



Re: Mr. Ali - Please Make the Case for Thoughtful and Caring Family Planning

Dear Mr. Ali,

Thank you for breaking the taboo that surrounds talking about the need for better family planning policies. Your love for your children shines throughout [your TED talk](#). You are helping create space for innovative solutions that will bypass growing polarization in the debate, as some urge [birth strikes](#)¹ while others push women to have [unsustainably large families](#), despite [the incomparably devastating impact](#) that will have on the environment.

We are writing to urge you not to take sides in the debate by joining the camp that promotes using future generations, in what one former United Nations Population Fund Director [called a pyramid Ponzi scheme](#), to create economic growth.² You ended your presentation by urging the audience to invest in children. Urging people to simply “have babies” does not accomplish that, and without crucial distinctions that ensure all children get what they need, your proposal [will do more harm than good](#).

Rather, we urge you to build nuance into your work in this area beyond proposals that incentivize us to “have babies,” and consider a third alternative: Truly human rights-based family planning policies. It’s an alternative to a system based on greed, and the [exploitation of future generations by seeing them as fuel for our economic engine](#). The downsides of lower fertility that you mention are all speculative. But we can see poor family planning cause tangible harms every day around the world: starvation and horrific abuse, the growing and potentially explosive gap between the rich and the poor, the climate crisis, mass extinctions, etc.: And human rights-based family planning policies are the most effective way to solve them. Without human rights-based family planning reform, [the world could go in directions](#) that undermine sustainable development goals, especially in your ancestral homeland of Pakistan, where economic pronatalism would cause immeasurable suffering.³

How do we get to human rights-based family planning reform? Here are five steps in that direction:

The first step begins by first recognizing a tension in your presentation, one you noted several times. The decision to have kids feels personal and private, as you said. But the premise of your presentation is that family planning decisions have massive impacts on others,⁴ and that as such “we should have babies.” Is family planning private, or public? That tension is irresolvable because it derives from

¹ Should those who care the most about our ecological future forgo raising future generations? What does that portend?

² This camp includes President Trump and his daughter Ivanka, Unilever Inc., and Tayyip Erdogan.

³ See:

https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/a-disaster-in-the-making-pakistans-population-has-more-than-doubled-in-20-years/2017/09/08/4f434c58-926b-11e7-8482-8dc9a7af29f9_story.html?utm_term=.8045edfad66e

⁴ Whether not having children is a cause that creates *any effect* is an open question, given issues of negative causation and other causes of the effects you refer to.

[mistakes in the way we've formulated reproductive ethics](#). Once we account for those mistakes, we see that family planning policies [will define the future we all share](#), and that they should be at the forefront of policy discussions and not avoided because of our visceral reaction to questions that surround the body. As will be discussed below, [we all share particular values](#) that make universal, cooperative and consensual family planning systems possible.

Second, while you rightly surrounded your proposals in the emotions like hopefulness and faith (especially in your conclusion), those cannot be the basis of policy. These feelings should not be smuggled into the conversation in ways that play to our cognitive dissonances, [like temporal myopia](#),⁵ and promote thoughtless family planning.

Hope is not a strategy.⁶ Love, [through thoughtful action](#), is better.

Third, whatever policies we devise will have to be based upon more than economics, and entail *qualitative* values and intricacies beyond the unsustainable growth of GDP. While we dispute your analysis of Chinese history and Japan's economic prospects,⁷ the crucial point is that children are not economic inputs. Family planning involves questions of religion, gender and [economic equity](#) (i.e. accounting for the disparate impact family planning has on women, including power dynamics in the planning process), child welfare, environmental justice (the massively disparate impact larger families in the United States have on the environment, relative to the average African family), etc. that go beyond simplistic economics and nations devising policies in isolation from one another.

These many values are incommensurable, and less like comparing apples to oranges and more like comparing oranges to Tuesdays. Our system of universal human rights, rather than the reductionism of economics, is the only thing comprehensive enough to account for and balance these values.⁸ [That system precedes and overrides economic concerns. Economies \(which require property rights in order to function\) occur after and within the confines of legitimate human rights-based democracies](#). And to the extent holding true to these principles costs us economically, perhaps it's right that we step forward and

⁵ The discourse of choosing to have children despite threats is appealing, but probably derives from historical natural threats to our species. Does the discourse make sense when the threats are man-made, like the climate crisis?

⁶ Would we be faced with the same ecological crises today if environmental advocates in the mid-Twentieth century had factored the risk of unforeseen but foreseeable things, like the climate crisis, in their family planning models? All the science suggest we would not.

⁷ For China, you would, as you put it "have to take the DeLorian" much further back in time. China's one-child policy was an emergency reaction to vertical population growth spurred by [Communist draconian pronatal policies earlier in the Twentieth Century](#) that lead to cataclysmic famines, the one-child policy, and a country whose size and disdain for human rights and democracy make it a strategic and environmental threat to the rest of the world. Those policies are the ones that mattered most in creating our current state of affairs. For Japan, there are serious questions as to why its [demographic transition has been a bad thing](#). Perhaps the answer depends on our values, and whether we prioritize GDP and our investments over child welfare, equity, and the environment?

⁸ [This article](#), written by a leading scholar, describes how family planning policies and religion might interact if we stay true to constitutional principles. What Smolla did not address was the religion-like creep of a low-grade form of utilitarianism across the world, [in the form of population-growth driven consumerism and corporate hegemony](#), that has eroded the [objectivity, consent and egalitarianism at the heart of liberalism](#). By excluding other worldviews this subjective consumerism is comparable to an oppressive religion, treats the entire world as a marketplace and its species as commodities, defines humanity through the lens of property, and forces that vision upon others.

finally [shoulder the burden of demographic transition and make the investments](#), rather than shuffling them off on future generations.

Fourthly, if we use human rights as our guide, we cannot use a simple quantitative baseline of replacement fertility, the baseline we think you ultimately embrace in your talk. Though it's preferable to current worldwide averages (0.4 less, on average), whether or not using replacement level fertility as a normative baseline is even sustainable given projected levels of consumption is an open question. But in human rights-based democracies the [normative baseline for environmental protection is much higher](#). Children are not economic inputs, They are foremost citizens, more so than worker, consumer or taxpayer. They must be invested in and developed to that former, and higher, standard, in terms of literacy, breadth of education. the development of cooperation enabling levels of empathy, etc. What would you want for your own children, and why don't other children deserve the same? Children must be nurtured and highly developed, in terms of their literacy, [access to equitable opportunities in life](#), [access to the freedom of nature](#) (which is correlative to the value of smaller democracies where each person plays a greater role), [personal resilience](#), reasonableness, etc. These ideals create a framework of [deontological normative baselines⁹ that together](#) point towards an optimal and sustainable world population. That framework will allow us to capitalize on [demographic dividends](#) by bending the trend into a [qualitative democratic dividend](#).

In contrast, recklessly pushing more and more kids into the world and through our current and failing educational, healthcare, [child welfare](#), nutritional, etc. systems – ones we are desperately trying to fix - does not achieve that standard. It does not even achieve the much lower but binding legal standards, [like the Children's Rights Convention](#). Blunt policies that run kids through these systems, irrespective of where they are working and where they are not, is wrong. We cannot love kids and allow them to be born into horrific conditions to which we would never expose our own children.

Note how the higher baseline described above sounds in the realm of an ethic of care, rather than the male-oriented ethic of domination and bigger-is-better mindset of economic growth and control. Growth at all costs was an ethic that might have once served our species (and colors the tone of your talk), but now threatens it.

Fifthly, if we use human rights as our guide, we will find a clear family planning policy path that allows us to get the best of both worlds: personal choice as well as moral societies. Human rights merely act as objective side-constraints on subjective choices, allowing us choice within reason. This is the way we think about free speech, the norms of which have developed much more quickly than norms around family planning, which remain mired in a dysfunctional mid-20th Century model. Yes, we can speak, but cannot incite violence, defame, shout fire in a theater, etc. We can have kids, but not so many that we endanger their own future. We can have kids, but not in conditions that violate their human rights. We can have kids, but we must cooperate with other families to ensure a sharing of resources that ensures every kid a fair start in life which – given that they will all interact in the future - protects every child's future.

How do we do this, *exactly*? Again you said we should invest in future generations. Having Kids is an organization that promotes smaller families sharing resources to invest more in every child as the best

⁹ These include ensuring a minimum level of welfare for each child, pegging that level to equitable opportunities in life relative to other children, using participatory democracy as a standard to set quantitative and qualitative outcomes, and ensuring the restoration of biodiversity. See <https://havingkids.org/model/>.

way to give kids a fair start in life. We have developed a [child-first Fair Start family planning model](#) designed to invest in future generations, and to shift the world's thinking from isolationist family planning as focused on what parents, to a more comprehensive and cooperative focus that includes what children and the community need. The Fair Start model creates a [system of exchanges between communities and future parents](#) in order to maximize child welfare outcomes, equity, and sustainability. It's *intersectionally* effective, beyond comparison.

Because of its fundamental nature, the Fair Start model creates true freedom, from the bottom up: The freedom that comes with being given real opportunities in life, the freedom of living in functional communities where you can have confidence in the people around you, the freedom of smaller and autonomous democracies where you have a role in creating the rules under which you live, the freedom of nature, and the safe and healthy environment that comes with it. This all begins with children's right to a fair start in life. It is the lexically primary human right, the right that most makes us who we are, and it overrides all conflicting interests. The relatively few people in the world who have power, both in business and government, push against this freedom because their power lies in exploiting the large and vulnerable populations poor family planning creates. If you value child welfare, equality, nature, or democracy – and the freedom they represent – you will push back.

What's a simple comparison of our model to your proposals? Applied at an international scale the Fair Start model lands not far from your suggested replacement rate, but the process for getting there would be radically different from any other trajectory, with [massive changes in qualitative outcomes](#) that would move us quickly towards and beyond the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. The Fair Start model would also [eventually point us more towards the United Nations lower population projections](#), as a consequence of higher investments in each child and as a means of minimizing environmental risk. Having Kids uses a [battery of policy changes](#), as well as [outreach to public figures](#), to achieve its ultimate goal of changing the way we plan our families.

We urge you to consider all of this as you continue to work in, and speak out, on the subject of family planning. Regardless, we wish you and your family strength and the best possible outcomes as you deal with Nusayba's illness. Our thoughts are with you.

Sincerely,

Erika, Willow and Carter