

Title: Food Aid and Population Control

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Sentence Description: This is a case study about the ethical issues of food aid to poor countries being linked with birth control.

Case Study:

Amala is a young woman in India, who lives and works on her parent's farm. Amala is the oldest of eight children and has helped her mother since she was a little girl by cooking and cleaning as well as raising and educating her younger siblings. The village in which Amala lives is small and is relatively isolated from the larger cities in India. Therefore, Amala has never really traveled outside of this small area near the mountains. While caring for her infant brother, she dreams of the day when she will marry and begin a family of her own.

Unfortunately, India is suffering from a massive drought and Amala and her family are suffering from hunger. Eating approximately 900 calories a day by regulating food very carefully, Amala's family is looking for other options in order to find more to eat. It has been more than a year since the drought began and all of Amala's clothes are too large as she has lost so much weight. She worries that her parents will struggle finding her a husband when she looks so emaciated. Her parents are more worried that one or more of the family will not survive this disaster due to hunger or illness as a result of the drought. Then an offer comes to the village that shocks everyone. In exchange for food aid, Amala and her family, as well as other village members, are required to receive birth control. This would entail the use of methods, such as IUD implantation in women and vasectomy for the men; both of these options require surgery and are permanent until surgical removal/reversal. Traditionally, birth control is viewed as culturally taboo. Should a person accept this offer for food, there is the possibility they will be ostracized from the other members of the village; however, there is also the likelihood of starvation. Amala and her family are now considering which option they will choose.

This story is taken from real "humanitarian" efforts in the 1960's by President L.B. Johnson's administration from the United States, providing food aid with required birth control. Even after the drought conditions improved, in the mid-1970's, India's government elaborated this method as a requirement for land allotments, medical care, irrigation water, ration cards, pay raises and promotions.

The carrying capacity of a population is the maximum number of individuals in the population that can be supported with the current amount of resources, space, etc. Typically, when populations reach their carrying capacity, many individuals die due to hunger and starvation, lack of space, predation, etc. There is a global carrying capacity, and a common concern is that the continual increase in the global population is making Earth reach its carrying capacity quickly. In fact, many would argue that Earth has already exceeded its carrying capacity, when you take into account the number of children that die of hunger every year.

If one were to look at the world population issues, the countries that are suffering the most from hunger are often also populations who are strongly developing; in fact, many of these countries, like India, Bangladesh, and Ethiopia, are areas where the doubling time for the population is less than 20 years! There are many that feel that feeding a growing population or requiring birth control will not solve our global population issues. Alan Gregg, Vice President of the Rockefeller Foundation in 1955, stated that “overpopulation is a cancer, and he had never heard of a cancer being cured by feeding it.” (Fletcher, 1991)

In an effort to control overpopulation and the global carrying capacity, many agencies are offering food aid to starving regions with the expectation that family planning and birth control methods be used. This is an issue because it doesn't account for cultural beliefs about the use of birth control. The premise behind these efforts is that hungry people will do anything for food, even go against their cultural and religious beliefs, but does this violate the individual's values? Suppose an individual in a particular region puts a strong emphasis on life and believes that to inhibit the conception of a life is inherently wrong. Is it right to withhold food from this person if they refuse to use birth control methods? Is it right to require that they limit the number of children that they choose to have? If it is morally right to provide food aid in exchange for family planning of these overcrowded populations, will this open it up for governments to withhold food aid in exchange for services to the government? What about those people who are medically unable to take birth control methods, due to illnesses or the risk factors associated with birth control?

On another note, consider how young people in the United States are impacted by overpopulation. One can argue that young people in the U.S. are some of the most privileged people in the world. Yet, there is hunger in the United States as well. Similarly, the United States is also a growing population. What if a drought were to occur, or some other natural disaster, and food aid is provided to Americans with the expectation that all women and men of reproductive age are required to become reproductively stable. This could include women receiving an IUD implantation and men getting a vasectomy. Would this scenario infringe on American values? Also, if it becomes accepted during a time of disaster to halt overpopulation in order to eat, could this evolve into the elimination of teen pregnancy through all middle school students becoming reproductively stable in this same way?

In a statement released on the eve of World Population Day, the World Bank stated that “Fifty-one million unintended pregnancies in developing countries occur every year to women not using contraception.” At this rate, the global population is increasing out of control. There is a possibility that the world will run out of resources and these gigantic populations will have dramatically increased the possibility that this will happen. By not providing food aid to these regions unless they begin to control their populations, the solution is placed in their governments' hands.

However, one of the basic human rights is the right to live and living requires food. As privileged members of this world, is it appropriate for Americans to watch fellow human beings to starve? Also, food is available to offer to other regions, but is there enough funding for providing birth control on this level as well? Who will pay for all of this birth control? Who will provide the medical care if something goes wrong with the people because of the birth control?

Ethical Question: *Should birth control be mandatory for countries in need of food aid?*

Guiding Questions:

1. If this type of argument is valid for countries receiving aid, could it also be used for people receiving aid in the United States?
2. Is this an example of tromping on a person’s right to make choices in their own life?

Teacher Resources / Background

Ethical Arguments

Ethical principle	Pro (Yes)	Con (No)
Respect for Persons / Autonomy	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• In most cases, the regions who are suffering from hunger have also overused their own resources and by not controlling their population size, this problem is only going to get worse.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• This approach does not respect a person’s autonomy, in that there is no choice given to the person. Some people have religious and cultural reasons for refusing birth control methods and this does not respect their right to choose what is right for them in following their beliefs.• If a person does not believe in birth control, there is even the potential for a person to die by refusing this offer in order to stand up for their religious and cultural beliefs.
Maximize Benefits/ Minimize Harms	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• In an effort to control overpopulation of the Earth and save our planet from reaching its carrying capacity, it is necessary to slow down and control global population growth. By requiring birth control of some of these dramatically increasing populations, there are maximum benefits to the world to slow down the world population growth, and by providing food to people suffering from hunger.• This approach maximizes the most benefit for the planet at the cost of some people’s religious and cultural beliefs. The most good is spent in controlling the population to save the planet, rather than preserving a	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The money for the birth control comes out American taxes, but think about the good that money could be doing in other areas instead!• Also, where is the access for these people to receive birth control? Many of these people live in extremely rural areas and it could be miles to the nearest clinic. Harm could come from a medical problem with the birth control. This actually occurred to women in the Philippines, where they were forced to accept an IUD in exchange for food aid, but later contracted pelvic inflammatory disorder as a result. There was no medical care given to these women later and many suffered.

	smaller number of people's beliefs.	
Justice	•	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Because birth control is tied with eating, which is a necessary action for life, people with more disadvantages are not being fairly distributed. • There is also a possible justice violation as the action itself opens up governments for withholding other human rights with population control in mind. Think about the Chinese government's "one child" rule. Also, after L.B. Johnson's policy came into effect in India, ten years later the Indian government expanded this policy to other areas of survival.

Background – Extra Information for Teachers

Extra Resources

- This case is meant to follow along with a unit in Ecology on the Human Population problem. I would want my students to have already had at least a basic introduction into the ethical principles, but this case could be used to practice their use of them. Also, I would follow up this case with more discussion on the ethics behind the use of the Dalkon Shield IUD in the Philippines and the lack of medical care follow-up. I would then ask my students to think about other possible solutions to the human population problem.

References

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