

I. How are developed countries like France & Sweden promoting higher birth rates?

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Mind the Baby Gap

By STEVEN PHILIP KRAMER

Although overpopulation plagues much of the developing world, many developed societies are now suffering from the opposite problem: birthrates so low that each generation is smaller than the previous one. Much of southern and eastern Europe, as well as Austria, Germany, Russia and the developed nations of Southeast Asia, have alarmingly low fertility rates, with women having, on average, fewer than 1.5 children each, well below the replacement level.

At the same time, life expectancies in those places have reached record highs. As a result, the dependency ratio — the ratio of the working population to the nonworking population — has become increasingly unfavorable, and it is projected to get more so. Making matters worse is that economic growth gets harder to achieve as workers age and their ranks dwindle; aging societies will have a tough time succeeding in an era of rapid technological change.

Population decline poses a danger to the developed world. Yet there is nothing inevitable about it. History shows that governments can raise birthrates close to replacement levels if they adopt the right policies. France and Sweden, for example, have crafted thoughtful, comprehensive and consistent policy responses that have largely reversed their declining birthrates over the long run.

France was the first country to experience a declining birthrate in the 19th century. French leaders blamed the country's defeat in 1940 on its stagnating demographic, economic and social development. If France was to regain its status, it needed a new dynamism — more social justice, a stronger economy and faster population growth. So France tried to plan itself out of industrial underdevelopment and demographic decay, and it did so through, above all, a generous program of financial support for families with children.

Sweden suffered from extremely low birthrates in the 1930s. When the Social Democrats came to power at the height of the Great Depression, one of their economic strategists was Gunnar Myrdal, who in 1934, with his wife Alva, wrote a best-selling book on the population crisis. It argued that if Sweden was to boost its birthrates, women had to be able to both raise children and have careers — a revolutionary idea at the time.

Because children were a crucial investment for society but an economic burden for individual families, the argument ran, the government needed to redistribute wealth from households with few

or no children to those with many. It had to eliminate the obstacles preventing ordinary people from following their wishes to marry and procreate, such as the sheer cost of raising children.

Today, France and Sweden both devote approximately four percent of their G.D.P.s to supporting families. The Swedish model provides new parents with over one year of paid leave based on their salaries, which can be divided between the father and the mother. Most Swedes send their children to their renowned public preschool system. Women have the right to return to their jobs after maternity leave on a full-time or part-time basis. The French system, for its part, offers mothers more financial incentives and focuses less on early public child care. Today, both countries enjoy healthy birthrates — near replacement level in France and slightly below replacement level in Sweden.

Unlike France and Sweden, other countries trying to promote childbirth have adopted ineffective policies, instituted no policies at all, or succumbed to cultural impediments. In these countries, politicians evince a kind of pervasive fatalism about population decline. Part of the reason is that these are still wealthy societies and the effects of falling birthrates have yet to be felt. Population decline is by its nature incremental, and without an immediate crisis, politicians relegate the issue to the back burner.

But demographics are not self-regulating, and successful population policies require governments to make long-term investments in encouraging childbirth. This means a great deal of financial support, even in times of austerity; when it comes to population policies, there is no such thing as short-term success.

Gender equality is also an important ingredient, as are carefully managed immigration and the acceptance of non-traditional family structures, such as unmarried cohabitation. After all, the countries most committed to the traditional family, such as Germany, Italy and Japan, have the lowest birthrates. Countries with high birthrates, in contrast, usually also have large numbers of children born out of wedlock.

Governments trying to institute pronatalist policies will face an uphill battle. The right kind of programs, such as those in France and Sweden, are expensive, and they may clash with vested interests and anger supporters of the traditional family — which is why many developed societies have done nothing or have employed useless half measures.

Countries that fail to take low birthrates seriously do so at their own peril. Time matters. If they wait too long and get caught in the low-fertility trap, they could find themselves in an uncharted era of depopulation that will be eerily different from anything before. And escaping that scenario will be difficult, if not impossible.