

# Contents

<i>List of Contributors</i>	xiii
<b>Part I. Setting the Stage</b>	1
1. How and Why Population Matters: New Findings, New Issues <i>Nancy Birdsall and Steven W. Sinding</i>	3
2. The Population Debate in Historical Perspective: Revisionism Revised <i>Allen C. Kelley</i>	24
3. Dependency Burdens in the Developing World <i>John Bongaarts</i>	55
<b>Part II. Population Change and the Economy</b>	65
4. Economic and Demographic Change: A Synthesis of Models, Findings, and Perspectives <i>Allen C. Kelley and Robert M. Schmidt</i>	67
5. Demographic Change, Economic Growth, and Inequality <i>Jeffrey G. Williamson</i>	106
6. Saving, Wealth, and Population <i>Ronald D. Lee, Andrew Mason, and Tim Miller</i>	137
7. Cumulative Causality, Economic Growth, and the Demographic Transition <i>David Bloom and David Canning</i>	165
<b>Part III. Fertility, Poverty, and the Family</b>	199
8. Population and Poverty in Households: A Review of Reviews <i>Thomas Merrick</i>	201

9. Demographic Transition and Poverty: Effects via Economic Growth, Distribution, and Conversion	213
<i>Robert Eastwood and Michael Lipton</i>	
10. Inequality and the Family in Latin America	260
<i>Ricardo Hausmann and Miguel Székely</i>	
11. Demographic Changes and Poverty in Brazil	296
<i>Ricardo Paes de Barros, Sergio Firpo, Roberta Guedes Barreto, and Phillippe George Pereira Leite</i>	
<b>Part IV. Population, Agriculture, and Natural Resources</b>	<b>323</b>
12. Rural Population Growth, Agricultural Change, and Natural Resource Management in Developing Countries: A Review of Hypotheses and some Evidence from Honduras	325
<i>John Pender</i>	
<b>Part V. Some Economics of Population Policy</b>	<b>369</b>
13. Why Micro Matters	371
<i>Jere R. Behrman</i>	
14. New Findings in Economics and Demography: Implications for Policies to Reduce Poverty	411
<i>Nancy Birdsall</i>	
<i>Index</i>	419

## How and Why Population Matters: New Findings, New Issues

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### INTRODUCTION: THE BELLAGIO SYMPOSIUM

No social phenomenon has attracted more attention in the last half-century than the ‘population explosion’—that surge of population numbers rising almost threefold from 2.5 billion in 1950 to over 6 billion at the turn of the millennium, and continuing at a diminishing pace to level out at as much as 11 billion in the middle of the twenty-second century. Given the exceptional complexity and diversity of the various impacts of rapid demographic change and rising population numbers, assessments of the consequences of the population explosion have varied widely, ranging all the way from the view that more population growth leads to more prosperity to forecasts that rapid population growth would precipitate wide-ranging catastrophes (famines, ecological collapses, wars, natural resource depletion, and the like).<sup>1</sup>

The range of views has spurred an outpouring of research, much of it by economists and economic demographers. Focusing on the effects of the developing countries’ extraordinarily rapid population growth on their economic growth and on the economic and social welfare of their peoples, economists have addressed two big questions: has the rapid population growth of the last half-century been good or bad for these countries’ economic prospects? If bad, what government policies and programs to encourage lower fertility and thus slower population growth, if any, make sense—for the economy and for individual and family welfare?

The debate about these questions has been fruitful and contentious, both among economists and between economists and other social scientists. It has been fruitful in the traditional academic sense, in contributing to increasingly sophisticated work based on a stream of new theoretical and modeling insights and on exploitation of ever-improving data. It has been contentious because of its policy relevance. Officialdom has looked to researchers, and particularly to economists, for guidance on policies in poor countries that affect the most personal and critical decisions of families—regarding marriage, women’s status, and of course childbearing itself, and for guidance on programs of foreign assistance by rich countries to poor countries.

<sup>1</sup> For example, for the positive view Simon (1977) for the negative view, Ehrlich (1975).

While knowledge on the big questions has proceeded slowly, distinct and measured progress has been made. At various times—once or twice a decade since 1950—groups of scholars have taken stock of the research—usually at the behest of the United Nations, the World Bank, USAID, and other official organizations concerned with economic development prospects in the Third World.<sup>2</sup> The present volume, resulting from a Symposium on Population Change and Economic Development held in Bellagio, Italy on 2–6 November 1998, represents the first installment in the new millennium of the continuing compendia of research on population issues by economists and economic demographers.<sup>3</sup> It brings to the fore some notable new findings and highlights a new set of questions.

This chapter is an introduction to the volume as a whole. It draws both upon the papers prepared for the Bellagio Symposium, and equally important, on the Symposium deliberations. The deliberations were of particular value because the Symposium brought together two groups of participants. The first represented economists actively involved in various aspects of economic-demographic research. The papers they presented were assessed not only by their peers at the Symposium, but also by the second group of participants, policy analysts representing various constituencies working on development and population issues. The purpose of an exchange between these groups was to push the research community to contemplate the policy implications of new findings and to help frame the critical policy questions that new research was shaping. At the same time, it encouraged the policy community to incorporate more quickly and more effectively into new programs the implications of new research findings. The papers themselves and the deliberations allow us in this first chapter to vary from the usual format of an edited volume which typically summarizes the results of each chapter. Instead, we have chosen to organize this chapter around several key arguments and empirical results bearing on the two big questions set out above. This permits us, while assessing and updating the literature on the basis of the reported research, to also lay the groundwork for a discussion of the implications of this most recent and sophisticated research for policy. There were, however, no papers at the Symposium that focused primarily on policy and no session that systematically linked the latest research findings to policy. To rectify this gap, one of us has compiled a short concluding chapter, drawing from her previous work and integrating the insights and findings of the Bellagio participants.

Finally, while we have attempted to be faithful to the research essays and to the discussion they catalyzed, judgments on what to include and emphasize have obviously

<sup>2</sup> Kelley, in Chapter 2 of this book, provides an extensive review of these official reviews as well as of the research on which the reviews were based.

<sup>3</sup> The Bellagio Symposium was organized by Nancy Birdsall of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, with the support of the Rockefeller and Packard Foundations and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). The sessions were chaired by Nancy Birdsall and Steven Sinding (then of Rockefeller).

been necessary.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, this format for an introductory chapter has the drawback that it greatly understates and downplays the richness of the individual chapters presented in the volume. We therefore hope our readers, particularly those who are scholars and researchers in this field, will give those chapters the detailed scrutiny they merit.

## THEMES AND NEW FINDINGS

The chapters in this volume address four questions: what have been the effects of fertility and mortality decline and other demographic changes in the developing countries in the postwar period

- on economic growth?
- on poverty and inequality? and
- on sustainable use of natural resources in agriculture?

What are the implications for economic, social, and population policies and programs?

These are, of course, only a subset of themes that merit consideration, but they arguably represent some of the more important areas of inquiry. First, assessments focusing on aggregate economic growth have attracted attention in past debates about population growth in developing countries (some would say inordinate attention), and the results of this type of assessment are bound to affect future policy and future new research efforts. Secondly, poverty reduction and the distribution of the fruits of economic progress represent critical dimensions of welfare advancement in the Third World; yet research on the impact of population growth and demographic change on poverty and income distribution by economists has been surprisingly limited. Thirdly, the agricultural sector has dominated the activity of most Third World residents; the environment is increasingly under stress; and interactions among the environment, poverty, and population are of special importance in the rural sector. These three themes—aggregate growth, distribution and poverty, and agriculture and the environment—thus represent especially important areas in which to take stock. Finally, debate among economists about the effects of population growth has often clouded rather than clarified policy; an objective of this volume is to reflect upon the implications of new evidence for future development programs and policies.

Like those collective research assessments that have gone before, the findings in this volume strike some new themes (in this case in the assessment of the impacts

<sup>4</sup> This chapter is a revision and expansion of our original report on the Symposium. Drafts of the original report were shared with each participant. Their inputs were then incorporated where we felt appropriate, and a revised document was circulated to each participant for information. The final Symposium Report, like this chapter itself, rests solely with the authors. (Allen Kelley joined as a co-editor to the present volume; he focused mainly on providing feedback to the authors.) The authors of this Introduction are especially grateful to our co-editor, Allen Kelley, for his extensive and extremely useful comments on the Symposium Report and on the original draft of this chapter.

of rapid demographic change on aggregate output growth, and on poverty), and reinforce others (in this case the impacts of population on the rural economy and the environment).

First, in contrast to assessments over the last several decades, rapid population growth is found to have exercised a quantitatively important negative impact on the pace of aggregate economic growth in developing countries. The finding, as discussed below, bodes well for the future, as population growth rates decline, even as it helps account for low economic growth in the past.

Secondly, rapid fertility decline is found to make a quantitatively relevant contribution to reducing the incidence and severity of poverty. Though an association between poverty and high fertility has long been noted, research in this area has rarely gone beyond association to causality, and has advanced slowly given the challenges of empirical assessment. The new findings suggest more strongly than before that past high fertility in poor countries has been a partial cause of the persistence of poverty—both for poor families that are large, and via the kinds of economy-wide effects that Malthus theorized about, for poor families even if they are small. As with the finding that rapid population growth affects economic growth, this bodes well for the future, since fertility is declining almost everywhere in the developing world.

Finally, the impact of rapid demographic change on the rural environment and development is found to be mixed—above all, a minor player in a much larger story about initial conditions and broad policy effects. This finding calls attention to the relevance of development policy writ large—of policies having to do with agricultural prices, rural infrastructure, the urban labor market, and the financial sector—to whether demographic change and more narrowly defined ‘population policies’ affect for good or ill rural residents, still the majority in the developing world.

We turn now to some specifics about these effects of demographic change, and then to the implications for policy as seen by economists through the lens of their economic analyses.

## SETTING THE STAGE: DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE AND ECONOMIC REVISIONISM

Recounting the at times fitful progress of economic research on population over many decades, Allen Kelley (Ch. 2) emphasizes the triumph of what he calls ‘revisionism’. He refers not to a particular quantitative assessment of the effect of rapid population growth—positive, negative, or neutral—but to a particular approach to research. That approach emphasizes the long run, and the possibility over the long run that the initial impact of demographic change will be modified by feedback within social and economic systems. With this approach, the net impact of a demographic change depends on the period allowed for such feedbacks, the importance of the feedbacks themselves, and the extent to which feedbacks moderate or reinforce initial impacts.

Economists have tended to emphasize the relevance of *compensating* technology and institutions in *moderating* initial negative impacts of, for example, the effect of a growing population; this is a point that Pender makes in Chapter 12, and that

Ester Boserup made in her classic study of how population growth in African agricultural societies catalyzed the change from shifting fallow to higher yielding settled agriculture.<sup>5</sup> The attention to compensating and thus moderating factors comes naturally for economists concerned with general equilibrium effects in large markets, where for example a new scarcity due to a perturbation in one part of the system should lead to a price increase in the scarce good, leading in turn to reduced demand for that good. However, in models of the effects of demographic change, economists have more recently also noted the potential for *reinforcing effects*, where an initial perturbation such as a decline in mortality has a long-run positive impact—potentially more than offsetting any short-run negative ‘crowding’ effect of the initial rise in population growth. Bloom and Canning in Chapter 7 note that an exogenous increase in life expectancy can spur economic growth because longer expected life encourages private investment in education which raises country economic growth, and that additional economic growth may then induce an additional increase in life expectancy.

Moreover, economists generally expect initial negative effects of a demographic change to be moderated and initial positive effects to be reinforced, the more effective are markets, governments, and institutions. So the initial negative impact on the economy of an exogenous demographic change such as a decline in infant mortality (due to new health technology) will be greater, unfortunately, in low-income countries, where these three institutions are relatively weak. And in turn the initial positive effect of a decline in fertility (say due to increased education of mothers) in reducing local pressure on school spending is likely to be reinforced where labor markets and school systems are working well and parents are prepared to invest in their children’s education. Similarly, economic models will take into account the possibility that the initial impact of a demographic change, whether positive or negative, can pale in comparison to the effect of its interaction with markets and policies, so that the strength or weakness of the latter turns out to be the critical determinant of the ultimate outcome in terms of people’s well-being.

The analysis of revisionism presented by Kelley clarifies and puts in perspective the contributions of the Bellagio papers. Specifically, the key findings of the Bellagio papers are all amassed using revisionist methodologies by economists who examine demographic impacts over long time periods, who account for some feedbacks of demography within societies, and who find, contrary to some previous revisionist studies, a negative net impact on measures of economic growth and poverty reduction.

Finally, it is worth noting one additional element of the revisionist approach, namely that over the long run the different components of demographic change can have offsetting, and thus moderating effects. Change in the rate of population growth is the result of change in one or both of fertility and mortality decline, and in some settings of migration, and the aggregate change in population growth brings over time changes in the size of population, in density, and in age composition. Moreover, because demographic change occurs slowly (at least compared to economic and political change), the separate effects of these different components of

<sup>5</sup> Boserup (1965).

demographic change matter immensely for understanding the overall effects of population on the economy. One of the long-run changes that follows from change in fertility and mortality in a population is the gradual, gradually shifting, and computationally complicated (while essentially straightforward) working through to changes in the age composition of that population. The latter half of the twentieth century has witnessed changes in age composition of populations on a dramatic scale, in both developing and developed countries. Though the changes have come slowly in terms of the short scholarly life of individual researchers, they have been stunningly rapid in historical terms, and highly differentiated across countries—making it possible to assess the impact of those changes over time and across countries. The studies in this book reflect the new prominence of age composition as a factor in economists' latest models of long-run economic growth, after many years of relative neglect.<sup>6</sup>

John Bongaarts's analysis of dependency burdens in the developing world (Ch. 3) is thus a critical starting-point for much of what follows in this volume. Bongaarts emphasizes that declining fertility, now under way to one degree or another in all regions of the world, will result in substantially changed age structures and distribution, with gradually reduced proportions of the population under age 15 and enlarged proportions over age 65. As countries move through the demographic transition of falling mortality followed eventually by falling fertility, they face first a period of increasing child-dependency ratios, then of decreasing child-dependency ratios as a larger proportion of the population moves through the working ages, and eventually of increasing old-age-dependency ratios.

The effect of fertility decline in the second intermediate stage (through which virtually all developing countries have passed and will be passing in the latter twentieth and early twenty-first centuries) is a one-time 'demographic bonus' or 'window of opportunity'—a period of as many as 50 years during which an initially high ratio of the working age to the dependent population gradually declines. After a country has passed through this period, it returns to a more or less stable child-dependency ratio (and a higher aged-dependency ratio), at new lower levels of both fertility and mortality.

Changes in the dependency ratio are driven mostly by fertility decline and less by changes in mortality. This is simply because mortality affects all parts of the age distribution while the fertility effect has a strong immediate impact on the child-dependency ratio, and then gradually works its way through the entire age distribution. In some developing countries, however, where the initial phase of mortality decline has concentrated on infants and youth, the mortality decline has reinforced the impact on age distribution of fertility decline.

So the duration and pace of fertility decline, and the extent to which mortality decline is disproportionately concentrated on infants and children, affect both the

<sup>6</sup> Of course there have been exceptions. Because age composition affects savings rates, economists have tried to assess the impact of age composition change on changes in savings. Early efforts to use cross-country data as a proxy for change in countries (e.g. Leff 1969) were unconvincing.

duration and impact of the so-called window of opportunity. The faster the decline, the larger the potential benefits of a relatively high ratio of working-age to dependent ages, but the shorter the period the window will remain open. The period of the window of opportunity is characterized by (1) more workers producing more total output, *if* they are productively employed; (2) greater accumulation of wealth, *if* savings occur and are productively invested; and (3) a larger supply of human capital, *if* appropriate investments are made in its formation.

Bongaarts traces the shift in dependency ratios that accompanies the demographic transition across the major regions of the developing world, showing that the shift occurred earliest in East Asia, followed shortly thereafter by Latin America, and considerably later by Africa. The Middle East and South Asia are at intermediate points between Latin America and Africa.

### POPULATION CHANGE AND THE ECONOMY

Allen Kelley's chapter with Robert Schmidt (Ch. 4) brings together and systematically assesses the results of the major recent studies of the effects of rapid population growth on per capita income growth over the last 35 years. Referring to recent studies using aggregate country data to assess the influence of population growth in the developing world on increases in country-level GDP per capita, Kelley and Schmidt conclude: 'We arrive at the *qualified* judgment: rapid population growth, and its associated demographic components, appears to have exerted a fairly strong, adverse effect on the pace of economic growth over the period 1960–1995' (emphasis added).

Economists for a decade or more have hesitated to make strong statements about the magnitude of effects of population growth on economic development. To quote from the 1986 National Academy of Sciences report: '*On balance*, we reach the *qualitative* conclusion that slower population growth would be beneficial to economic development for *most* developing countries' (emphasis added). In his review of the history of the population debate (Ch. 2), Kelley explains why economists now have more confidence in the clearer results of more recent analyses. These more recent analyses—of the last five years or so—are based on better-specified models (in which demographic variables are now incorporated into the growth models developed by economists in the last decade). Compared to the 1980s, they exploit the longer period of time over which it has been possible to observe the effect of reduced fertility, changing labor force size, and lower youth dependency on economic growth.

These recent analyses, including those in this volume by Jeffrey Williamson (Ch. 5) as well as by Kelley and Schmidt, represent an advance over earlier analyses because they distinguish carefully among the effects of changes in the various components of demographic change and population growth—including fertility, mortality, and the dependency ratio—rather than looking only at population growth in the aggregate, and because they also take into account changes in population size and density. These analyses indicate that among demographic changes of the last three decades, increases in population density and size and increases in the relative

size of the working-age population are positively associated with economic growth, while increases in the size of the age group 0 to 15 are negatively associated with growth.

Kelley and Schmidt use their statistical results to examine not only the positive or negative effects of the different components of demographic change, but the quantitative magnitude of these effects, taking into account the size of the actual demographic changes over the 35-year period 1960–95. Over that period, demographic trends have been strongly favorable to economic growth for the average country. Declining fertility and mortality, and to a much smaller extent, larger populations and higher densities, have all spurred economic growth. The only trend that has apparently slowed growth for the average country is a decline in the growth rate of the working age population. Of course many of the poorest developing countries that are still in a relatively early stage of fertility decline can look forward to increases in the size of the working-age population for many years to come.

Why should a relatively larger working-age population contribute to positive economic growth? Economists have long theorized that savings contribute to higher levels of per capita income (by financing higher investment and thus higher output per person), and more recently that higher savings and investment may contribute to sustained rates of income growth as well. In their chapter (Ch. 6) Ronald Lee, Andrew Mason, and Tim Miller, using household survey data from Taiwan on earnings, estimated savings, and fertility and mortality, simulate increases in savings rates and in accumulated wealth on the basis of a life-cycle model of savings behavior. The life-cycle model is driven by the kinds of changes in the youth-dependency ratio and the rapid increases in working-age population that Taiwan and other East Asian countries have experienced in the postwar period due to their rapid fertility declines. (It also assumes that individuals cannot rely on the kind of ‘transfer wealth’ that pay-as-you-go systems of retirement represent, but must save themselves to finance their own retirement.)

The simulation model generates substantial increases in savings rates and in wealth during the period of demographic transition as the working-age population increases (under the assumptions of a constant rate of interest or return to capital, and a constant productivity rate). The simulation also generates much higher savings rates and wealth–income ratios at the end compared to the beginning of the long demographic transition, implying higher sustained rates of economic growth at lower levels of fertility and mortality. The results of the simulation track reasonably well actual data on increasing savings rates in Taiwan. This result is consistent with the conclusion of Williamson in this volume and of others who, though differing on the magnitude of the demographic effect, see changes in age structure in East Asia in the least three decades as an important contributor to that region’s large upward swings in savings and investment over the same period. The resulting high savings and investment levels were one of many factors that set the stage for that region’s long and sustained period of historically unprecedented economic growth. Williamson concludes from cross-country statistical analysis that demographic changes, especially the increase in the working-age population and the increase in savings induced by changes in

dependency, can be associated with as much as one-third of the total average annual per capita growth rate of about 6 percent in East Asia in that period.

Four issues need to be considered when assessing the relationship between demographic change and economic performance.

First, the effect is conditioned by the level of development. Kelley and Schmidt's analysis of evidence based on data for the 1980s suggests that the lower the initial level of per capita income, the greater the net positive impact of demographic changes, especially of fertility decline.

Secondly, the positive effect of the demographic changes associated with the demographic transition probably depends strongly on the economic policy which accompanies the transition. The East Asian countries were able to exploit the opportunity presented by the 'demographic bonus' because of a combination of policies including fiscal discipline, relatively open and competitive markets, and substantial public investments in basic education that ensured healthy returns to physical and human capital and to participation in the labor force. In contrast, rapid demographic change in Latin America, including rapid fertility decline in the last two decades, has not been so clearly associated with improved economic performance. Participants agreed that fertility decline and other demographic changes may encourage economic growth but are far from sufficient to guarantee growth. A sound policy regime is essential.

Thirdly, though fertility decline is the primary impetus to the change in age composition that generates the demographic bonus, the statistical results point to mortality decline as an important factor in raising economic growth rates, despite the obvious initial and partial result of higher population growth.<sup>7</sup> Mortality decline has long been assumed by demographers to catalyze, with a lag, a subsequent fertility decline—this is at the heart of the theory of the demographic transition. In addition, the economic models suggest that mortality decline more directly improves growth prospects—possibly by increasing the private incentives to invest in human capital, or because it is associated with morbidity declines that raise productivity.

Fourthly, it is clear from many other studies that the key components of the change in age composition highlighted above, mortality and fertility decline, are not only a possible cause of more rapid economic growth (through their effects during the transition of reducing dependency ratios) but are *outcomes* of factors associated with economic growth, including increased education, better functioning markets, and so forth. If this reverse causality is not taken into account, statistical estimates of the effect of lower or declining mortality and fertility on growth may be overstated. Recent analyses do a much better job of correcting for this possible reverse causality, but cannot fully eliminate it. (It is in part for this reason that Kelley and Schmidt refer to their judgment quoted above, regarding the effects of rapid population growth, as 'qualified'.)

<sup>7</sup> Debate continues about whether mortality decline in developing countries has been in part exogenous to economic growth, that is, triggered by factors such as better health technologies that were independent of growth itself, or not. This is a separate issue from the question of the effect of mortality decline on growth.

At the same time, the likelihood of reverse causality out there in the world raises another issue. Reverse causality (to repeat, meaning that fertility and mortality decline may be outcomes as well as or instead of causes of economic growth) creates a methodological problem. On the one hand, its likely presence has led careful scholars to avoid making strong statements about the size of any effect of fertility or mortality change or any other demographic change on economic growth. At the same time, reverse causality if present implies that even an initially small impact of fertility decline in raising growth prospects (by reducing youth dependency for example) could, over time, induce a mutually reinforcing process with larger cumulative effects, as the resulting economic growth contributes to further fertility decline, leading to more economic growth and so on. So while reverse causality, unaccounted for, implies that the long-run effect of an initial fertility decline and the resulting initial boost to growth is *overstated*, two-way causality with feedback implies that the effect is *understated*. (Similarly reverse causality implies that an initially small impact of mortality decline in raising youth dependency could generate a downward spiral of reduced growth, unless followed by reduced fertility, with offsetting effects in lowering youth dependency. In many developing countries, in fact, the sequence of declining mortality which once the larger cohorts reach about age 15 years actually improves dependency ratios, followed by declining fertility, has in fact meant both demographic effects have combined to produce the demographic bonus described above.

Of course these dynamics also make any specific prediction of future high or low economic growth due to demographic triggers foolhardy—because magnitudes are so sensitive to initial estimates and to the effects of elusive and multiple interactions with many non-demographic factors. Having said that, modeling of dynamic, two-way relationships has been largely absent in the economic demography literature. In Chapter 7 of this volume, David Bloom and David Canning set out the theoretical basis for these dynamics. They argue that not only do higher income (and education and other positive correlates of income) lead to lower mortality and fertility, a reasonably well-documented finding, but that lower mortality and fertility can contribute to rising income. Lower mortality and longer life expectancy for example create an environment for higher household investment, including in education, and obviously allow longer periods of productive work per person.<sup>8</sup> Using long time series of demographic and economic data for a large sample of countries, they explore empirically the possibility of two-way causality between economic growth on the one hand, and mortality as well as fertility decline on the other, given a consistently positive link at the country level between declines in mortality and fertility and changes in average country per capita income. Bloom and Canning illustrate the possibility of a reinforcing or ‘accelerator’ effect of two-way causality. However, they are not able to establish definitively the underlying causal mechanisms nor the quantitative magnitude of two-way causality; it is for the next round of research to hone in better on its quantitative relevance.

<sup>8</sup> Of course, there are also offsetting forces such as age-distribution changes, highlighted in their work, where averted infant/child deaths can attenuate or even offset, at least for 15 years, the positive impacts of extending life expectancy.

Another point: even the latest and most technically careful aggregate macro models do not take explicitly into account the potential powerful impact of female labor force participation on economic growth, and the link between declining fertility and increased female labor force participation. Declining fertility and rising female labor force participation may both be the outcome of increases in the opportunity cost of women's time in child-rearing, in turn due to rising levels of education and/or to increasing demand for labor in the formal sector. Rising female labor force participation means that the growth in total work participation increases even faster than the growth in the size of working-age population. The 'demographic bonus' thus may be realized not only through shifts in the age structure but through increases in the participation of women in the formal labor force that fertility decline encourages or at least permits.

Of course the effect of such increases on income growth is overstated to the extent that national accounts include monetary income earned by women but not the real income represented by women's work at home. This raises still another issue that needs to be considered in assessing the effects of population change on economic growth. As with the effects of increased participation in the labor force of women, measured increases in economic growth per capita exaggerate real income gains to the extent that they reflect unsustainable degradation of natural resource wealth, or fail to reflect such 'costs' associated with income growth as pollution which are not subtracted from measured gains in current systems of national accounts.<sup>9</sup>

With all these points in mind, and notwithstanding very important conditioning or mediating factors, there is today stronger evidence than ever before that first, reductions in the dependency ratio due to declining fertility during the demographic transition can, if policy circumstances are favorable, have a strong positive effect on economic growth; and, secondly, that lower fertility (as well as lower mortality), along with the small positive effects of greater density and a larger population resulting from earlier higher population growth, can also lead to higher economic growth rates.<sup>10</sup>

This conclusion, measured as it is, represents a significant departure from the typically more agnostic position of economists on this relationship over the last two decades.

## FERTILITY, POVERTY, AND THE FAMILY

Malthus noted at the level of entire societies that high fertility would likely worsen income distribution and increase poverty by increasing the price of food and reducing the price of labor—economic effects in large interacting markets that need to be examined at the macroeconomic level. Along with these effects at the macro level,

<sup>9</sup> National accounts may also fail to measure adequately changes in knowledge, improvements in the quality of life due to new products, and so forth that work in the opposite direction.

<sup>10</sup> Higher-aged dependency, once the transition is complete, could eventually reduce and even offset the positive effect on economic growth during the transition. It is too soon to judge whether higher-aged dependency in Japan, Europe, and eventually in China, will reduce their rates of growth.

there may also be effects at the micro level—of lower fertility within families on the family's own economic and social welfare.

*Macro Effects* The literature on income growth and demographic change discussed above indicates that across countries and over many decades declines in fertility and mortality have contributed to income growth. Have these declines also helped reduce poverty and improve the distribution of income? Surprisingly little empirical work has been done on the effects of country-level fertility decline, now a fact for so many developing countries, on changes in country measures of poverty. What has been done is, less surprisingly, generally inconclusive,<sup>11</sup> given the lack of comparable data on country poverty until recently and the inability to test directly such key connections between aggregate demographic change and poverty as the effects of lower fertility on labor demand and wages.

These deficiencies are in part addressed in the chapter by Robert Eastwood and Michael Lipton (Ch. 9). Based on analysis of economic and demographic data for 45 developing countries, they estimate that high fertility increases absolute levels of poverty both by retarding economic growth (thus slowing growth-induced poverty reduction) and by skewing the distribution of consumption against the poor. They estimate that had the average country in this group of 45 countries reduced its birth rate by 5 per 1,000 throughout the 1980s (as in fact many countries did) the average country poverty incidence of 18.9 percent in the mid-1980s would have been reduced to 12.6 percent between 1990 and 1995.<sup>12</sup> The statistical work suggests that about half the estimated decline in poverty over the period in the countries studied can be attributed to increases in economic growth and half to changes in the distribution of consumption that helped the poor.

Eastwood and Lipton also show that the poorer the country and the higher its initial level of fertility, the greater the effect of declining fertility on a decline in absolute poverty. Moreover, the beneficial effects increase as the demographic transition proceeds. The effects of the transition on reductions in poverty are, as with the effects on economic growth, different at different stages of the transition—harmful to poverty reduction in the early stages as population growth accelerates due primarily to mortality decline that occurs disproportionately among infants and children, and helpful in the later stages as fertility declines and aggregate population growth slows.

It follows that during the early stages of the demographic transition, income differentials between poor and non-poor households may in fact become greater. But as the transition extends to all groups in the society, so that fertility as well as mortality begins to decline, and the fertility decline spreads to poor households, the poverty-reducing

<sup>11</sup> For a useful survey of work on population and poverty, see Ahlburg (1996). He concludes that there is little direct evidence using economy-wide data to tie population growth to poverty incidence; he goes on to review evidence of indirect links, e.g. through effects on education, and evidence at the family level.

<sup>12</sup> The authors' definition of the poor for this estimate is persons in households where consumption per adult is below that estimated as the minimum needed for adequate food-energy. This definition is a stricter one than the now-conventional definition used for example by the World Bank, of those households where income per person per day is \$1 or less.

and inequality-reducing effects increase. As the dependency ratio within families declines and the cost of childbearing declines, more income is available for consumption and savings, particularly where women enter the labor force and contribute to increased family incomes.<sup>13</sup> The analysis (Ch. 11) of Ricardo Paes de Barros and colleagues for Brazil, a country already in the later stages of the transition to lower fertility, illustrates this point. Paes de Barros *et al.* use a series of household surveys in Brazil to study long-term changes in household size and age structure (resulting from various demographic changes, especially fertility decline) and their effects on the incidence of poverty. They estimate that with the age structure of households 70 years ago but today's average income by age of household members, 37 percent of people would be classified as poor, compared to today's actual 25 percent. Put another way, they estimate that the poverty level of the cohort born in 1970 is 12 percentage points lower than it would have been had it experienced the fertility level of the cohort born in 1900. The decline in poverty associated with what has been a dramatic reduction in fertility and thus in household size in Brazil is equivalent to what would have been produced by a 0.7 percent greater annual increase in per capita GDP.

In summary, recent evidence, which exploits improved data on poverty changes at the country level, as well as the fact that a larger number of countries are experiencing some fertility decline, indicates that reductions in fertility may well be contributing to a decline in poverty rates and intensity. Whether this result is robust and whether the impacts are large depend critically on other factors, for example how changes in wage rates affect labor force and fertility decisions of the poor, that need to be studied at the country and at the family level. This brings us to the next topic.

*Effects of Large Family Size on Family Welfare* There is little debate that poverty and large family size go hand in hand. Eastwood and Lipton's study and Thomas Merrick's (Ch. 8) refer to dozens of empirical analyses confirming that in today's developing countries larger households have higher poverty incidence. Moreover, among poor households, those that have more children invest less in children's education and health, and systematically see worse health outcomes associated with pregnancy for mothers.<sup>14</sup>

But scientists have long cautioned that the associations observed do not in themselves indicate causality. High fertility in poor families may reflect parents' sensible

<sup>13</sup> Lipton points out that this distribution effect of declining fertility can itself be due to two factors. First, there may be a dependency effect—if a reduction in country-level fertility is associated with a greater reduction in the dependency ratio of poor households than of rich households (usually in the later stages of a country's fertility decline—as in the Brazil case above). Secondly, there may be an 'acquisition' effect whereby a decline in fertility improves the ability or willingness of poor households to raise their consumption levels (per non-dependent) for example by raising their labor supply or by raising their savings rate (if their own household size declines with lower fertility) or at the level of markets by reducing the demand for land and increasing the scarcity of labor—both Malthusian-style benefits for the relatively poor whether their own fertility declines or not.

<sup>14</sup> The size of the impact on education enrollment and attainment is typically small, but does not take into account the likely reality that poor families, particularly in rural areas, probably have access to lower quality schooling.

decisions to trade off current consumption for greater future family income when children begin work, or for greater old age security, or it may simply reflect parents' decisions to enjoy children rather than other forms of consumption. The fact that large families tend to have lower incomes should not be construed as meaning that they either are, or that they regard themselves as being, objectively 'worse off'. Indeed, Ricardo Hausmann and Miguel Székely (Ch. 10) emphasize that the fertility decision is embedded in a set of decisions at the family level which are influenced by many aspects of the economic environment, and which make sense given that environment.

On the other hand, studies over the last decade raise several countervailing arguments, increasingly shifting the burden of proof from those who argue that high fertility is chosen (implicitly if not explicitly) by poor couples and should be assumed to reflect optimal levels of welfare for the family, to those who argue that at least some fertility among the poor may not be optimal to family welfare. Many of the arguments are summarized in the chapter by Merrick. They include:<sup>15</sup>

- Severely (indeed often tragically) limited choices of very poor parents. The very poor (the approximately 1 billion households—20 percent of the population of developing countries—that subsist on \$1 per day per person or less) have severely constrained choices. For the very poor, the alternative of fewer but 'higher quality' children who might have better prospects does not really exist. The risks—that a child will fail in school, suffer poor health, or even die—are too great, and the rewards too few in an uncertain future. The resources to finance good health and schooling, even to finance a healthy diet, do not exist. In the face of poor capital and other markets, poor households cannot borrow against the future earnings of better-educated children, and ironically therefore cannot afford to choose few children, even recognizing that their fewer children might face a better future.
- A lack of critical information available to the poor. Given the poor state of markets for information, poor households are likely to lack information on the changing probability of infant mortality, on increasing returns to schooling, on improving financial markets as a mechanism for old-age security—that is, on a variety of changing conditions that would lead them to choose fewer children. Such information is in a real sense more costly to acquire for the less educated, and very poor parents are usually without much education. (And of course, whatever information is available, from government officials, for example, on improvement in mortality rates or in the trustworthiness of banks, might reflect an average state of affairs which the poor might reasonably discount as applying to them.)
- The fact that men may dominate in the choice of number of children, while not fully sharing the costs—a kind of intra-familial externality that is assumed away in traditional unitary household utility functions.<sup>16</sup> Cultural and institutional factors

<sup>15</sup> The following discussion also reflects the authors' own analyses, including Birdsall and Griffin (1993), Chomitz and Birdsall (1991), and Birdsall (1994). The possibility that men and women have different interests in fertility decisions was raised frequently in the deliberations at the Bellagio Symposium.

<sup>16</sup> Models with individual utility functions and bargaining among household members would better reflect the underlying mechanisms leading to the intra-household allocation of resources.

may lead to differing interests among household members and unequal capacity to participate in household decisions, particularly for women. The reality in many low-income settings may be one of gender imbalances in decision-making regarding whom and when to marry, who in the household gets access to health care and education, when and what kind of contraception to use, and the power to negotiate safe sex when the risk of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS infection is high.<sup>17</sup>

- The evidence of higher prevalence of unwanted pregnancies among the poor,<sup>18</sup> combined with evidence that when births are not planned, investments in children, for example in their education, are systematically lower.<sup>19</sup>
- The evidence that in the last decade, fertility has fallen (and contraceptive use risen) even among very poor, uneducated women in Bangladesh and Kenya, who had good access to health and family planning information and services.<sup>20</sup>

In short, on the one hand it is altogether likely that household poverty is a cause as much or more than a consequence of high fertility (or that poverty and high fertility do not cause each other but are both caused by other factors such as poor education). On the other hand, as was the case with aggregate demographic change and aggregate economic growth, it is also likely that there is two-way causation, with poverty and high fertility unfortunately reinforcing each other in a vicious circle. In fact, both theory and improved and expanded empirical efforts support the likelihood that high fertility of poor parents is contributing to their and their children's poverty. In Chapter 14 below Birdsall sets out the implications for policy of this new evidence linking demographic change to poverty decline.

## POPULATION, AGRICULTURE, AND NATURAL RESOURCE USE

Of all the possible effects of population size and demographic change on natural resource use, effects on land use in agriculture are probably the most relevant for the developing world. It is in use of land for agriculture that a syndrome of high population growth interacting with poverty to generate pressures for natural resource degradation is most likely.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup> There is evidence that in some cultures women have little autonomy in sexual and reproductive decision making. See e.g. Mane *et al.* (1994).

<sup>18</sup> See e.g. Bongaarts (1990). The evidence of unwanted pregnancies is ample—based not only on more than two decades of surveys but even more convincingly on the continuing high incidence of abortion, including among the poor, even where abortion is illegal and dangerous. For a skeptical view on measuring unmet needs, see Behrman and Knowles (1998).

<sup>19</sup> The latter evidence is from studies of outcomes for twins (where the extra birth is presumably unanticipated) and of outcomes for children of parents with high biological propensity to conceive. See e.g. Rosenzweig and Wolpin (1980); Rosenzweig and Schultz (1987).

<sup>20</sup> Cleland *et al.* (1994) for Bangladesh; Cross *et al.* (1991) and National Research Council (1993), for Kenya.

<sup>21</sup> An emphasis on land use, particularly farming systems and forest use, was implicitly supported by the 1986 National Academy of Sciences report, which concluded that any problem of population is

In his chapter on this issue John Pender (Ch. 12) reviews the growing empirical literature and provides an example from Honduras of the kind of new study needed. He concludes that though rapid population increase may encourage technological innovation that leads to increased output, such population increase can also have a negative impact, especially in the absence of an adequate policy and institutional environment—that is, an environment that creates incentives for individuals and societies to manage natural resources in a sustainable manner. On the one hand, the potential negative effect of population growth has been and can be mediated by policy and practices. This is particularly the case with respect to output and land productivity.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, as Pender puts it, *without* collective action, population density can make things worse in terms of agricultural output, land productivity, and most important in terms of human welfare. (Pender also notes that even where population increases catalyze increases in production and land productivity,<sup>23</sup> the outcome in terms of labor productivity and thus consumption and income per person may not be in net terms positive.)

Collective action includes in this instance the capacity of societies to develop the necessary policies, for example protection of property rights and appropriate pricing of water, and the necessary institutions, including rules for sustainable use of common property resources. There remains the question of whether collective action is itself catalyzed or undermined by rapid increases in population in local settings—a question which also seems to depend on many other factors. And as Pender notes, if population increase does raise the likelihood of collective action, it does so necessarily at some cost, administrative and organizational as well as financial, if extant welfare levels are to be sustained. The costs will be particularly high in settings where land is sparsely populated in area terms, so that a society cannot take advantage of the positive effect of a denser population on say the cost of infrastructure, and at the same time densely populated in terms of effective productive land, so that there are negative effects on output per worker as population increases. This combination of a sparse population over space with a dense population per effective agricultural unit prevails in many parts of Africa.<sup>24</sup>

In the end, though the theory and the concepts are clear, in the absence of a richer body of empirical work, in many different settings and over substantial time periods, a simple and general conclusion about the effect of population on natural resource use and sustainability remains elusive. This is unfortunate. Estimates of the costs of environmental damage in developing countries often reach several percentage points

more likely to be associated with unsustainable use of renewable resources such as land, rather than with non-renewable mineral resources.

<sup>22</sup> Pender emphasizes the lack of any convincing evidence that even with favorable (Boserupian) technological change, labor productivity and thus income per worker has also been sustained or increased.

<sup>23</sup> This is the effect that Boserup (1965) outlined.

<sup>24</sup> A possible net negative effect of density in some settings is not inconsistent with the Kelley and Schmidt (Ch. 4) finding that, over many countries and several decades, size and density of population have positive but rather small effects on economic growth.

of GDP, thus qualifying the record of economic growth in developing countries.<sup>25</sup> To the extent that population does play a role in environmental damage, it represents another kind of demographic bonus from reductions in its growth rate, and a further externality far from the calculus (implicit or explicit) affecting individual couples' fertility behavior.

Moreover, there is evidence of a close link between *poverty* and environmental damage; to the extent population growth adds to the difficulty of reducing poverty, it is implicated, if only indirectly, as a factor in environmental degradation.<sup>26</sup> Quite aside from population change, the poor are often driven by lack of options to unsustainable exploitation of natural resources, and in turn, households and entire communities are less able to escape poverty where environmental damage has reduced their access to natural resources. Worse, the vicious cycle may start and is often sustained not because the poor damage the environment, but because their poverty impedes their political ability to resist unsustainable exploitation by others of resources on which they depend.

Still, a simple conclusion about the effects of population change on natural resource use, and the role of poverty interacting with population change, is not warranted. The problem is that the necessary empirical work is unusually challenging. To tease out any effect in a particular setting requires observations over a long time period, if only because changes in population size proceed slowly (at least compared to changes due to natural disasters, price changes, and so on). Over a long time period, of course, the possibility of confounding compensatory or reinforcing adjustments increases, disguising any population effect or confusing its apparent magnitude. For example outmigration may serve as a safety valve out of agriculture if natural resource problems constrain production, or in-migration may occur where resources are managed well. Similarly government investments and interventions may be reinforcing or compensating—an apparent result in Pender's Honduran setting. In this area, there seems to remain no alternative to more detailed and probably more country-specific studies over longer periods of the type the Pender chapter represents. Meanwhile, the one point that is clear is the following: the effects of markets and institutions—sometimes good, sometimes bad—can easily swamp the effect of population change on resource use, degradation, and depletion. The implications for policy thus go far beyond the traditional 'population' arena.

### CONSEQUENCES OF RAPID POPULATION GROWTH: A NEW BOTTOM LINE

While over the last several decades major scholarly assessments have generally concluded that rapid population growth has an adverse impact on economic growth in the

<sup>25</sup> In addition, high population growth in developing countries for given greenhouse gas emissions per person implies a negative global externality, if emissions contribute to global warming. Of course, any increases will be small relative to accumulated emissions of the rich countries. Birdsall (1993) notes that there are multiple routes for reducing the potential contribution of population growth to global warming.

<sup>26</sup> World Bank (1992).

Third World, especially in the poorest countries where markets are relatively underdeveloped and government policies too often ill advised, previous studies have for the most part been cautious about providing a *quantitative* assessment. The Bellagio Symposium breaks from this tradition. The Symposium studies more clearly than before some of the linkages between components of demographic change and economic growth, and indicate that the size of the impact of rapid population growth may be larger than that attributed to it in the past. The Bellagio results also bring more closely into focus the impact of demographic change on poverty reduction, and underscore the potential (but as yet by no means fully revealed) impacts, both positive and negative, of rapid demographic change in the rural environment.

### ECONOMICS AND DEMOGRAPHY: POLICY IMPLICATIONS

We noted at the beginning of this chapter that debate about the effects of population growth on economic growth in poor countries has been particularly contentious. The reason is straightforward: if the effects of the extraordinarily rapid population growth of the last half-century in developing countries have been to constrain their growth and hamper their development, then it is easy (indeed, as we discuss below, too easy) to conclude that government policies to induce people to have fewer children, in the interests of society, make perfect sense. A conclusion that population growth has been harmful seems to invite government to intervene to affect fertility, a sensitive and highly personal arena of family behavior. (The alternative mechanism of slowing population growth via higher mortality is not on the table because it is so obviously not in the interests of individuals or society. Moreover, as the studies in this volume indicate, lowering infant and child mortality is not only an objective in itself and a means to lower fertility as parents seek a desired family size, but also with some lag, a factor in increasing the proportion of the working-age population, with the potential benefits to the economy and on poverty reduction discussed above.)

Along these lines, economists have long emphasized that a finding at the macro level that high fertility impedes economic growth does not necessarily justify public intervention to alter individual micro-level behavior, unless it can be shown that individual childbearing preferences are consistent with lower fertility in the aggregate. In the same spirit, Bellagio participants noted that economic growth is not an end in itself but a means to the larger objective of improved well-being.<sup>27</sup> Thus, it is likely to be counterproductive to push for lower fertility against the wishes of families even if there is a benefit in terms of growth. Economists thus find absolutely no justification for policies that *coerce* people toward specific fertility outcomes.

More formally, as emphasized by Behrman in Chapter 13 of this volume, the central justification for a policy intervention is the *difference* between the private and the social costs (net of benefits; or benefits net of costs) of high (or low) fertility. Any

<sup>27</sup> Sen (1999) is most eloquent on the point that an objective of development as well as a means to development, is individual freedom.

difference between private and social costs in whatever realm is usually the outcome of some market failure—for example in the case of pollution, where the polluter passes on costs to others. High fertility may or may not represent a gap between the private and social costs of having children: parents may not only be choosing children over other consumption and investment options; they may also be fully absorbing the costs of those children. If parents absorb fully the cost of children, the resulting reduction in their household per capita income (and thus in aggregate per capita income) does not necessarily justify public intervention. Where parents either cannot or will not absorb the full cost of their children, or where they are bearing children in excess of their desired fertility goals, there may be justification for non-coercive policies that encourage—or make it easier for parents to attain the goal of—smaller families. In any case, the new and more convincing evidence that high fertility constrains growth does not *in itself* provide a rationale for public interventions to reduce fertility.

Behrman's chapter thus provides a link between the conclusions from the earlier chapters regarding the consequences of population change, and the issue of whether and how to intervene in order to improve people's lives. Indeed, all of the 'macro' as well as 'micro' chapters are rooted in 'micro' models of human behavior: in Lee *et al.* about savings decisions at different ages; in Eastwood and Lipton about effects on consumption and work of changes in family size; in Pender about farmers' behavior, and so on. Policy interventions need to be justified and shaped by an understanding of those 'micro' choices people make, and of how public policies and programs affect those choices. As Birdsall suggests in the concluding Chapter 14, the essays in this volume do point to a conclusion which links concern about population growth and change more directly to concern about the welfare of millions of people in the developing world. In their entirety they put together a newly compelling set of arguments and evidence indicating that high fertility exacerbates poverty or, better put, that high fertility makes poverty reduction more difficult and less likely. Given new evidence about the potential benefits of declining fertility for reducing poverty and about the effects of declining mortality and fertility on growth, itself a critical factor in reducing poverty, she argues that a set of policies—ranging broadly from sensible macroeconomic regimes to public financing for certain education, health, and family planning services—are likely to make sense. They make sense because while reducing fertility (and mortality), they also have broad social and economic benefits for relatively low costs, and pose no trade-off in terms of improving individual well-being.

In summary, the chapters in this volume, almost all of which focus on the consequences of demographic change without direct allusion to specific policy implications, strengthen the proposition that the demographic transition and the reductions in rates of population growth throughout most of the developing world in the last few decades have contributed and are contributing to improvement in the lives of that world's poor. Along with some simple application of welfare economics and common sense about the goals of development, they also strengthen the argument for policies that will further improve the lives of the poor in developing countries. Those policies can contribute to development in many ways; we show in this volume that they

do so in part by reinforcing the social and economic changes that are speeding the demographic transition.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> This statement remains true even for those developing countries, including China, which will face new challenges associated with the increasing aged-dependency burden, the result in part of past fertility decline. A 'birth dearth' will not in itself justify public interventions any more than a seeming birth glut did in the past.

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# Index

- abortion 383
- Abramovitz, M. 76
- absenteeism 272
- accounting effect 170
- accumulation 125, 126
  - wealth 9, 143, 144, 145, 229
  - see also* capital accumulation
- acquisition effect 216, 228–30
- adolescence 208, 209
- ADR (age dependency ratio) 59–63
  - see also* OADR
- Africa 43, 167, 240, 245, 325
  - agriculture 7, 18, 41, 328
  - dependency burden 61, 62, 111
  - early transitional stages 56–7
  - fertility 166, 173
  - growth 117
  - infrastructure investments 77
  - life expectancy 174
  - mortality 58
  - rapid expansion 57
  - social action programs and social funds 210
  - see also* North Africa; Sub-Saharan Africa
- age composition 7, 11, 59, 300, 314, 317, 319
- age-dependency 35
  - see also* ADR
- age distribution 58–9, 80, 107–9 *passim*, 116, 124
  - changes in 47, 111, 125, 126, 174
  - coefficients 128
  - impacts on economic growth 79
  - mortality affects 8
  - populations growth slows from bottom of 139–40
- age structure 71, 106, 176, 214
  - change in 82, 152, 345, 346
  - changing population 177
  - divergent trends in 110
  - effects 170, 171, 186
  - impact of 155
  - importance of 169
  - increased emphasis on 168
- aggregation 92
  - capital 183
  - demand for wealth 142
  - demographic change 14, 17
  - economic growth 17
  - family members 314, 317
  - income per capita 21, 412
  - mortality decline 108
  - output growth 6
  - resources 375
  - savings 142, 146, 152, 171
- agriculture 76, 167
  - diminishing returns in 41
  - impacts of population growth on 325–68
  - intensification 344
  - lowered importance of 169
  - population, natural resource use and 17–19
  - positive benefits of population size 77
  - productivity performance 109
  - settled 7
  - technical change/technology 39, 43–4
- agroclimatic factors 338
- agroecological conditions 334, 335
- Ahlburg, D. A. 47
- Ahluwalia, Montek 129, 131
- AIDS epidemic 58, 169, 192
- Alderman, H. 391, 394
- Allison, C. 236
- Amazon region 328
- Anand, S. 241
- Andean Region 265
- Ando, A. 142
- Angelsen, A. 341, 347
- animal power 336
- Argentina 263, 277, 279, 285
  - children per household 265
  - educational attainment 282, 286
  - over-65 population 264
- Arrow, K. J. 340
- Asia 130, 167, 218, 240
  - birth rate decline 56
  - catch-up with the West 109
  - dependency 61, 111
  - economic miracle 119–21, 129
  - growth 117, 121
  - land densities 77
  - mortality 58, 109
  - population size 57
  - savings 127–8
  - savings rates 124
  - transitions 61, 108
  - see also* East Asia; South Asia; South-Central Asia; South-East Asia; *also under individual country names*
- Asian Development Bank 113
- assets 298, 394
- Attanasio, O. P. 147
- Ault, D. E. 352
- aunts 208
- Australia 47–8, 173

- autonomy 207, 208, 209  
     women's 207  
 Axelrod, A. 193  
 Azariadis, C. 184
- baby boom(er)s 146, 157, 187, 190  
     creation of 165, 175–6  
     labor market entry 132  
     youth dependent age population 115
- Backus, D. 78  
 Baland, J.-M. 326, 351  
 Bangladesh 17, 121, 210, 238, 244  
     old and childless widows 236
- banks 16  
     rural 354  
     *see also* Asian Development Bank; World Bank
- Barlow, R. 80, 168  
 Barrera, A. 391  
 Barro, R. 70, 74, 75, 85, 90, 113, 183, 193, 242  
     *see also* models
- Bates, Robert 44  
 Bauer, J. 237  
 Becker, G. S. 183, 184, 193, 214, 236, 344, 345, 390  
 Behrman, J. R. 20, 21, 173, 206–7, 389, 391, 395,  
     396, 400, 413
- Bellagio Symposium (1998) 3–5, 20
- bequests 143  
 Besley, T. 334, 392  
 Bilborrow, R. E. 326
- binary probit analysis 357
- Binswanger, H. P. 44, 240, 328, 352
- biodiversity 328, 333
- biotechnology 169
- Birdsall, Nancy 17, 21, 37, 38, 189, 201, 204, 237,  
     242, 244, 383, 391, 414
- birth control 35, 181
- birth rates 32  
     contemporaneous dependence on poverty 222  
     decline 185  
     high(er) 79, 219  
     impacts over time 80  
     increases 169  
     lagged 222  
     largely unchanged 56  
     low 55, 167, 168, 169  
     patterns change over time 70  
     reductions 90  
     virtually no change in 57  
     *see also* CBRs; NBR
- births 58, 59  
     not planned 17
- Blaikie, P. 326
- Bloom, D. E. 7, 12, 46, 70, 75, 86, 87, 89, 108, 110,  
     112, 113, 117, 121, 168, 169, 170, 173, 181,  
     214, 240, 243
- Bloom–Canning–Malaney dynamics 82–3  
 Bloom–Williamson dynamics 80–2
- Bolivia 269, 285  
     educational attainment 282  
     fertility gap due to education and returns 268
- Bongaarts, John 8–9, 58
- Bos, E. 177
- Boserup, Ester 7, 76, 167, 325, 326, 327, 328, 333,  
     339, 346, 352
- Bouis, H. E. 374
- boys 208
- BRAC (micro-enterprise program) 210
- Brander, J. A. 168
- Brazil 15, 393  
     Annual Household Survey 301, 303  
     Census bureau 303  
     demographic changes and poverty 296–321  
     education 276, 282, 286, 287  
     gaps between rich and poor 245  
     inequality 260, 269, 277, 280, 285
- Britain 130, 395  
     income levels 186  
     low demographic dependence 128
- Brookfield, H. 326
- Bruce, J. 208
- Brumberg, R. 142
- Bruno, M. 241
- Bulatao, R. 58
- Buresh, R. 334
- burning 334, 338
- bush 333
- Cairo Population Conference (1994) 28, 46–8, 211
- Caldwell, B. K. 110
- Caldwell, J. C. 110, 173
- calories 374
- Canning, D. 7, 12, 86, 87, 89, 110, 170, 181  
     *see also* Bloom–Canning–Malaney dynamics
- capacity utilization 336, 337
- capital:  
     aggregate 183  
     depreciation 72  
     efficiency of 216  
     equilibrium supply of 149  
     foreign 126–8, 150  
     formation 29, 30, 31, 35, 145  
     increased holdings of 145  
     invested domestically 150  
     per worker 137, 138, 148, 149  
     returns to 10, 68, 183  
     rural social overhead 41  
     stock 148, 149, 184  
     supply of 149, 150  
     worldwide rate of return to 149
- capital accumulation 39, 166, 168, 170, 183–6  
     *passim*  
     ‘catching up’ through 73  
     per capita 126  
     relative role, downgraded 26

- see also* human capital accumulation  
 capital-deepening 137, 138  
 capital intensity 42, 173, 204, 358  
   adoption of methods 336–9  
 capital–labor ratios 29, 76–7, 185  
 capital markets 378, 414  
   global 126, 148  
   imperfections for investments 382  
   improved 377  
   international, completely open 171  
   poor 16  
   world 128  
 capital-shallowing 35, 39  
   impact of rapid population growth 75  
 capitalist countries 131  
 Carr, D. L. 326  
 Carroll, C. D. 154  
 Carter, L. R. 146  
 Case, A. 392  
 cash crops 338  
 Cassen, R. 47  
 catastrophes 3  
 catching-up 73, 109, 128  
 causality 6, 230, 261  
   cumulative 165–97  
   econometric issues 221–2  
   two-way 12, 17  
   *see also* reverse causality  
 CBRs (crude birth rates) 71, 78–9, 89, 241  
   contemporaneous and lagged 86  
   declining very rapidly 108  
   temporally correlated 87  
 CDRs (crude death rates) 71, 78–9, 90, 177  
 censuses 214, 217, 218, 303  
 Central America 265  
   *see also* Costa Rica; El Salvador; Honduras;  
   Mexico; Panama  
 Chad 180, 183  
 Chayanov, A. 229  
 Chen, S. 214, 221, 232, 241  
 Chenery, Hollis 77–8, 129  
 Cheng, B. S. 172  
 child-care responsibilities 208  
 child dependency 207  
 child mortality 20, 108–10 *passim*, 124, 236  
   declines 106, 115, 345  
   falls 213, 215  
   high(er) 214, 245  
   reductions 175, 395, 396  
 child-rearing 38, 70, 183, 209  
   costs 71, 143, 144, 209  
   requires resources 267  
   responsibilities assumed/not assumed 206  
 childbearing 3, 38, 345, 415  
   costs of 15, 205, 415  
   extra-partnership 206  
   interdependence of household decisions  
   about 204  
   lifetime 155  
   preferences 20  
   unanticipated 208  
 childhood and adolescence 205  
 children 147  
   costs of raising 75, 266  
   educational attainment 276–83  
   mobility for 375  
 Chile 161, 269, 277, 285  
   fertility gap due to education and returns 268  
 China 43, 244  
   irrigation 167  
 chi-square value 178, 180  
 choices 297, 373, 383  
   constrained 416  
   contraceptive 383  
   fertility 415, 416  
   inefficient 401  
   limited 374  
   ‘micro’ 21  
   severely constrained 16  
   uncertainty behind 297  
   variable 74  
   welfare 375  
 Chomitz, K. M. 383  
 CI (consumption and income distribution) 130,  
   171, 213, 236, 237, 242, 261, 276, 332  
   demographic effects on 235  
   growth rate 214, 216  
   low-end ratios 217  
   near-poverty 239  
 cigarettes 244  
 cities 173  
   building 42  
   income advantages enjoyed in 173  
   ‘killer’ 108  
 Clay, D. 335  
 closed economy 148  
 Coale, Ansley J. 28, 34–5, 49, 107, 108, 125, 142,  
   167, 168, 171  
 Coale–Hoover hypothesis 40, 124, 126  
 Coase, R. 350  
 coastal countries 174  
 coefficients 82, 87, 89, 119, 126, 192  
   age distribution 128  
   correlation 223  
   estimated Z-vector 84  
   instantaneous convergence 84  
   negative 115, 117  
 Cohen, B. 395  
 Cohen, W. 78  
 cohort effects 155  
 Coleridge, S. T. 240  
 collective action 18, 327, 346–55, 358  
   determinants of 357  
 Collins, S. 125  
 Colombia 237

- commercialization 334, 335, 338, 339, 341, 351, 352, 358
- comparative advantage 342
- competitive markets 402
- competitiveness 174
- composition effect 299
- composting 344
- conditional forces 129
- consensus:
  - preference model 393
  - revisionist 38–45
- conservation practices 358
- constraints 41–5, 173
  - finance 240
- consumption 18, 143, 144, 146, 382, 397, 398, 401
  - age profiles of 152
  - calorie 374
  - distribution of 14
  - economies of scale in 237, 263, 264
  - effects on 21
  - food 328
  - government share 85
  - household 147; mean 227–8, 229; total 219–20
  - income available for 15
  - independent of current income 154
  - inefficient behavior 386
  - interdependence of household decisions
    - about 204
  - life-cycle 125
  - needs of people with young families 171
  - non-child 413
  - poverty-line 215
  - price-induced substitutions in 36
  - saving to smooth 142
  - subsistence 332
  - see also* CI; PCP
- contraception 17, 181, 206, 397, 400
  - choices 383
  - control 204
  - distribution programs 185
  - methods 396
  - technology 186, 203
- contracts 85
- convergence 70, 85
  - conditional/unconditional 73
  - economic 114
  - frameworks 92
  - instantaneous 84
  - patterns 72–4, 80, 81
  - renderings 83
  - world health 106–11
- conversion effect 217, 239–40
- conversion efficiency 214, 235–9
- cooperatives 354
- Cornia, G. 242
- correlations 63, 67, 69, 79, 396
  - empirical 68
  - macro 45
  - negative 202, 205, 378
  - 'new' 68
  - positive 73
  - simple 38, 71–2, 92
  - time-series 168
  - unconditioned 71
- Costa Rica 277, 282
- costs 77, 373, 412, 413
  - alternative structures 354
  - child 228–9; extra 220; raising 75, 266
  - childbearing 415; unanticipated 208
  - child-rearing 71, 143, 144, 209
  - communications 88
  - dependency 86, 89, 90
  - direct 384, 385
  - distortionary 384, 385, 386
  - environmental damage 18
  - exclusion 350
  - family planning services 397
  - fixed 346
  - health-care 377
  - high fertility 209
  - infrastructure 18
  - marginal 228, 376, 377, 380, 382, 385, 390, 400, 402
  - near-term 345
  - non-monetary 374
  - private 20–1, 352, 375, 382, 390
  - production 332
  - recovery 400–1, 404
  - social 20–1, 380, 381, 382, 385, 389, 400, 402
  - time 374, 389
  - transactions 347, 350
  - transport 88, 173
  - youth dependents 90
  - see also* opportunity costs
- couples 285–7
  - fertility correctly anticipated by 147
  - poor, many-offspring strategy 236
  - richer 214
- Crafts, N. 186
- credit 335, 338, 339, 340
  - access to 346
  - increased demand for 352
  - micro 415
  - rural markets 44
- Crimmins, E. 214
- crops 327, 333
  - higher value 338
  - intensification of production 327
  - irrigated 342
  - labor-intensive 341
  - perennial 334
  - perishable 342
- 'cross-subsidization' 404
- crowding 88
- cultural and institutional factors 16–17
- current account balance 128

- Daly, H. 214, 245  
 Dasgupta, P. 205–6, 217  
 Datt, G. 242  
 De Haan, A. 241, 244  
 death:  
   maternal 203  
   infant 221, 241  
   *see also* mortality  
 death duties 245  
 death rates:  
   age-specific 177  
   average annual 56  
   decline 57, 185  
   high(er) 79, 169, 172, 219  
   low 55, 168, 173  
   net 225  
   patterns change over time 70  
   reductions in 173  
   *see also* CDRs  
 Deaton, A. 125, 152, 154, 155, 171  
 debt overhang 88  
 decision-making  
   effective 207  
   household 206  
   individual versus collective 379  
 deforestation 334, 347, 363  
 DeGraaff, D. 237  
 degradation 19, 332, 339, 344, 360, 381  
   renewable resource 39, 40  
 degrees of freedom 178, 180, 217  
 Deininger, Klaus 130–1, 242  
 Deloalikar, A. B. 391  
 demand 7, 36, 39, 129  
   credit 352  
   elasticity of 347  
   food 218, 221  
   interaction of supply and 344  
   investment 124, 126, 128  
   labor 14  
   market 37  
   wealth 148, 149  
 Demeny, Paul 31, 33  
 demographic bonus 8, 11, 13, 19  
 demographic change 41, 67–105, 185  
   aggregate 14, 17  
   economic growth, inequality and 106–36  
   economic performance and 11  
   economic revisionism and 6–9  
   feedbacks in analysis of 39  
   income growth and 14  
   long-term 298–310  
   poverty and 296–321  
   rapid 6, 20  
   technology and 44  
 demographic diversity/differences 315–20  
 demographic dividend 186, 192  
 demographic gift 111–12, 121  
 demographic shift 186  
 demographic spending 93  
 demographic transition 10, 11, 89, 125, 141, 144,  
   205, 395  
   completing 55–8  
   differential 217  
   disequilibria outcomes that occur over 148  
   dynamics of 89, 139  
   early stages 14  
   ends 59–60, 61  
   faster 192  
   impacts 84, 150  
   influences on growth rate 123  
   labor market and 129  
   manifested by big elderly burden 124  
   models 182–6  
   old-age support and 145  
   poverty and 213–59  
   rapid 150, 155–9  
   size and speed of 174–82  
   slow 155–9  
   timing relationships associated with 67  
   transfer wealth increased by 145  
   triggered by income growth 166  
   world health convergence and 106–11  
 demography 74–83, 85–7  
   and economics 20–2  
   and labor force growth 121–4  
   and savings 124–6  
   *see also* headings above prefixed ‘demographic’  
 Demsetz, H. 352  
 Denison, E. F. 76  
 dependency 89, 174, 216, 227–30  
   changes in 10–11  
   elderly 110, 111  
   low-skilled children 375  
   retired 115  
   *see also* youth dependency  
 dependency burdens 55–64, 124, 125  
 dependency ratio 9, 175, 185, 221, 299, 304,  
   305, 346  
   child 8, 60  
   old-age 8  
   reducing 11, 13, 170  
   within families 15  
   youth 10  
 Desai, S. 238, 239  
 development pathways 358, 360, 363  
   determinants of 357  
   population pressure effect on 363  
 development trap 184  
 diet 16  
 diminishing returns 41, 43, 68, 71, 76, 88, 337,  
   339, 375  
 Dinopoulos, E. 78  
 discount rates 335, 345, 346, 390  
 discrimination 238  
 diseases 108  
   contagious/infectious 381

- diseases (*cont.*):  
 sexually transmitted 17, 206  
 tropical 336
- distortions 384, 385  
 elimination of 416
- distribution 404  
 adverse impacts 351  
 benefits 205, 338  
 education 205  
 effects 214, 218, 220  
 families according to positions in life cycle 299  
 food 204, 238  
 fruits of economic progress 5  
 indicators 241  
 intra-household 387  
 more equal 244  
 policy and 379, 383  
 resource ownership 380  
*see also* CI
- distribution channel 219, 223–30
- diversification 76
- divorce 395
- domestic duties 208
- Dominican Republic 208
- Dowrick, S. 168
- draft animals 336, 337, 342
- Dreze, J. 236
- droughts 69
- Durón, G. 326
- Duryea, S. 173, 261, 276
- EA (equivalent adult) issues 215, 216, 235
- earnings 10, 145, 268  
 age 132  
 co-resident children 147  
 from assets 394  
 future 147, 172  
 lifetime 147, 278  
 real, depressed 229  
 taxes on 145
- East Asia 89, 110, 119, 129, 415  
 dependency 111–12, 124, 174–5  
 economic growth 192  
 economic miracle 126, 165, 166  
 education rates 170  
 fertility transition 61  
 labor-input-per-capita growth 123  
 life expectancy 174  
 productivity growth 138  
 savings 125, 142, 170, 186  
 workers-dependents ratio 176  
*see also* China; Japan; South Korea; Taiwan
- Easterlin, R. A. 214, 344, 345
- Easterly, W. 187
- Eastwood, R. 14, 21, 214, 217, 218, 220, 221, 222,  
 223, 228, 230, 234, 243, 413
- Eckstein, Z. 395–6
- econometric issues 217  
 analysis 356  
 causality 221–2  
 modeling 70  
 results 113–19, 152  
 significance tests and heteroskedasticity 223  
 structure and robustness 222–3
- economic convergence 114
- economic development 33, 312, 371, 372–9  
 demographic trends and 30  
 models 182–6  
 policies related to population change and  
 379–87  
 population growth and 9, 68; rapid 32–3, 36  
 slow 110
- economic divergence 121
- economic growth 79, 159, 168, 180, 185, 187,  
 216, 243  
 adverse impact on 19–20, 88  
 age distribution impacts 79  
 aggregate 17  
 benefit of death-rate reductions 90  
 conversion and distribution effects versus  
 239–40  
 critical ingredient for poverty reduction 412  
 demographic change, inequality and 106–36  
 demographic factors can affect 183  
 distribution effects of fertility change on poverty  
 and 218–35  
 encouraging 91  
 expectations of 378  
 factors considered central to 72  
 fast(er) 121, 415  
 fertility and 91, 378–9  
 government policies incompatible with  
 promotion of 41  
 high fertility impedes 20  
 human welfare and 193  
 impact of demographic transition on 83  
 life expectancy and 7, 192  
 long-run 110  
 low 6  
 negative impacts on 89  
 net consequences of demographic change on 69  
 new birth impacts 70  
 new demography and 168–74  
 notably increased rate 71  
 per capita, strong deterrent to 24  
 poor 119  
 population growth and 114, 117, 168; rapid 3  
 positive, negative or neutral impacts on 46–7  
 rapid 38, 176  
 retarding 14  
 role of demography on 70  
 role of population in 166–8  
 simple theory 112–13  
 slower/slowing 242, 413  
 theoretical linkages between population and 35

- economic hypothesis 111–12  
 economic independence 147  
 economic miracle 119–21, 124, 126, 129, 165, 166  
 economic performance 115, 183  
   demographic change and 11  
 economic progress 76  
 economic recovery 24  
 economies of scale 35, 43, 76–7, 144, 173, 174, 340, 351  
   consumption 214, 237, 263, 264  
   exclusion 350  
   marketing 346  
   possible 385  
   prosperity through 37  
   protecting resources 347–8  
   research 217  
   resource protection 350  
 ecosystems 332  
 Ecuador 260, 277, 285  
   educational attainment 282  
   poor women 271  
 education 181, 189, 190, 193, 273, 353, 383  
   access to 17, 206, 237–8; very unequal 242  
   attainment 172, 205, 207, 208, 261, 276–83, 285–6  
   attendance 303  
   bad prospects 236  
   basic 210  
   better 393  
   differences 285  
   diversion of resources toward 40  
   effect on labor market participation 275  
   expansion of social services related to 378  
   female 166, 176–7, 214, 241; mothers 7, 269, 278; women 274, 276, 303, 345  
   GNP share allocated to 40  
   higher levels 184, 267  
   improving 394  
   increased 346, 379  
   indicators of provision 223  
   infant mortality and 176  
   investment in 185, 381; private 7  
   loss of conversion efficiency 237–8  
   mass 242  
   older siblings 237–8  
   prices paid for different types of 284–5  
   primary 239  
   programs 415  
   reduced quality 40  
   returns on/to 173, 183, 276, 287, 374  
   rich and poor 275  
   rising levels 13  
   spending 35  
   substantial progress 170  
   training and 343  
   upper levels 401  
   *see also* schools/schooling  
 efficiency 77, 380–3, 403, 404  
   capital 216  
   conversion 214, 235–9  
   gains 40  
   policy and 379, 383  
   technical 73  
 Egypt 208  
 Ehrlich, A. H. 325  
 Ehrlich, I. 167, 184  
 Ehrlich, P. R. 325  
 Ehui, S. 326  
 El Salvador 276, 277, 285  
   educational attainment 280, 286, 287  
   fertility gap due to education and returns 268  
 elderly people 108  
   dissaving 142  
   wealth to sustain consumption 145  
   working part-time 117  
 electricity 271, 346  
 elites 353  
 empirical studies/issues 77, 124, 143  
   analyses of growth 76  
   assessments using cross-country data 92  
   lengthy and expansive inquiries 85  
   propositions 39–41  
   specifications 83–8  
 employment 81, 82, 128  
   added 85  
   female 241  
   modern 214  
   non-farm 343  
   off-farm 333, 335  
 endogeneity 87–8  
 endogenous forces 109, 110, 178, 180  
   growth 77, 183, 184, 186  
   multiplier effect 166  
 environment:  
   damage/degradation 18, 19, 169  
   diminishing returns to 68  
   problems 339  
 equilibria 137, 138, 141, 142, 148, 152, 156, 281  
   general 7, 40, 45, 411; computable 297  
   long-run 74  
   multiple 183, 184, 353  
   short-run transitions en route to 75  
   steady-state 73  
   supply of capital 149  
 erosion 332, 336, 337, 339  
 estimation 113, 388, 390–1  
   least squares 357  
   techniques 70  
 Europe 110, 117  
   aggregate savings 171  
   income growth 166  
   plague (1348–50) 169  
   real income levels 167  
 evapotranspiration 332  
 exchange rates 41, 174

- exogenous forces/factors 110, 176, 178, 181–2,  
 184, 185, 186, 187  
 expectations 147, 353, 395–6  
   increased growth 378  
   long-run future 148  
   predictable price 85  
 exports 41, 174  
 extensification 328–32, 333, 358  
 external economies 237  
 externalities 19, 193, 201, 336  
   intra-familial 16  
   negative 350  
   positive 340, 350
- factor augmentation/proportions 75, 77  
 factor endowments 339  
 factor markets 334  
 factors of production 168, 352  
 fallow cycles 333–4, 336, 338, 358  
 families 209, 260  
   changes in size 21  
   extended 229  
   independence from 209  
   nuclear 265  
   parental decisions with respect to size 38  
   richer and poorer 205  
   *see also headings below prefixed 'family'*  
 Family Income and Expenditure Survey 145, 147  
 family planning 192, 244, 379, 383, 396,  
   401–2, 404  
   activity 180  
   information 17  
   options 345  
   private access to 416  
   programs 185, 397–8; non-coercive 416  
   services 210, 400  
   subsidies 397–8  
 family size 31, 172, 304, 345  
   impacts of 45  
   large 15–17, 47, 202, 203, 207  
   smaller 412  
 famines 108, 169  
 fat working-adult cohorts 131–2  
 Feder, G. 334, 335  
 feedbacks 41, 44–5, 47, 181  
   analysis of demographic change 39  
   attenuating 69  
   demand-side 82  
   importance of 36  
   positive 166, 183, 186, 241  
 Feeney, G. 110, 145, 157  
 female exhaustion 238  
 fertility 93, 146, 155, 187, 239, 412  
   age-specific 216  
   'amplifier' 243, 244  
   average total rate 63  
   changes in 8, 213; rapid 157  
   control of 181, 192, 381  
   couples correctly anticipate 147  
   decisions 285, 288; taken by individuals 193  
   determinants of 180, 204  
   differences within and between countries 261–2  
   dynamic optimizing model of behavior 396  
   economic growth and 91  
   endogenous 378  
   exogenous impact on 181  
   falling 215, 217  
   forecasts of alternative scenarios 35  
   household decisions on 38, 204  
   labor market conditions and 82  
   poverty, family and 13–17, 199–321  
   rapid fall in 176  
   reduced 9, 169, 172, 181, 414  
   replacement 146; above 57–8  
   rising 124  
   theory of 183  
   unwanted 209, 413, 415  
   *see also fertility decline; high fertility; household  
   fertility; low fertility; soil fertility; TFR*  
 fertility decline 8, 10–14 *passim*, 59, 92, 186  
   potential benefits of 21  
   economic growth and 71  
   dramatic 110  
   rapid 62, 157, 166  
   endogenous factor 180  
   last group in society to experience 207  
   necessary precondition for 395  
   *see also TFR*  
 fertilizers 336, 338, 339, 343  
 financial crises/collapse 88, 119  
 financial markets 190  
 Fisher, I. 142  
 fixed effects 180  
 flooding 332, 336  
 fodder 337, 339, 351  
 Fogel, R. W. 108, 176  
 food 109, 173, 215, 236  
   additional purchases 401  
   balance 30, 31, 32  
   consumption 237  
   dear 213  
   demand for 218, 221  
   distribution of 204, 238  
   fixed resources for growing 167  
   more expensive calories in 374  
   trade in 109  
 Ford Foundation 27  
 foreign markets 242  
 forests 360  
   fallow 333  
   pressure on 327, 341  
   resources 332  
   state 328  
 formal sector 13  
 Foster, A. 392

- Foster, J. 301  
 France 157, 158–9  
 freedom 263–4  
 Freeman, R. 132, 168  
 Fry, Maxwell 125
- Gage, A. 208  
 Gage-Brandon, A. 238, 239  
 Gaiha, R. 238  
 Gallup, J. L. 173, 183  
 GDP (gross domestic product) 19, 230–5, 240  
   mean 230, 243  
   real 177, 219, 220, 221  
   share devoted to education 205  
 GDP per capita 234  
   annual increase in 15  
   country-level 9  
   growth 112, 115–16, 117, 119, 121, 123;  
     rise in 126  
   per worker 131  
   real 220, 241  
 gender 205  
   bias 202, 208  
   differentials 208, 209, 393  
   discrimination 238  
   focused initiatives 210  
   imbalances 17, 206  
   stratification 207  
 Gertler, P. 180, 401  
 Ghana 238  
 Gini coefficients 131, 227, 260  
 girls 208  
   school enrollment 209  
 Glewwe, P. 239, 391  
 global warming 169  
 Glover, D. R. 76  
 Gobin, R. 240  
 Godwin, W. 36  
 Goldberger, Arthur 124  
 Goldman, A. 344  
 Gould, B. J. 404  
 government policies 41  
   anti-poverty 203  
   biased against technical change 44  
   ill-advised 20  
   imprudent 77  
   ineffective and biased against labor 38  
 governmental officials 397  
 grains 358  
 grandparents 208  
 Granger causality 222  
 grass 333, 337  
   fallow 336, 338  
 grazing areas 327, 337  
   collective restrictions 351  
 Green, M. E. 208  
 ‘Green Revolution’ 169
- Greenhalgh, S. 238  
 Greer, E. 301  
 Grootaert, C. 239  
 Guinea-Bissau 225
- Haarmann, V. 326  
 Haddad, L. H. 374  
 Hall, J. 239  
*Handbook of Development Economics* 201, 204  
 Hansen, Alvin 24  
 Hanushek, E. A. 172  
 Harberger, A. C. 138  
 Harkavy, Oscar (Bud) 49  
 Harrington, F. 125  
 Harris, J. R. 343  
 Hatton, T. 107  
 Hausman test 178, 180  
 Hausmann, R. 16, 209  
 Hayami, Y. 43–4, 326, 339, 352, 353  
 Hazell, P. 326  
 headcount ratio 301, 307, 308  
   decline 309  
 health 72, 85, 238, 344, 345, 379, 383  
   best practice 108  
   better 388, 393, 399  
   children 207, 390, 395  
   disadvantage in 47  
   effect of nutrient consumption on 387  
   expansion of social services related to 378  
   improving 394  
   indicators 170, 223  
   interventions 381  
   life expectancy as a proxy for 90  
   mass 242  
   policy 192  
   poor 16, 202  
   problems 339  
   reproductive 202, 210  
   spending 35  
   world 109  
   *see also* health care; public health  
 health care 176, 181  
   access to 17, 206, 238  
   best quality 397  
   costs 377  
   interventions in 210  
 Heckscher–Ohlin mechanism 242, 244  
 Henderson, J. V. 76  
 herbicides 338  
 Herlihy, D. 169  
 heroin 244  
 Herweg, K. 335  
 heterogeneities 320, 385  
 heteroskedasticity 223, 357  
   significance tests and 223  
 Higgins, M. 125, 126, 128, 131, 150, 152–3, 154,  
   171, 186

- high fertility 21, 58, 174, 218, 237–8, 239  
 adverse social and economic effects 32  
 contribution to poverty 17  
 conversion effect of 217  
 exacerbates poverty 413  
 impedes economic growth 20  
 incomes and 166, 202  
 parents' sensible decisions 15–16  
 poverty increased through 219, 412  
 pre-industrial 106  
 short-term costs of 209
- Hill, A. A. 389
- Hirshleifer, J. 169
- HIV/AIDS infection 17, 206
- Hobcraft, J. 206
- Holden, S. 326, 240, 335
- Honduras 18, 19
- Honduras 269, 277, 285, 355–63  
 education 274, 280, 282, 286, 287  
 fertility gap due to education and returns 268
- Hong Kong 121, 173
- Hongyi, L. 241
- Hoover, Edgar M. 28, 34–5, 107, 125, 142, 167, 171  
*see also* Coale–Hoover hypothesis
- horticultural expansion 358, 360
- hospitals 397, 398
- hours worked 80, 121, 272, 413  
 growth, impacts of 80
- households:  
 changes in fertility decisions 344–6  
 population and poverty in 201–12  
 single-person 263
- household income 144, 209, 229  
 differentials between poor and non-poor 14  
 per capita 21
- housework 262, 271, 273  
 productivity of 271
- human capital 73, 76, 85, 202, 210, 242, 262  
 accumulation 26, 37, 39, 40, 144, 170  
 children's 239  
 economic opportunities depend on 276  
 embellishments for 75  
 growth 72  
 investments in 204, 340  
 larger supply of 9  
 private incentives to invest in 11  
 stocks 74  
 up-to-date 32  
 women's, relative prices for 267
- human resources 387, 404  
 development programs related to 400–2  
 policies associated with 396
- Hunt, D. 143, 229
- ICPD (International Conference on Population and Development) 201
- IFPRI (International Food Policy Research Institute) 327, 355
- illiteracy 129, 202
- immigration *see* migration
- imperfect insurance markets 382
- import 173  
 primary product 41  
 substitution policies 129
- incentives 244, 374  
 per worker to acquire income 216–17  
 price 374  
 private 381, 383, 384  
 problems 347, 350  
 right types of schooling 393  
 social 380, 383, 384
- incidence of poverty 220, 221, 225, 227
- incomes 18, 77, 113, 124, 168, 176, 181, 206, 207, 303, 344  
 advantages enjoyed in cities 173  
 age profiles 152  
 aggregate per capita 21  
 available for consumption 15  
 average 301, 307, 317  
 beneficial influence on 169  
 boost 169  
 counter-factual 320  
 critical level of 184  
 distribution 13, 171, 216, 242, 332  
 eliminating demographic differences between groups 316–18  
 equal 395  
 equalization 243  
 eroding 129  
 family 16  
 growth 13, 14  
 higher 12, 229, 398  
 impact of demographic disparities within groups 319  
 incentives per worker to acquire 216–17  
 inequality 129, 260, 347  
 infant mortality and 178  
 interest 143  
 investment 236  
 labor 229  
 low 202  
 monetary 13  
 national 125, 150  
 per worker 142, 149  
 pooling 146  
 population pressure key force determining 166–7  
 positive correlates of 12  
 real 13  
 redistributing 85, 242  
 retirement 171, 172  
 rising 177, 178, 185  
 savings and 15, 168  
 tendency consumption to track 154  
 unearned 393, 394  
 unequal 131, 242

- welfare per capita 345
- wide differences 183
- wide dispersion 185
- see also* CI; household income; income per capita
- income per capita 39, 130, 173, 180, 332, 337
  - aggregate 412
  - depressed 167
  - family 300
  - growth rates 32, 111, 187
  - higher 10, 159
  - household 21
  - increased 326
  - lower 11, 85
  - proportional improvement in 170
  - raised 169
  - richest countries 182
  - steady-state levels 83
- India 35, 43, 204, 242
  - NSS data 235–6
  - old and childless widows 236
  - Sample Registration Survey 221
- individual responsibility 145
- Indonesia 138, 204
- industrial revolution 176, 186
- industrialization 128
- inequality 215, 216, 260
  - demography and 128–32
  - income 347
  - intergenerational transmission of 281–3
  - land 227, 244
  - low-end 216
  - reducing 15
  - worsening 242
- infancy 59
- infant mortality 7, 16, 20, 108, 109, 119, 124, 178, 241
  - decline in 106, 184, 208
  - factors affecting 177
  - low 173
  - reductions in 175, 395, 396
  - significant effect on 176
- infants 106
- 'infection effects' 217
- inflation 74, 85
- information 17
  - critical 16
  - family planning 17
  - imperfect 347
  - 'real' demographic 84
- infrastructure 18, 126, 128, 346–7
  - cost of 18
  - creation of 242
  - development of 341, 342, 343, 360
  - health 397
  - investments in 77, 326, 346–7
  - transportation 352
- inheritance 218, 245
- inland areas 174
- innovation 33
  - firm-specific 77
  - impacts on resource conditions 341
  - induced 69
  - infrastructural 353
  - institutional 353, 354
  - population-induced 341
  - technological/technical 18, 149, 152, 339, 340, 354
- institutional change 38, 44, 352–4
- institutional failures 37, 38, 242
- institutions 33, 147, 191, 192, 244
  - considered as 'variables' 41, 44
  - democratic, stronger 85
  - high quality 190
  - necessary 18
  - quality of 74
  - standard proxy for the quality of 117
- instrumentation 87
- intensity of poverty 215, 220, 223
- intensification 332, 333, 360
  - agricultural 338; crop production 327
  - capital 339
  - knowledge 339–41
  - population pressure may have indirect effects on 360
  - see also* labor intensity
- interaction effects 231
- interest rates 147, 148, 296
  - constant 10, 152
  - global 150
- internal effect 299
- 'international experts' 373
- international trade 30, 204
  - barrier against 242
  - inward-oriented policies 41
- interventions 19, 20, 38
  - public 21, 187, 201
  - societal 193
- inventiveness 245
- investment(s) 30, 39–40, 77, 216, 327
  - agricultural 44
  - alternative opportunities 346
  - barrier against 242
  - capital 403
  - children 38, 204, 207, 345
  - constrained 126
  - countries that impede or facilitate 74
  - economical 335
  - educational 172, 185, 205, 381
  - financial 375
  - foreign 150
  - government 19
  - higher 10
  - household, higher 12
  - human capital 340
  - impacts of population on 29
  - infrastructure 77, 346–7

- investment(s) (*cont.*):  
 labor-intensive 326, 334, 335, 344, 346, 356  
 lumpy, indivisibilities in 76  
 micro 377  
 national 171  
 optimal 376–7, 381  
 output per unit of 216  
 private 85, 381  
 productive 35, 93  
 related to one individual decision-maker 380  
 related to population change 382, 386  
 risky 382  
 saving and 39–40  
 school 390  
 shares 74  
 social optimal 384  
 Ireland 167, 169  
 irrigation 338, 341, 346, 347
- James, J. 76  
 Jamison, 177  
 Jamison, D. T. 176–7  
 Janowitz, B. 404  
 Japan 110, 173  
   capital-deepening 138  
   young adults 145  
 Jejeebhoy, S. J. 207
- Kaimowitz, D. 341  
 Kalemlı-Ozcan, S. 172  
 Kanbur, R. 241  
 Kang, K. 125  
 Kates, R. 326  
 Kazmi, N. 238  
 Keefer, P. 117  
 Kelley, A. C. 6, 9, 10, 11, 38, 46, 69, 70, 74–5, 86,  
   125, 152, 168, 170, 171, 172, 204, 205, 218–19,  
   221, 243, 244, 411, 414  
 Kelley-Schmidt:  
   components dynamics 89–90  
   dynamics: components demography 78–80  
   early and augmented Models 91  
   early demography 75–8  
   growth channel from fertility to poverty 230–4  
 Kenya 17, 208, 326  
 Kerr, J. 326, 335, 342  
 Keyfitz, Nathan 45, 58  
 Khalily, B. 210  
 Khandker, S. 210  
 Kim, J.-I. 138  
 King, E. M. 201, 203–4, 237, 238, 389  
 Klenow, P. J. 183  
 Klepper, S. 78  
 Knack, S. 117  
 Knight, J. B. 391  
 Knodel, J. 172, 237, 239
- knowledge:  
 acquisition of 375  
 adding to society's stock of 381  
 intensification 339–41  
 non-rival stock of 77  
 scientific 167  
 Knowles, J. C. 396, 400  
 Krautkraemer, J. A. 326  
 Kremer, M. 78  
 Krugman, Paul 117, 119, 170  
 Kuznets, S. 30, 31, 36, 40, 68, 69, 167  
 Kuznets curve 128, 241, 243  
   strong version 129, 130, 131
- labor 38, 72, 342, 346  
 diminishing returns to 43  
 family 326  
 government policies ineffective and biased  
   against 38  
 increasing demand for 13  
 inputs complementary to 338  
 mismatches of non-human resources to 29  
 mobility 172, 343  
 more remunerative opportunities for 333  
 opportunity costs of 346  
 participation rates fixed 124  
 skilled and literate 129  
 substitutes for 338  
 unskilled 213, 218  
   *see also headings below prefixed 'labor'*
- labor force 15, 47, 70, 185, 285  
 changing size 9  
 children begin to enter 229  
 constant share in the population 83  
 female participation 140  
 growth 71, 81, 121–4, 126, 139; relatively rapid  
   rate 140  
 participation 303; growth of 81; more active  
   123; per capita 108; female 13, 269–76  
 per capita 108, 173  
 positive impacts on entry 86  
 quality 89  
 under-utilization of 41, 42  
 unskilled 128  
 value of 335  
 women in 13, 15, 269–76
- labor intensity/intensification 41, 333, 358  
 investment in land 334–6  
 manufacturing sectors 174  
 methods 334, 342, 344, 360  
 production 341, 342  
 products 129
- labor markets 352, 378  
 baby-boom generation enters 176  
 children who die before entering 184  
 demographic transition and 129  
 effects 169–70, 176

- female participation 289  
 fertility influenced by 82  
 functioning 129, 132, 170, 262, 269, 280, 335  
 indicators for efficiency of 190  
 participation 261, 269, 285  
 productivity 394  
 relatively integrated 361  
 labor productivity 18, 332–5 *passim*, 343  
   agricultural 43, 327  
   average 341  
   indicators of 356, 360  
   long-run 75, 81  
   move to steady-state equilibrium 72–3  
 labor supply 123, 184, 204, 218, 228  
   bidding up 221  
   demand for 229  
   female 394  
   important impacts on 296  
   inelastic 341, 342  
 LaFrance, J. T. 335  
 Lalou, R. 236  
 land:  
   ability to mortgage 335  
   common 353, 358  
   declining availability 343  
   grazing 337  
   income from 229  
   intensification 43  
   intensity of use 352  
   marginal 336, 347, 360  
   mortgageable 354  
   state or community ownership of 328  
   steep 360, 363  
   suitable, differential access to 339  
 Lanjouw, P. 237  
 Latin America 157, 159, 176, 223, 225, 227  
   birth rate decline 56  
   demographic impact 121  
   economic growth 192  
   education 170  
   fertility decline 11  
   gender differentials in school enrollment 209  
   income levels 167  
   inequality 129, 130, 244, 260  
   life expectancy 174  
   mortality 58, 109  
   population size 57  
   savings 146  
   transitions and dependency burdens 61  
   *see also under individual country names*  
 Lau, L. J. 138  
 Lazear, E. 237  
 LDCs (less-developed countries) 46, 57, 69, 93  
   OADR of all regions 62  
 Lee, J.-W. 46  
 Lee, R. D. 10, 67, 70, 74, 80, 83, 84, 113, 125, 143,  
   146, 147, 148, 152, 154  
 Leff, Nathaniel 124, 171  
 legal services 210  
 Leibenstein, Harvey 32–3, 185  
 Lele, U. 326  
 Lewis, H. 214, 236, 344  
 Lewis, W. A. 343, 345  
 liberalization 242  
 life cycles 46, 302, 303  
   families 299  
   household 239  
   hypothesis 93, 127, 171  
   later stages 79  
   models 10, 124, 125, 147–8; equilibrium 152;  
   ‘pure’ 143; saving 154; simple 171  
   optimal fertility decisions 396  
   reproductive 203  
   saving 142, 154  
   wealth 144–6  
 life expectancy 58, 71, 115, 172, 188  
   economic growth and 7  
   higher 85  
   increases/rises in 108, 155, 166, 171, 174,  
   175, 192  
   longer 12  
   low 146, 172  
   proxy for health 90  
   seems to evolve exogenously 176  
 Lindert, P. H. 130  
 Lipton, M. 14, 21, 201, 202–3, 207, 214, 217, 218,  
   220–3 *passim*, 228–30 *passim*, 234, 241, 243,  
   244, 343, 413  
 liquidity 335  
 livestock 337, 341, 342  
 living standards 169, 193  
   improved 56  
 Lloyd, C. B. 207–8, 238, 239  
 Londono, J. L. 189  
 Lopez, R. 326  
 low fertility 141, 155, 165, 169, 184, 415  
   aggregate 412  
   means to 20  
   policies and programs to encourage 3  
   post-industrial 106  
   rapid 6  
 low-income countries 73, 243, 244  
 low-income rural groups 229, 320  
 Lucas, R. E. 340  
 Lui, F. T. 184  
 Lundberg, S. J. 395  
  
 McElroy, M. B. 394, 395  
 McIntire, J. 44, 328, 336, 341, 352  
 McIntosh, J. 238  
 McNicoll, G. 38  
 macroeconomics 93, 193  
 Macunovich, D. J. 132  
 Maddison, A. 167, 177  
 Mahal, A. 169

- Mahmud, S. 238  
 maize yield 360  
 Malaney, P. 86, 87, 89, 170, 181  
   *see also* Bloom–Canning–Malaney dynamics  
 Malawi 210  
 Malaysia 110, 121, 204, 238, 244  
   ‘life-cycle saving’ 145  
 Mali 236, 238  
 malnutrition 108  
 Malthus, T. R. 6, 13, 28, 36, 166, 167, 169, 183,  
   185, 213, 214, 217–19 *passim*, 221, 229, 230,  
   240, 413  
 management systems 350  
 Mankiw, G. N. 113  
 manure 337, 358  
 Marc, A. 210  
 marginal benefits 380–1, 385, 390  
   social 402, 403  
 market access 339, 357  
 market distortions 204, 242  
 market failures 21, 37, 38, 201, 384–5, 413, 415–16  
 marriage 3, 17  
   early 208, 345  
   failed 395  
   gender imbalances in decision-making 17  
 Mason, A. 10, 110, 125, 142, 143, 145, 146, 147,  
   148, 152, 154, 157, 171, 237  
 Masson, P. 125  
 ‘maternal depletion’ 203  
 Mbacké, C. 236  
 Meinzen-Dick, R. 350  
 Meltzer, D. 172–3  
 Mensch, B. S. 208  
 merit goods 383  
 Merrick, Thomas 16  
 Mexico 35, 277, 285  
   educational attainment 280, 282, 286, 287  
   fertility gap due to education and returns 268  
   PROGRESA program 394  
 Michael, R. 237  
 micro behaviors 371–410  
 microeconomics 172, 193  
 Middle East 107, 108, 110, 121, 129  
   elderly dependency rate 111  
   mortality decline 109  
 middle-income groups 404  
 midwifery 236  
 migration 30, 42, 71, 333, 351, 361  
   changes in 343–4  
   external 107  
   internal 221  
   international 107  
   mass 107, 129  
   raises working-age population 115  
   zero 58  
 Miller, Tim 10, 143, 146, 147, 148, 152, 154  
 Mingat, A. 205  
 Mira, P. 395–6  
 Mitchell, B. R. 177  
 mobility 172, 343, 375  
   intergenerational 206  
 models/modeling:  
   Barro Core 46, 83, 85, 87, 88, 91, 92, 93  
   CGE 297  
   Coale–Hoover 31  
   Components 89, 91–2  
   consensus preference 393  
   demographic transition 182–6  
   dynamic optimizing, fertility behavior 396  
   econometric 70  
   economic development 182–6  
   Expanded Dynamics 86  
   KS Early and Augmented 91  
   life-cycle 10, 124, 125, 147–8; equilibrium 152;  
   ‘pure’ 143; saving 154; simple 171  
   micro behavior on population change 395–6  
   neoclassical 124, 137, 140–1, 167–8, 183, 394  
   overlapping generations 150  
   Ramsey 112, 113  
   random effects 178, 180  
   rate-of-growth effect 125  
   savings 146–50  
   Solow 142, 168, 169, 183  
   steady-state 124, 147  
   technological change 77  
   technology-gap 70  
   Transition 89, 91–2  
   utility-maximization 147  
 Modigliani, F. 142, 143  
 Molyneaux, J. W. 180  
 Montgomery, M. R. 208, 395  
 morbidity declines 11  
 mortality 93, 173, 181  
   age-specific 216  
   catastrophic increases in 146  
   changes in 8, 90, 91, 92, 144; rapid 157  
   constant 58  
   country-specific differences 178  
   empirical age-specific profiles 172  
   high(er) 20, 106, 166, 413, 414  
   low(er) 13, 106, 388  
   reductions in 56, 108, 184  
   theory of 183  
   *see also* child mortality; infant mortality;  
   mortality decline  
 mortality decline 10–14 *passim*, 21, 58–9, 92,  
   106, 155  
   aggregate 108  
   economic growth and 71, 176  
   fertility falls after 214  
   poor usually experience 217  
   population growth accelerates to 14  
   timing of 110  
 Mozambique 180, 183  
 mulching 344  
 multicollinearity 79

- multiplier effect 166, 180  
 Munshi, K. 392  
 Murphy, K. M. 132, 183, 184
- NAS (National Academy of Sciences) reports:  
 (1971) 25, 32–3, 48–50  
 (1986) 9, 25–6, 29, 33–4, 68  
 National Research Council report (1986) 37,  
 76, 201
- natural resources 17–19  
 agriculture and 325–68  
 depletion of 167  
 fixed 169  
 global pressure on 174  
 stocks 74  
 stress on 412
- NBR (net birth rate) 223, 230–2, 241  
 marginal effect of change in 225
- Nelson, R. R. 185
- neoclassical economics 72, 76, 138, 142  
 growth model 124, 137, 167–8, 183  
 important questions about model 140–1  
 model of family demand behavior 394
- neo-Godwinians 218
- NGO (non-governmental organization) 50, 403,  
 404, 405
- ‘no-correlation’ findings 70
- non-working population 110
- non-working-age population 111
- norms:  
 absent reduced family-size 218  
 cooperation 351, 353  
 rational 244  
 religious and cultural 345  
 social 372, 375
- North, D. C. 326, 353
- North Africa 108, 110, 121, 129  
 elderly dependency rate 111  
 mortality decline 109
- North America 117, 171  
*see also* United States
- Norway 214
- null hypothesis 223
- nutrients 333, 334, 336, 342, 379, 383, 395  
 consumption 387  
 cycling 337  
 depletion 327  
 micro 374
- nutrition 47, 108, 109, 203, 238  
 better 56, 388, 393  
 damage to 238  
 expansion of social services related to 378  
 improving 394  
 interventions 381  
 women 344, 345
- Nwachukwu, S. L. S. 172
- OADR (old-age dependency ratio) 8, 60, 62  
 occupation changes 343–4  
 OECD countries 123, 129  
 Ogaki, M. 147  
 Ogawa, N. 145  
 oil-producing countries 107
- old-age:  
 dependency 127, 173  
 security 209, 344, 345  
 support 145, 375, 377  
*see also* OADR
- OLS (ordinary least squares) 92, 117, 180, 233  
 F test decisively rejects 178
- Olson, M. 354
- OPEC shocks 88
- open economy 148
- openness 117, 131, 191, 241, 242  
 increased 244  
 to trade 190  
 zero 192
- opportunity costs 183, 228, 243, 267, 335, 346, 376  
 low 326  
 participating in labor market 269
- organizational change 354–5
- Ostrom, E. 350
- Ostry, J. 147
- Otsuka, K. 328, 333, 334
- output 72  
 agricultural 18  
 elasticity with respect to capital 183  
 equilibrium 137, 142, 145, 148, 149  
 farm 41, 204  
 future, working-age people must develop claims  
 on 144  
 growth 76, 138; aggregate 6; changes in 92  
 higher 10  
 increased 18  
 per unit of investment 216  
 per worker 148, 149, 150  
 taxation of 41  
 total 9
- output per capita 29, 67, 113  
 agricultural 337  
 growth 31, 35, 45, 46, 69, 80, 85; average annual  
 71; ‘net’ effects on 75  
 increasing value of 338
- outsiders 354
- overgrazing 337
- Overseas Development Council 47–8, 211
- oxen 358
- Paes de Barros, Ricardo 15
- Pagiola, S. 335
- Pakistan 121, 236
- Panama 269, 277, 285  
 educational attainment 280, 282, 286, 287
- Panayotou, T. 326, 327

- Paraguay 260, 277  
 children per household 265  
 education 276, 282  
 fertility gap due to education and returns 268  
 poor women 271
- Parfit, D. 245
- partnership breakdown 206
- path dependency 353
- Paxson, C. 125, 152, 154, 155, 171
- PCP (private consumption poverty) 220, 221  
 low 239  
 percentage incidence of 223  
 reliable nation-wide estimates 222
- Pender, J. 6, 18, 19, 326, 335, 339, 340, 342, 345, 346
- pensions 142, 374, 377  
 pay-as-you-go 145
- period binaries 84
- perturbation 7
- Peru 269, 279, 285  
 educational attainment 282  
 fertility gap due to education and returns 268  
 poor women 271
- pesticides 338, 339
- Philippines 121, 208, 237, 238
- Pingali, P. 336
- Piotrow, P. T. 35
- Place, F. 326
- plants 332
- Platteau, J.-P. 326, 351, 352, 353
- plowing/plows 336, 337, 358
- policies 387–405  
 adjustment 242  
 cheap food 32  
 choices 383  
 implications 186–93, 209–11  
 necessary, capacity of societies to develop 18  
 non-coercive 21, 399–400, 412  
 poverty reduction 411–17  
 reform 38  
 related to population change and economic development 379–87  
 tentative and impertinent thoughts on 244–5  
*see also* government policies
- pollution 21, 412
- poor countries 129, 178, 180, 182–3, 269
- poor people:  
 ability to make investments 335  
 families/households 93, 316–18, 413  
 relative prices and quantities of education 284–5  
 schooling/educational attainment 275, 277  
 small income increases 374
- population:  
 explosion 3  
 feedback induced by 75  
 momentum 58  
 ‘neutralism’ 167  
 poverty in households 201–12  
*see also* headings below prefixed ‘population’
- population change 215, 371, 379–87  
 economic development and 387–405  
 economic growth and 9–13  
 economy and 65–197  
 investments related to 382, 386  
 models of micro behavior on 395–6  
 programs related to 400–2  
 schooling impact on 391  
 structural 215
- Population Council 27, 211
- population density 18, 357, 360  
 changing, indirect effects of 363  
 grows to high levels 350  
 high 173, 174, 334, 341, 342  
 increases in 167, 351  
 low 173, 360  
 positive impacts of 71  
 promotes the formation of political systems 44  
 rising 333, 334
- population growth 75, 137  
 accelerates to mortality decline 14  
 assumed endogenous 187  
 change in the rate of 7  
 contemporaneous 71  
 declining 138, 141  
 dependent 47  
 disaggregated 240  
 divergent trends in 110  
 economic growth and 114, 117, 168  
 educational participation, food availability, and 45  
 effects of 5, 18, 204  
 GDP per capita growth and 115  
 geometric 167  
 global resources and 39  
 impacts of 46, 69, 80; adverse 30, 35, 43;  
 macroeconomic 47; negative 31, 67–8, 71, 86; overall 91  
 increases poverty 221  
 increases requirements for food 31  
 lagged 225  
 low 157  
 near zero 55  
 no acceleration in 106  
 persistent 57  
 relative 80–1  
 renewable resource degradation 40  
 rural 325–68  
 significant deterrent to saving 37  
 slow(er) 3, 9, 20, 24, 38, 42, 139–40  
 way to decrease 169  
 zero 57, 58  
*see also* rapid population growth
- population pressure 37, 93, 336, 352  
 effect on development pathways 363  
 intensification and 360  
 key force determining income 166–7

- positive impacts 38
- poverty and 46
- responding to 41
- population size 55–6, 77, 86, 213
  - positive impacts of 71
  - agriculture positive benefits of 77
  - density and 76
  - faster fertility-induced rises 214
  - increase in 77
  - retarding 214
- poverty 13–17, 37, 201–12, 296–321, 339
  - changes in 361
  - chronic 238–9
  - demographic diversity and 315–20
  - demographic transition and 213–59
  - environmental damage/pressures and 19, 167
  - farmers 335
  - hypotheses about 265
  - increased 167, 363
  - indicators of 356, 360
  - persistence of 6
  - policies to reduce 411–17
  - population growth increases 345, 351
  - population pressures and 46
  - reducing 5, 6, 21, 412
  - severity of 216
  - transient 238–9
  - see also* incidence; intensity; PCP; poverty line; poverty trap
- poverty trap 166, 183, 185
- poverty line 220, 237, 301, 311
  - consumption 215
  - less probability of being below 389
- predators of pests 338
- predictions 89
  - tautological 83
- preferences 20, 204, 394, 395
  - childbearing 20
  - subjective time 147
  - women 394, 395
- pregnancies 239
  - adolescent 236
  - unwanted 17, 208
  - 'wasted' 229
- Prescott, E. C. 183
- Preston, S. 176
- prices/pricing 18, 400–1
  - expected 377
  - heavily subsidized 384
  - incentives 374
  - increases 401
  - market 298
  - meat 336–7
  - relative 343
  - suppressed 41
- primogeniture 245
- Pritchett, L. H. 110, 176
- privatization 350
- probabilities 147
- product mix changes 341–3
- production 328
  - agricultural 325–68
  - diversion of household labor resources from 229
  - food 31, 32, 167
  - fundamental structure changed 169
  - future 144
  - government policies encouraged 42
  - increases in 18
  - interdependence of household decisions about 204
  - knowledge of processes 375
  - per capita 169
  - price-induced substitutions in 36
  - scarce factors of 33
  - subsistence 328
  - successful 244
  - theory of 183
- production functions 29, 72, 92, 148–9
- productivity 11, 173, 380–3
  - agricultural 109, 341, 390
  - capital 341
  - constant rate 10
  - declining 333, 339
  - economic, individual 382
  - factors influencing 30, 138
  - growth rate 148, 150–2
  - housework 271, 283
  - impact on 390
  - land 18, 327, 341, 356
  - morbidity declines that raise 11
  - reduced 363
  - steady-state 89
  - substantial improvements in 169
  - unobserved 394
  - see also* labor productivity
- profitability 341
- property rights 18, 353
  - difficult to assign 40
  - intellectual 340
  - lack of 204
  - not legally protected 414
  - security of 85
  - vesting over scarce resources 44
- prosperity 24, 37
- Psacharopoulos, G. 172, 389
- public health 177, 186
  - low-cost measures 56
  - welfare 192
- public spending 40
- purchasing power parity 182, 220, 223
- Quah, D. T. 184
- quality standards 383
- R&D (research and development) 77
- Radelet, S. 46, 70, 74, 80, 83, 84, 113, 242

- rain forest depletion of 169  
 rainfall 334, 357  
 Ram, Rati 124  
 rapid population growth 6, 9, 58, 124, 139, 204  
   adverse consequences attributed to 42  
   capital-shallowing impact of 75  
   consequences of 19–20  
   economic development and 32–3, 36, 37  
   effects of 3, 11  
   heavy burden on society 30  
   government policies and 41  
   negative consequences/impacts of 68, 92, 411  
   potential impacts of 39  
   prominence of 24  
   serious burden 38  
   slowing of 47  
   triggered 167  
 rapidly growing economies 382  
 Rasmussen, L. N. 350  
 rates of return:  
   depressed 150  
   education 173, 374  
   effect of mortality on 172  
   expected 377  
   private 389  
 Ravallion, M. 214, 221, 232, 237, 241, 242  
 raw materials 169, 174  
 Reagan Administration 26  
 real wages:  
   depressing 221, 229  
   falls in 220  
   pushing down 218  
 Reardon, T. 344  
 redistribution 244  
 regressions 115, 178, 180, 187, 188, 233, 267–8,  
   301–2, 357, 360–1  
 Reinhart, C. 147  
 rent-seeking activities 174, 353, 354–5, 384  
   Ricardian theory 334  
 replacement effect 32, 57–8, 146, 157, 397  
 reproduction:  
   ages 57  
   decisions 207, 210  
 ‘repugnant conclusion’ 245  
 research agenda 45–6  
 reservoirs 332  
 residuals 222  
 resources 264, 267, 273, 332  
   allocation of 205, 206, 210  
   constraints 173  
   degradation 39, 40–1  
   depletion 72  
   real flows 220  
   aggregate 375  
   benefits out of 263  
   child-rearing requires 267  
   fixed 169  
   non-renewable 39  
   pooled within households 395  
   spent on each child 265  
   used efficiently 380  
   yield 374  
   *see also* human resources; natural resources  
 Retherford, R. D. 145  
 retirement 70, 79, 176, 273  
   age constant 171  
   average ages 172  
   mandatory programs 145, 146  
   pay-as-you-go systems 10  
   wealth and 143, 144  
 returns 74  
   alternative structures 354  
   diminishing 41, 43, 68, 71, 76, 88, 337, 339, 375  
   education 276, 287  
   private 376  
   raising animals for meat 337  
   relative 271  
 Revelle, R. 48, 49  
 reverse causality 11, 12, 72, 87, 117, 170, 222, 394  
 revisionism 24–54, 68, 81, 92  
 rewards 131, 228, 244, 245  
   rates of 230  
 Ricardian rent theory 334  
 rich countries 178, 180, 182, 183, 206, 269  
 rich people 265, 404  
   children 245  
   couples 214  
   demographic differences 316–18  
   schooling/education 275, 277, 284–5  
 Richards, P. 339  
 rights:  
   inheritance 245  
   squatters’ 343  
   *see also* property rights  
 risk 203, 245  
   aversion 338, 351, 382  
 Robinson, W. C. 326  
 Rockefeller Foundation 27  
 Rodriguez-Clare, A. 183  
 Romer, P. M. 242, 340  
 Rosenzweig, M. R. 44, 172, 204, 237, 392, 395  
 run-offs 332, 336, 403  
 Russia 192, 229  
 Ruthenberg, H. 325  
 Rutman, G. L. 352  
 Ruttan, V. W. 43–4, 239, 326, 339, 352, 353  
 Ryan, J. 238  
 Ryder, H. E. 172  
  
 Sabot, R. H. 391  
 Sachs, J. 46, 70, 74, 80, 83, 84, 113, 117, 131, 173,  
   174, 183  
 Sahn, D. 242  
 Sala-i-Martin, X. 83, 113  
 salary 276

- Salehi-Isfahani, D. 326  
 Sanchez, P. A. 339  
 sanitation 56, 108, 244  
   bad 236  
 savings 30, 111, 117, 170, 344  
   adverse impacts on 35  
   age profiles of 152  
   aggregate 142, 146, 171  
   aggregate household 152  
   can raise income 168  
   capital generated by 216  
   decisions at different ages 21  
   decrease in capacity 31  
   demography and 124–6  
   depressing effect on 127  
   differential 228  
   estimated 10  
   families cannot accumulate 414  
   group 340  
   higher rates of 155, 156  
   household 33, 154, 229  
   ‘hump’ pattern 127  
   impacts on 29, 296  
   income available for 15  
   induced fall in 128  
   investment and 39–40  
   model 146–50  
   national 171  
   net private 154  
   peaks in rates 157  
   per capita 345  
   population growth a significant deterrent to 37  
   population growth and 142–4  
   private, for retirement 146  
   productively invested 9  
   rates mainly driven by life expectancy 172  
   traditional linkages 38  
   unaffordable 236  
   wealth, population and 137–64  
 scale 72, 75, 76  
   positive impacts/effects 69, 88  
   returns to 137, 184, 339  
   strong and pervasive effects 78  
   *see also* economies of scale  
 scarcities 107  
   conservation in response to 33  
   due to perturbation 7  
   resource 76  
 Scherr, S. J. 326, 327, 347  
 Schmidt, R. M. 9, 10, 11, 46, 69, 70, 86, 125, 152,  
   168, 170, 171, 218–19, 221, 243, 244, 414  
   *see also* Kelly-Schmidt  
 schools/schooling 187, 207  
   attainment 85, 391  
   better 399  
   efficiency motive for policies to support 391–2  
   gender differences 208  
   impact on population change and productivities  
     388–93  
   incentives for right types of 393  
   primary 392  
   rates of return to 389  
   resources to finance 16  
   secondary 188  
 Schultz, T. P. 32, 40, 180, 205, 221, 222, 344, 389,  
   391, 393–4  
 Schutjer, W. 326  
 security:  
   land tenure 341  
   old age 16  
 sedentary farming 338  
 sedimentation of rivers 332  
 seeds 338  
 sex ratio 57  
 sexual activity:  
   early 208  
   safe 17, 206  
 Sheehy, E. J. 170  
 shocks 84, 88  
   OPEC 88  
 Shreeniwas, S. 238  
 sib crowding 235, 237, 238, 240  
 siblings 208  
   older, access to education 237–8  
   spacing of 217  
 significance level 222  
 Simon, J. L. 26, 27, 35, 36–7, 76, 167, 217,  
   218, 240  
 simulations 146, 148, 154, 155, 363  
   counter-factual 298, 300, 301, 304, 314  
   dynamic 150  
   saving and wealth 156  
 Singapore 110, 121, 173  
   gross domestic saving 138  
   life-cycle saving 145  
 Smaling, E. M. A. 334  
 small countries 78  
 Smith, Adam 166  
 social marginal benefits 403  
 social security systems 144–5, 374  
 socialist countries 131  
 sociocultural factors 345  
 soil:  
   conservation 340  
   erosion 327, 333  
   organic matter 342, 343  
 soil fertility 327, 332, 333, 337, 339  
   declining 333  
   management 344, 356  
   manure can contribute to 337  
   means of improving 336  
   regeneration 344  
 solid waste 108  
 Solow, Robert 124, 137, 167, 339  
   *see also* models

- South Asia 108, 209  
 demographic transition 126  
 fertility transition 61  
 GDP per capita growth rate 123  
 gender bias 206  
 growth rate 121  
 savings rates 124
- South-Central Asia 174, 176
- South-East Asia 108, 121  
 economic miracle 119  
 savings rate 125  
*see also* Malaysia; Philippines; Thailand
- South Korea 110, 121  
 female participation rates 140  
 productivity growth 138  
 total fertility rate 62
- space sharing 263
- specialization 76, 173, 174, 244, 340, 342
- species extinction 339
- Spengler, Joseph J. 28, 36
- Squire, Lyn 130–1
- Sri Lanka 110
- Srinivasan, T. N. 38, 42, 44
- standard errors 357
- state retreat 239
- statistical procedures 69
- sterilization 400
- Stigler, G. J. 76
- Stolnitz, George 49
- Stone, S. W. 326
- Strauss, J. 170, 389, 391
- structural adjustments 69
- Strulik, H. 184
- stylized facts 243
- Sub-Saharan Africa 166, 192, 209, 336  
 education 170  
 mortality 58
- subsidies 204, 338, 385, 386, 401  
 family planning program 397–8  
 student 389
- subsistence 167, 185  
 consumption 332  
 production 328
- substitution 33  
 intertemporal elasticity of 147
- Summers, L. H. 110, 154, 176
- supply:  
 capital 149, 150  
 expansion of 36  
 home-made goods and services 271  
 interaction of demand and 344  
 resource 39  
 savings 128  
 wealth 150  
*see also* labor supply
- supply curve 149
- survival 236, 395
- sustainability 402, 403–5
- Sweden 180, 395–6
- Switzerland 180, 214
- synergies 210
- Syrquin, M. 77–8
- Székely, M. 16, 173, 209, 261, 276
- Taiwan 10, 144, 146, 238  
 causal link from education to fertility 172  
 economic independence 147  
 elderly living with their children 145  
 female participation rates 140  
 productivity growth 138  
 savings 150–2, 153–4, 155–9, 171
- take-off problem 185
- Tamura, R. 183, 184
- Tan, J.-P. 205
- taxes 204, 385, 386  
 earnings 145  
 farm 41
- Taylor, A. 108, 125, 128
- technical assistance programs 357, 358, 360
- technical/technological change 26, 43, 69, 76, 93,  
 128, 138, 337  
 embodied 75  
 government policies biased against 44  
 higher rates of 78  
 induced 340  
 more rapid 340  
 stimulus of density on 88  
 theoretical models of 77
- technical/technological progress 138, 168, 181,  
 183, 240, 242, 262  
 growth in productivity through 169  
 slow 167
- technology 72  
 adoption of 33  
 compensating 6  
 contraceptive 186, 203  
 creation and diffusion 73  
 health 7, 108  
 high-yielding 167  
 labor-using 204  
 level of 137  
 medical 186  
 non-rival 77
- teenagers 304
- Tegucigalpa 356
- Templeton, S. 326, 327, 347
- tenure insecurity 334
- terms of trade 74, 85
- terraces 334
- TFR (total fertility rate) 71, 75, 86, 88, 146,  
 208, 221  
 decline 90, 261  
 fallen 396  
 lower 85
- Thailand 110, 121, 237, 239, 244

- productivity growth 138
- population growth rate 139
- Socioeconomic Survey (1980–81) 393
- theory 71–4
  - tentative and impertinent thoughts on 244–5
- Thomas, D. 170, 379, 389, 391, 394
- Thompson, P. 78
- Thorbecke, E. 301
- Tiffen, M. 326
- time series 217, 240, 242
- timing 69, 70, 79, 86, 109, 110, 125, 203
- Tobin, James 124, 142, 143, 147, 162
- Todaro, M. P. 343
- Todd, Murray 49, 50
- trade 190
  - cheaper by sea or river 173
  - food 109
  - liberal policies 129
  - openness to 74, 190
  - see also* international trade
- transfers 144, 146, 173
  - family 145
  - intergenerational 147
- transition *see* demographic transition
- trends 90, 92, 303
  - saving 150, 152, 155
  - time 303
  - wealth 150
- t-statistics 223, 231
- Tucker, Albert W. 193
  
- Udry, C. 327
- ultimogeniture 245
- UN (United Nations) 4, 55
  - demographic projections 121
  - Fund for Population Activities 27
  - projections 58; regional 57
  - Reports (1951) 48; (1953) 28–30, 67–8; (1973) 30–1, 34, 35, 67–8
- uncertainty 147, 154, 155, 184, 382
  - behind choices 297
- uncles 208
- undernutrition 236
- United Kingdom *see* Britain
- United States 130, 138, 142, 173, 180
  - children per household 265
  - demographic hypothesis 132
  - expanding population size 76
  - fertility 157
  - Food and Drug Administration 383
  - foreign policy 35
  - founder of modern economic demography 28
  - household resources 395
  - migrations 107, 129
  - over-65 population 264
  - poor people 263
  - population revisionism among scholars 26
  - simulated saving rates 158–9
  - see also* USAID
- unsustainable exploitation 19
- Uphoff, N. 354
- upper-income groups 397
- urbanization 128
- Uruguay 260, 263, 277, 285
  - children per household 265
  - educational attainment 282
  - fertility gap due to education and returns 268
  - over-65 population 264
- USAID (United States Agency for International Development) 4, 27, 48, 50
- utility function:
  - lifetime 147
  - unitary household 16
  
- Vasey, D. E. 332, 333
- vegetative cover 333–4
- Venezuela 269, 277, 285
  - educational attainment 286
  - fertility gap due to education and returns 268
- Vietnam 396–9, 400, 401, 404
- Vosti, S. A. 345
- Vu, M. T. 177
  
- wages 14, 296
  - available for women 266
  - changes in 361
  - downward pressures on 82
  - expected 285
  - higher 377
  - past 394
  - rural 344
  - urban 343
  - see also* real wages
- Wald test statistics 223, 225, 231, 232
- Walker, R. 238
- Wang, J. 176–7
- Warner, A. 113, 117, 131, 174
- wars 69
- water 335
  - clean 56, 108, 244
  - conservation measures 337, 338, 340, 341
  - contamination 339
  - downstream users 336
  - drinking 108
  - fresh 173
  - improvement of supplies 341
  - pollution problems 337, 403
  - pricing of 18
  - quality of 332
  - recycling 333
  - running 271
  - unhealthy 236
- Watkins, S. C. 108

- Wattenberg, Ben 24
- wealth 137
- accumulation of 9, 143, 144, 145, 229
  - aggregate demand for 142
  - consequences for 148
  - demand for 149
  - income ratio 157
  - intergenerational transfer of 345
  - life-cycle 144–6
  - per capita 345–6
  - potential 174
  - supply of 150
  - transfer 10, 144, 145
- Webb, S. 125, 171
- Weil, D. N. 172
- Weinstein, W. 145
- Welch, F. 132
- welfare 18, 170, 328, 334, 341, 351, 373, 382
- advancement 5
  - choices for increasing 375
  - declines in 239
  - direct effects 375
  - distribution of 327, 337
  - economic 3
  - economic growth and 193
  - family 15–17, 299
  - farmer 333
  - general 354
  - loss in 204
  - making people worse off by reducing 403
  - own, people's perceptions of 380
  - parental 203
  - private gains 387
  - public health measures 192
  - reduced 414
  - rural 346
  - social 3, 40
- well-being 7, 202, 414, 416
- White-corrected standard errors 92, 223
- Williamson, J. G. 9, 10–11, 46, 70, 75, 87, 107, 108, 113, 117, 121, 125, 130, 150, 152–3, 154, 170, 171, 173, 186, 214, 240, 243
- see also Bloom–Williamson dynamics
- windows of opportunity 8, 9, 210
- temporary 207
- Wolfe, B. L. 391
- Wolpin, K. I. 237, 395–6
- women:
- autonomy 207
  - childhood family background 391
  - earning potential 283
  - education 209, 276, 345
  - elderly 145
  - entering labor force 15
  - greater interest in limiting fertility 379
  - income 268; forgone 267; household 393; unearned 393
  - lactating 239
  - married 398
  - more productive 395
  - nutrition and health 344, 345
  - poor 17, 210, 235, 271, 276, 397
  - preferences 394, 395
  - status 3, 415
  - uneducated 17, 276
  - wage rates 180, 266
  - widows 383
- Wongsith, M. 172
- workers 111, 124
- effective 137
  - increase in numbers of 170
  - per capita 187
  - ratio to non-workers 176
  - too few relative to the number of retirees 167
  - unskilled 244
  - young 173
- working-age population 59, 71, 86, 89, 110–12
- passim*, 174, 187
  - decline in size 304
  - differential growth 189–90, 192
  - economic growth and 10
  - factor increasing the proportion of 20
  - growth of 13, 80–1, 82, 92, 119
  - immigration raises 115
  - prime 169
  - ratio to non-working age populations 185
  - regional differences 312–13
  - saving 142
- World Bank 4, 46–7, 55, 69, 110, 129, 130, 138, 390
- Poverty Assessments 228, 248–50
  - World Development Report* (1984) 37, 42, 201
- World Commission on Environment and Development 325
- world recession 69
- Woytinsky Lecture (1967) 390
- Wu–Hausman test 87
- Young, A. 138, 170, 186
- Yousef, T. 108
- youth dependency 12, 89, 187, 228, 312
- age structure 58, 71
  - burdens 111, 124
  - child mortality decline, baby boom and 115
  - cohort 79, 80
  - costs 90
  - decline in 125
  - depressing effect on savings 127
  - high 85, 166,
  - increased 35
  - lower 9
  - rates peak 110
  - ratio increase in 184
- Zia, H. 125, 171