Population makeup is major factor in global resource allocation

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Less is more, in terms of population, in the Malthusian view. In past debates on the links between population and development, many have emphasized population size and population growth as the main (negative) factor. Informed by this perspective, they saw reduction in population growth as the key to sustainable development and solving global inequality.

But at an Oct. 1 seminar on campus Parfait M. Eloundou-Enyegue, professor of development sociology, offered another perspective on population and its potential role in meeting some of the United Nations' new sustainable development goals, which aim to eradicate hunger, reduce socioeconomic inequality and unequal access to education and health.

"Population is an important factor, but there is more to a population than its mere size. Increasingly, researchers have begun to pay close attention to population composition, the ratio of the active vis-à-vis the dependent – the young or the elderly," Eloundou-Enyegue said.

While the Malthusian answer to resource scarcity is a smaller population, Eloundou-Enyegue said this answer still leaves the issues of distribution unaddressed. He argued that a focus on size ignores other major aspects of population that contribute to development and inequality.

In this perspective, based largely on the work of Harvard University economist David Canning, the age structure of the population – the

number of dependents relative to productive workers – becomes an important consideration in resource allocation. According to Canning, countries transition from a period of high birth rates and a large proportion of children to a period of low birth rates and a higher proportion of active workers, a transition likely to generate what is known as the demographic dividend. In this period, productivity by the active population outweighs consumption by children and the elderly, allowing countries to invest their resources in environmental, social and economic growth, and development.

Using calculations involving population composition and age structure, Eloundou-Enyegue demonstrated population's large role in global inequality and resource distribution. While population size only accounts for 1.5 percent of global income inequality between countries, analyses including age structure show that population composition accounts for 13.1 percent of income inequality.

In another example, Eloundou-Enyegue said when looking at differences in education spending across time in various countries in Africa, population composition accounts for over 30 percent of the gains in public spending per pupil change in most of the countries that displayed large gains in in this spending.

"Does size matter? The answer is yes, absolutely," Eloundou-Enyegue said. "But it's not the only factor, and in most cases it's not the most important factor."

By expanding the focus from size to composition, academics and policymakers could come closer to solving inequality and open the door to global growth and development, he said.

"Does size matter? Updating the links between population and global inequality" was part of the Program in International Nutrition.

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