today. 43

Religious leaders were mobilized to convince couples to have smaller families. Mullahs who once were on the front lines urging women to have more children were now encouraging them to have fewer. Iran pioneered with a family planning program that offered the entire range of contraceptive practices and materials. Contraceptives, such as the pill, were free of charge. Iran also became the first Muslim country to offer male sterilization. And uniquely, in Iran couples must take

a two-day course in family planning and contraception in order to get a marriage license. 44

Average family size has dropped from seven children to fewer than three. The population growth rate was cut in half from 1987 to 1994, putting Iran in the same category as Japan and China—the only other two countries that have succeeded in halving their population growth rates in such a short period of time. In 2004, Iran's population was growing only modestly faster than that of the United States. 45

If Iran, with its strong undercurrent of Islamic fundamentalism, can move so quickly toward population stability, then there is hope for countries everywhere. Over the long term a sustainable population means two children per couple. The arithmetic is simple. Any population that increases or decreases continuously over the long term is not sustainable.

NOTES

34. Thailand and Iran general country information from *CIA World Factbook*, Online Database, at www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook, updated 11 May 2004.

35. G. Tyler Miller, "Cops and Rubbers Day in Thailand," in *Living in the Environment*, 8th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1994).

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid.; slang for condom from "Mechai Viravaidya: Mr. Condom, Mr. Senator," *Asiaweek*, at www.asiaweek.com/asiaweek/features/power50.2001/p49.html, viewed 10 September 2004.

38. "Mechai Viravaidya: Mr. Condom, Mr. Senator," op. cit. note 37.

39. Miller, op. cit. note 35; demographics from United Nations, op. cit. note 1.

40. Janet Larsen, "Iran's Birth Rate Plummeting at Record Pace," in Lester R. Brown, Janet Larsen, and Bernie Fischlowitz-Roberts, *The Earth Policy Reader* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002), pp. 190–94; see also Homa Hoodfar and Samad Assadpour, "The Politics of Population Policy in the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Studies in Family Planning*, March 2000, pp. 19–34, and Farzaneh Roudi, "Iran's Family Planning Program: Responding to a Nation's Needs," *MENA Policy Brief*, June 2002; Iran demographics from United Nations, op. cit. note 1.

41. Larsen, op. cit. note 40.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid.

45. United Nations, op. cit. note 1.

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