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Commentary

A Little Bit of Sugar Helps the Pill Go Down: Resilience, Peace, and Family Planning

Comment on "The Pill Is Mightier Than the Sword"

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Abstract

The article by Potts et al, "The Pill is Mightier than the Sword," points out that family planning has an important role to play in building peace by increasing women's empowerment and their agency, ultimately helping peacebuilding efforts. Evidence has demonstrated that family planning programs are cost effective, produce quick results, help women and couples meet their desired fertility levels, and produce a multitude of benefits around economic productivity, community engagement, conservation, resilience, and peacebuilding. In order for policy audiences from a variety of sectors, including conflict and peacebuilding, to appreciate these benefits, it is important to find common ground and articulate co-benefits that will help them appreciate and value the role of family planning, as it were, give them sugar to help the pill go down. This commentary examines how resilience, peacebuilding and family planning efforts need to focus on co-benefits in order to build on the successful interventions and opportunities that Potts et al highlight.
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The article by Potts et al,[1] "*The Pill is Mightier than the Sword,*" notes that family planning has an important role to play in building peace by increasing women's empowerment and their agency, ultimately helping peacebuilding efforts. Yet, peacebuilders and conservation groups may be less apt to see the immediate benefits of family planning to their immediate causes.[2-5] Indeed, in policy-making circles, the political contention around family planning and women's health has been well-documented as a barrier to advancing these programs as effective development policies.[6,7] There is a long-standing effort to stop support for organizations like the United Nations Population Fund and Planned Parenthood – organizations that provide support for overall women's health services. At the same time, evidence has well-demonstrated that family planning programs are cost effective, produce quick results, help women and couples meet their desired fertility levels, and produce a multitude of benefits around economic productivity, community engagement, conservation, resilience and peacebuilding.[8-11] In order for policy audiences to appreciate these benefits, it is important to find common ground and articulate co-benefits that will help them appreciate and value the role of family planning, as it were, give them sugar to help the pill go down. In this commentary, I examine how resilience, peacebuilding and family planning efforts need to focus on co-benefits in order to build on the successful interventions and opportunities that Potts et al highlight.

Peacebuilding

The development, security, and humanitarian communities are recognizing that incorporating gender differences in peacebuilding efforts can bolster community resilience by incorporating women as peacebuilders and as actors to strengthen approaches against violent extremism. Resilience is emerging as a key concept for overall development planning. For many it refers to increasing the capacity of an individual, community or institution to survive, adapt, and grow in the face of environmental, economic and political crises and stresses.[12]

In an effort to understand population dynamics and security implications, some studies have found a link between youthful populations and conflict, even after allowance for such obvious confounders as income, ethnic heterogeneity and type of political regime (eg, Moller,[13] Fuller and Pitts,[14] Collier et al[15]). Others have found no effect of youth bulges whereas political and economic factors emerged as strong predictors.[16] Similarly, Urdal and Hoelscher,[17] in an analysis of violent and non-violent disorder in 55 major Asian and African cities, found no evidence that age structure was an important influence.

In the 2000s, as the focus of US foreign and security policy shifted to the threats posed by weak and failing states, policy-makers demonstrated growing awareness of the importance of demographic variables in evaluating risk. The National Intelligence Council, in its *Global Trends 2025* assessment,

characterized a demographic "arc of instability"—a geographic band of states whose populations are disproportionately 25 years or younger—that crosses much of sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia.[18] The U.S. Department of Defense's 2014 *Quadrennial Defense Review*, which sets the framework of national security policy in the United States, has also recognized the link between security, population dynamics, and climate change[19]: United States Agency for International Development's (USAID's) Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation has provided programming guidance that alludes to key roles women play in conflict and post conflict situations including acting as agents of change.[20] The idea that the treatment of women and girls should play a major role in US security and foreign policy was recently explored in Hudson and Patricia Leidl's new book, *The Hillary Doctrine: Sex and American Foreign Policy*. The Doctrine is derived from a speech in Beijing in 1995 when as First Lady Hillary Clinton made the case that "human rights are women's rights and women's rights are human rights."[21] As Hudson and Leidl define it, the doctrine recognizes that the subjugation of women is a threat to the common security of the world and the national security of the United States, and that the suffering of women and the instability of nations go hand in hand. They note that Clinton was successful in making gender a principal topic at the Department of State and other federal agencies, as well as creating frameworks that integrated the issue into existing work.

Evidence of the Doctrine is demonstrated by some initiatives in the peacebuilding area. These include the passage of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 calling for the recruitment of women to play an integral role in conflict resolution and all efforts at "countering violent extremism."[22] Similarly, the "United States National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security" – released in 2011– was designed to facilitate women's involvement in preventing conflict and building peace in countries threatened and affected by war, violence, and insecurity.[23] These approaches recognize that women's leadership and participation can enhance a community's ability to resist violent extremism, but in only a few instances make the direct link to family planning.[24]

Resilience and Family Planning

In security terms, resilience is emerging as a policy and programmatic framework for addressing multilevel fragility (ie, at different scales such as individual, community, and state) and for finding ways to manage and plan for political and economic disruptions or outbreaks of conflict tied to those fragilities. In peacebuilding circles, donors such as USAID and the G7 foreign ministers note that armed conflict, when paired with other factors, poses a significant threat to societal resilience, leaving people and communities more vulnerable to stresses from future shocks.[25] Accordingly, "resilience deficits" are more likely in fragile and conflicted-affected areas.

There are a number of ways that donors are working to institutionalize resilience – to make it real on the ground, to operationalize it in their programming in field-based interventions, to mainstream it in their funding strategies, and to promote ways of sharing innovations. These include, *inter alia*, joint assessments across sectors, agencies and donors;

increased flexible funding and improved procurement processes; commitments towards breaking the humanitarian-development divide; directive communications from headquarters and donor capitals to the filed on resilience; and incentivizing personnel to embrace resilience in their work.[26] Development interventions that focus on ways to build resilience, however, are criticized for their inability to address local realities, especially power dynamics – which underlie the opportunities for women's engagement in peacebuilding efforts especially in geographies where population pressures, youth bulges and gender inequities pose great risks to development and humanitarian efforts[1].[27-29] Ultimately, governments and policy-makers can reinforce resilience by addressing conflict and fragility dynamics and facilitating peacebuilding.[30]

Donor collaborations – sometimes framed as "key development challenges" – have emerged around this resilience agenda. One particular effort, the Global Resilience Partnership, joins USAID, the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida) and the Rockefeller Foundation to provide the basis for emerging innovative thoughtful strategies to address resilience challenges in the Sahel, the Horn of Africa and South and South-east Asia.[31] The range of responses that are being considered include linking social and financial capital, livestock trade, technological and infrastructure innovations, early warning systems, using mobile technology to help communities access information that will help them anticipate, plan for, respond to and learn from disasters, and private sector engagement. None of these interventions specifically address family planning, women's empowerment and peacebuilding.[32]

Potts et al allude to this resilience agenda, and elsewhere I make the case for demographic resilience, in recognition of demography's effect on environmental security.[33] In particular, I suggest that demographic resilience – the ability of a government to harness its age structure and gender dynamics for its overall well-being – provides a basis for stability that reduces conflict at the national or sub-national level. Population dynamics matter to peacebuilding. Unless policies specifically incorporate strategies to manage these dynamics, efforts to mitigate conflict and build peace will be undermined.

Spoonfuls of Sugar to Help the Pill Go Down

The family planning movement has recently embraced another global development challenge around meeting the unmet need for family planning. Family Planning 2020 (FP2020) is a global partnership–a collaboration with USAID, the UK Department for International Development (DFID), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation–with an ambitious target of empowering 120 million girls and young women in the poorest countries to decide when and how many children to have.[34,35] Beth Schlachter, Executive Director for FP2020 notes that it is important for girls to delay childbearing, complete their education and to give birth when they decide.[36] Doing so has multiple benefits for the economy, health, education, and the environment.

In order to more securely demonstrate the importance of family planning to overall development and peacebuilding

agendas there is a need to focus on the co-benefits to development and to peacebuilding. The resilience community makes the case of triple dividends of resilience that link natural disasters with development efforts: first, avoiding losses when disasters strike; second, unlocking development potential by stimulating innovation and bolstering economic activity; and third, the social, environmental and economic co-benefits that result.[37] Similarly, we know that investing in family planning programs that link environmental and economic outcomes also help build resilience by helping communities to diversity livelihoods, bolster community engagement and resilience, build new governance structures at the local level, and position women as agents of change and community leaders.[38]

As the development community positions itself for the role out and implementation of the sustainable development goals and as donors come together on global challenges such as that exemplified by FP2020 and the Global Resilience Partnership, there are opportunities to align family planning with broader messages around overall development. Once the sustainable development goals have been unified into an overarching sustainable development framework for post-2015 there will be a great need to articulate how governance and stability, health (including family planning) and climate change resilience intersect.[39] If indeed the pill is mightier than the sword, that pill will need some sugar to help it go down. Sugar, in terms of co-benefits, will need to be articulated in concrete terms that accrue in the context of sustainable development goals and targets, resilience dividends and peacebuilding. The time is now.

Ethical issues
Not applicable.

Competing interests
Author declares that he has no competing interests.

Author's contribution
RMDS is the single author of the manuscript.

Endnotes
[1] These gender inequities include differential sensitivities to shocks and stresses as well as different skills, mechanisms and strategies used to cope with these disruptions.

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