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### **Culture, contraception, and population legislation: Insights from the discourses on the proposed “two-child policy” in the Philippines<sup>1</sup>**

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#### **Introduction**

In July 2004, Congressman Edcel Lagman filed House Bill No. 16, or the Proposed Reproductive Health Act, in the Philippine House of Representatives. This bill primarily calls for the creation of a Reproductive Health and Population Management Council, to be tasked with the implementation of national policy on reproductive health and population management. Since the bill was formulated within the broad, life cycle framework of reproductive health, it has wide-ranging specific provisions. One of its specific provisions is the promotion of the two-child norm through the granting of incentives for families who would follow this recommendation. It was to this provision that the media focused their attention when they reported on the bill, and henceforth, House Bill No. 16 became known as the “two-child policy”.

The bill or more accurately, the “two-child policy”, generated intense debate among various sectors of Philippine society. The conservative groups, led by the Church, vehemently opposed the policy, primarily on moral grounds. Other population stakeholders disapproved of the policy because they felt that this was not the appropriate population policy for the country to implement. On the other hand, ordinary citizens

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opposed to the bill phrased their arguments in terms of “freedom of choice” and the government’s failure to provide for the basic needs of its constituents.

Those in favor of the “two-child policy” explained their position in terms of the relationship between population size and development, at the macro level, and between family size and family welfare, at the micro level. Others also lamented the lack of a “real” population policy in the country, despite the many population-related problems currently plaguing the country.

The debate surrounding House Bill No. 16 has once more underscored the difficulty of formulating a comprehensive population policy and implementing a population program in the Philippines. This situation becomes ironic when seen in relation to the country’s high population growth rates and its strong policy commitments to reproductive health. Moreover, there now exists a “critical mass” of population management advocates in the country, and studies have shown an increasing openness among the public towards such norms and practices as small family size, contraceptive use, family planning, and women’s empowerment. Data also indicate a greater understanding and appreciation of the population-development dynamics among the population.

It is widely acknowledged that the Philippine population program’s failure to move forward is largely due to the Catholic Church’s strong opposition to such. Political bickering among population program stakeholders and patriarchal societal norms have

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also stood in the way of the program’s development. The combination of these factors has resulted in a government too vacillating and too tentative in its stand on population and related issues.

From a heuristic perspective, the debate generated by the “two-child policy” offers an excellent opportunity for analyzing the discourses (and counter-discourses) surrounding the problematic status of the population program in the Philippines. Such discourses may refer to the population program per se, or to its broader components such as fertility regulation and reproductive rights, or to more specific issues like contraception, abortion, sex education, etc.

A discourse analysis is deemed appropriate for understanding the dimensions of the debate, as such approach will surface the values and norms that underlie the differing sentiments which sectors and individuals hold about the population policy and the population program. Too often, well-intentioned interventions fail because they have failed to take into account the possible clashes in values between the proponents of the intervention, on the one hand, and the beneficiaries of these interventions, on the other. In the context of the present study, a discourse analysis will not only help identify the competing values and norms impinging on the country’s population policy but also ascertain the intensity with which these norms and values are articulated in the discourses. By extrapolation, the findings of the discourse analysis will hopefully contribute to the identification of strategies and approaches that could help move the Philippines’ population program forward.

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### **Methodology**

The study on which this paper is based aims to gather discourses about the two-child policy from two main perspectives:

1) the elite perspective, which refers to the discourses articulated by the major figures influencing the direction of the Philippine population program. Using concepts from Beck (1986 in Hajer, 1995) the elite perspective is further divided into the discourses of traditional politics (the venue for legislation) and those of subpolitics (particularly the church, media, and other interest groups that have a major stake in population policy formulation and programming); and

2) non-elite perspective, which refers to the discourses of the “ordinary” citizens. Guided by concepts from the knowledge gap theory, this perspective is further divided into two: a) the perspective of the non-elites who have better access to technical information about the population, by virtue of their education and ease of access to various information sources/channels, and b) the perspective of the non-elites who have lesser access to technical information, as again determined by their education and socio-economic status.

The discourses of these four groups are being gathered from various sources, specifically 1) print media, the internet, and in-depth interviews for the elite perspectives, 2) print media, internet, and focus group discussion for the non-elite, higher SES perspective, and 3) focus group discussion for the non-elite lower SES perspective. Print sources are heavier on discourses coming from the various interest groups (government, church, mass media, NGOs, etc.) – i.e., the elite – but there are occasional letters to the

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editor that contain the “average citizen’s” views about the two-child debate. The internet is likewise rich in information about the interest groups’ views on the debate, but it also has a several online forums that provide “ordinary individuals” (higher SES elites, in particular) with a venue for airing their side on the debate. Since the lower SES non-elites hardly have access to (and/or are not interested in accessing) print media and internet, focus group discussions are deemed as the best means of getting their views on the two-child policy debate. Additionally, the focus group discussions, along with the focus interviews, are envisioned to provide more in-depth information about individuals’ (whether elite or non-elite) perspectives on the two-child debate in particular, and the country’s population program in general.

Data gathering for the study is ongoing. Towards the end of 2004, the debate on the “two-child policy” appears to have waned, only to get back into the limelight when, on February 2005, a new bill was filed in the House of Representatives. This was House Bill No. 3773, otherwise called as the Responsible Parenthood and Population Management Act of 2005. The bill consolidates and supersedes four House bills previously filed in Congress; one of them is House Bill No. 16.

HB 3773 has several authors (among them Rep. Lagman) and Congresswoman Josefina Josen, Chair of the House Committee on Women, is its lead sponsor. Nevertheless, it is to Rep. Lagman that the media and the interest groups – both for and against the bill – turn their attention when discussing the perceived merits (or lack thereof) of the bill. This bill has generated more intense debate than HB 16 did, and the

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two-child policy still figures prominently in the discourses. However, the scope of the discourse has significantly expanded to include contraception and sex education. Given these developments, the researcher's original plan of ending the data gathering by October 2004 was not followed; instead, data gathering has been extended until the end of September 2005 to accommodate the additional discourses on the two-child policy in the study's analysis.

### **Theoretical perspectives**

The study's design and analytical approach are guided primarily by the concepts and approaches to discourse analysis found in the works of Frank Fischer (2004) and Maarten Hajer (1995), whose works are, in turn, informed by and elaborate on Foucault's theory of discourse. Nurit Guttman's (1997) value-centered analysis of health communication interventions provides additional concepts and indicators for contextualizing the values and norms contained in the discourses.

Several studies focusing on the "rhetoric" underlying population policies, programs, or issues also proved helpful in developing this study's design (Kaler, 2004; Greenhalgh, 2003; Sang, 2002; Watkins, 2002; Briggs, 1998). Some papers dealing with policy analysis (Dogan, 2004; Radaelli, 2004) and qualitative studies dealing with reproductive health issues (Octomo, 2004; Cushing, 1999) were also consulted. None of studies/papers that conducted discourse analysis are, however, as comprehensive as Hajer's work. Moreover, no local studies that closely examine population policy-making

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dynamics were found. The present study thus hopes to be able to contribute to addressing these research gaps.

Presented in this paper are preliminary findings involving a portion of this study, specifically the discourses coming from the non-elite, higher SES group. Moreover, the data herein presented came from internet sources only, which is but one of the three sources of discourses (the other two being print media and focus group discussion) involving the non-elite, higher SES group. Given these parameters, it thus follows that whatever arguments are herein presented should be taken as tentative formulations about the nature of the discourse about the population debate in the Philippines.

### **House Bill No. 16: An overview**

House Bill No. 16, otherwise known as the Reproductive Health Care Act of 2004, proposes to create “a Reproductive Health and Population Management Council for the implementation of an integrated policy on reproductive health relative to sustainable development and population management, and for other purposes”. The proposed Reproductive Health and Population Management Council is a multi-agency body composed of the heads of 18 agencies.<sup>3</sup> This council will take the lead in the formulation and implementation of policies, programs, and projects in support of the country’s Reproductive Health Care Program. This program will have the following components:

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<sup>3</sup> These are the Department of Health, National Economic and Development Authority, Department of Social Welfare and Development, Department of Education, Department of Labor and Employment, Department of Interior and Local Government, Commission on Population, National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women, National Youth Commission, Commission on Higher Education, Housing and Urban Development Coordinating Council, National Anti-Poverty Commission, three representatives from the local government units, and three representatives from the NGOs.

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- 1) reproductive and sexual health education
- 2) maternal, peri-natal and pos-natal education, care and service
- 3) promotion of male involvement in reproductive health matters
- 4) prevention of abortion and management of post-abortion complications
- 5) provision of information and services addressing the reproductive health needs of the poor, senior citizens, women in prostitution, differently-abled persons, and women and children in war crisis situations.

Two sections of the bill make explicit references to the two-child norm, namely:

SEC. 4. 1. Definition of terms. – Population management – a program that aims to: a) encourage the limitation of the number of children to an affordable level of two (2) children per family (underscoring mine); b) attain an optimum fertility rate vis-à-vis equitable allocation and utilization of resources; c) realize a balanced spatial distribution of the population by discouraging migration to urban centers and decongesting thickly populated areas; d) promote the effective partnership among the national government, local government units and the private sector in the design, implementation, coordination, integration, monitoring and evaluation of people-centered programs on population, development and environment; and e) conduct studies on and provide incentives for the deceleration of population growth.

SEC. 13. Ideal Family Size. – In order to attain the desired population growth rate, the State shall encourage two (2) children as the ideal family size. Children from these families shall have preference in the grant of scholarships at the tertiary level.

Initial reactions to this bill – from the media, legislators, and other interest groups – expectedly varied. Below is a sampling of reactions to HB 16 culled from media reports:

FAVORABLE

*I didn't want to jump into the discussions until I'd read the bill. Now that I have, I can say this: it does not propose anything close to China's former*



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*policy, or even to milder versions such as Singapore's two-child policy. In fact, Lagman's bill goes to great lengths to make sure people's rights are respected around reproductive decisions, with penalties prescribed for anyone who attempts to force family planning. (Tan, Philippine Daily Inquirer, 12 August 2004)*

*The reality is that the problem of overpopulation is beginning to assume threatening proportions. The myriad problems affecting the country may be attributed to our inability to sustain our rapidly burgeoning population. Thus, the proposed two-child policy is a long-term solution addressing this problem. /Since the proposed policy is purely voluntary, and therefore not an infringement of our basic freedoms, then it is logical to support this program. (Ramos, Ilocos Times, 15 August 2004)*

*The proposed two-child policy could be an effective population management measure on a long-term if given the chance to be implemented in the country, an official of the Population Commission (PopCom) in Central Mindanao said. (Sun Star General Santos, 19 August 2004)*

### UNFAVORABLE

*Opposition Rep. Imee Marcos of Ilocos Norte predicted on Monday that abortions would rise if measures promoting two-child families or a spacing of five years between births become laws. /If enacted into laws, Marcos said, they would force mothers to get rid of "excess" babies to avoid costly fees that government hospitals or state-run clinics would impose on births outside the prescribed limit. (Cruz, The Manila Times, 3 August 2004)*

*A newly-formed alliance criticized Rep. Edcel Lagman's proposed Reproductive Health Act of 2004 (House Bill 16) which recommends, among others, the adoption of a two-child family policy./The alliance, led by Manila Mayor Lito Atienza...called the bill "destructive and an alibi for failure for the government."/The proponents are not only encroaching on the powers of local government units, they also want to sacrifice local development objectives to buy and distribute condoms and birth control pills...."The measure is promoting a culture of death and would open the floodgates to heinous acts such as abortion. The issue is very basic: Are you promoting life or death?" he said. (Cueto, Malaya, 5 August 2004)*

*A women's group on Monday scored Albay Rep. Edcel Lagman's bill proposing incentives for families with only two children./Junice Demeterio-Melgar, executive director of Linangan ng Kababaihan Inc., said the offer of scholarships to families who practice the government's*

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*two-child policy is discriminatory towards the poor. (Dizon, ABSCBNNews.com, 10 August 2004)*

*Will the government impose sanctions once it implements the two-child policy? If it does, then I fear that Rep. Edcel Lagman's two-child policy proposal is like Herod's order, or the Pharaoh's, when Jochebed hid Moses in a basket down the Nile to save him. I've read some favorable reactions to the policy as they cite China's "controlled" population growth. But the danger of just parroting facts without looking behind them is synonymous to eating crow. (Bangsoy, Sun Star Baguio, 21 August 2004)*

*The Filipino Church unequivocally condemns and expresses its total opposition to the draft bill on population management.... In the press release Archbishop Capalla calls the underlying logic of the bill "simplistic" for it assumes that "our growing population is the cause of our nation's poverty and that we just have too many people for our scarce resources." (AsiaNews.it, 27 August 2004)*

### NEUTRAL

*The two-child policy proposed by Albay Rep. Edcel Lagman is fraught with danger. In particular, it opens up the possibilities of institutionalizing discrimination in the name of economic progress. However, as a starting point for much-needed discussions on population control, his proposal is a welcome development./The Lagman proposals have sparked contending proposals from other politicians as well as comments from the private and religious sectors. The urgency of a population control program is clear. What should concern us today is defining the parameters within which further discussions should take place. (Editorial, The Philippine Daily Inquirer, 1 August 2004)*

From this sampling of elite discourses, one already gets a fairly good idea of the breadth and depth of discourses surrounding the two-child policy. From these discourses, one could see that the controversial two-child policy is being dissected from various perspectives bringing forth demographic, developmental, religious, moral, and governance issues. In the succeeding sections, this paper will attempt to show the extent

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to which such discourses are also articulated by members of the non-elite, higher SES group.

### Data sources

For this paper, the analysis and discussion are based on data coming from 11 online sources consisting of forums, blogs, discussion groups, and message boards.

Overall, 230 entries were collected, distributed as follows:

Source	Number of entries
<a href="http://www.gov.ph">www.gov.ph</a> forum	48 postings
<a href="http://laundry-day.bluechronicles.net">http://laundry-day.bluechronicles.net</a>	1 blog entry; 46 responses
isadalawatamana.html	1 newspaper article; 10 reactions
1freeworld.net discussion group	29 postings
<a href="http://www.gutom.org">www.gutom.org</a> forum	15 postings
<a href="http://www.flyfreeministries.org">www.flyfreeministries.org</a> forum	9 postings
kodiko.blogspot.com	1 blog entry; no responses
The sassy lawyer's journal	1 blog entry; no responses
<a href="http://www.pinoypblog.com">www.pinoypblog.com</a> forum	6 postings
iBalita forum	56 postings
Alleba message board	7 postings

Expectedly, the entries were uneven in their length and depth of discussion of the two-child policy issue. Some participants took pains to explain their perspective on the issue, others had short but still substantive comments about it, while others only put in brief reactions to the postings that preceded their own.

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### The foci of discourse

Data gathered from the online sources enumerated above indicate that the two-child policy has an almost equal share of supporters and non-supporters among the non-elites of higher SES. Data further suggest that both sides are equally passionate about their stand on the issue, as can be gleaned from the way they chose to frame their perspectives on this issue.

From their postings, it appears that the higher SES non-elites<sup>4</sup> perceive the two-child policy to be an issue that involves mainly the government, the Catholic church, and the masses. The government and the Catholic church are seen as the key actors shaping the contours and direction of the two-child policy. More often than not, the church is seen as the stronger institution, to whom the government should, or is forced to, comply. In its superior role, the Catholic church is either maligned or supported, depending on which side of the debate the person is in. Consequently, those who regard the church positively see it but proper for the government not to implement the two-child policy. On the other hand, those against the church criticize the government for its lack of will to do what is good for the people:

**laundry-day:** ... *our elected officials would rather be “good catholics” than be “good filipinos”. They would rather look “mabango” [trans: sweet smelling] to the Catholic hierarchy who live tax-free than address the real needs of their countrymen who pay their taxes.*

**vcleyes:** *Even if President GMA chooses to play deaf and dumb on this politically-charged issue, patriotic Filipinos should rally behind Rep. Lagman and not let him do his fight alone. His adversary, the Catholic church, is too powerful, and it is a pity if Rep. Lagman ends up looking more like the legendary Don Quixote dela Mancha.*

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<sup>4</sup> Alternatively called as “posters” in certain parts of this document

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The strong hand of the Catholic church in the shaping of the Philippines' population policy is thus not lost among the posters. The government is mainly perceived to take on a passive role, content to take its cue from the church. In many instances, the Catholic church's anti-population stance is seen to be a form of dogmatism, and the government's subservience to the church as a strategy to protect its (government's) self-interests. One poster, however, sees the church and the state as equally tyrannical against the people they both profess to serve:

**kano\_kuno:** *Politicians condemn [the masses] in public, while loving them in private. For them it means MORE VOTES! The Church thinks the same way the Politicians do! More members, and more members = more money! Maybe we should ask the church to feed everybody. God knows they have amassed enough wealth through the centuries!*

The masses, on the other hand, are seen to play a key role as the “targets” of the two-child policy – specifically, as its “beneficiaries”, on the one hand:

**laundry-day:** .... *Go out to the malls on a Sunday and see for yourself. See the crush of people choking the streets of the country during the morning and evening rush hour. See the number of schoolkids who have to contend with classes under the Mango tree because of a lack of classrooms. What about the mothers who have to give birth on a hospital gurney because they can't accommodate her in the ER?*

and as its “confounding factor”, on the other:

**Shaolin:** *How about those couples that [sic] belong to the underprivileged /undereducated strata of society? Do they take those family planning seminars seriously? How about those couples who live in shanties and cartons? Does [sic] our insipid lawmakers and trapo [traditional] politicians think those people give a rat's ass about their family planning seminars?*

**kodiko:** *A lot of these BIG families live below the poverty line.... These are families whose primary and only pleasure and leisure in life is SEX.... Probably their only other leisure is television, which by the way is highly charged with SEX..... Maybe we can better gauge the effect of Lagman's bill if we can compare it to the four child policy that is currently being implemented. Has it changed*

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*society? Has it convinced families from the railroads to settle for only four child [sic]? (Pag apat lang ang anak mo sa riles, baog ka.) [Among families who live along the railroad tracks, someone who has only four children is considered sterile.]*

Shaolin situates his indictment of the masses within a vicious cycle where the government and the church play a prominent role:

**Shaolin:** *The filipino ‘masang tanga’ [stupid Filipino masses] have been pampered and coddled by these worthless groups and the vampiric politicians because of their size and obvious winning factor come election time but we should not ignore the fact that the number of illiterate and poverty stricken filipinos grow [sic] horrendously by the second!.... They multiply exponentially like rabbits on an extacy<sup>5</sup> [sic] overdose and all because our government and society is filled with vultures I(politicians and church leaders) capitalizing on their obvious stupidity!!!!*

It is noteworthy that, in assessing the two-child policy and its attendant issues vis-à-vis the three key actors mentioned above, the posters seem to see themselves as outsiders. They are observers and commentators, not active participants who can determine the course of the country’s population policy and programs. In a way, this may be reflective of what some members of the middle class are now articulating in their discourses: that in heated debates about issues, in deciding which course of action to take, the members of the middle class are often taken for granted. That is, the relative merits of an issue or a program are, more often than not, evaluated vis-à-vis the harms and benefits it would bring to the masses and to the poor. The middle class, which actually sustains the economy more than the poor and the elites do, are often ignored in these valuations.

Additionally, as outsiders, the higher SES non-elites seem to position themselves more closely with the elite discourses, than with the discourses emanating from the

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<sup>5</sup> Extasy, the prohibited drug

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masses. This is, of course, partly a function of access – i.e., technically and conceptually, the higher SES non-elites find it easier to relate with the elite discourses than with the discourses of the lower SES non-elites (to whom the masses belong).

### The themes of the discourses

*Religion, morality, freedom.* Given the Catholic church's prominent role in the two-child policy debate, it is not surprising that the many of the discourses carry strong religious and moral undertones. Quite predictably, the morality discourses deal with the evils of contraception and abortion, as exemplified by **master\_alterserver**'s post: *Every bit of contraception in every way, in any circumstance is wrong, because man takes upon himself the role of God in limiting the creation of life.*

Attempts to discredit the morality discourse are found in the postings, including those that question the scare of abortion:

**jo-an:** *those who say that this policy is immoral, are hypocrites... especially those who say that this policy may lead to abortion... hey! snap back to reality, abortion is a great fad in our country even before this policy was ever thought of.*

Other discourses attempting to subvert the moral-religious discourses are directed against the church. As shown in some of the postings cited earlier, some of the posters have questioned the church's sincerity in looking after people's welfare and some of the posters, as illustrated below, can be scathing in their criticism:

**vcleynes:** *.... If it is not yet clear to many, history tells us that the Catholic church is actually anti-Filipino. It has no real concern for the well-being of our people. It educates our youth not to make them useful citizens but to make them apologists for the church.... The Church profits from its dominant influence on our people and will protect this position against any form of attack. And it sees the Lagman*

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*bill as one of these kinds of attack that could shake off its powerful influence over the minds of our people*

Others have criticized the church for what they perceive as its refusal to accept the reality of the population problem:

**Don:** *Just basic arithmetic here, my dear Cardinals, Bishops, Reverends, etc. etc. .. No amount of morality-hooya can save the country from imminent [sic]hell on earth or as the adage goes, it being “handed to HELL in a basket” if you do not accept the sad fact that the uncontrollable growth of population is one big piece of the overall poverty and hardship puzzle.*

Coexisting with the morality discourses are discourses on free will, individual rights, and freedom of choice:

**fred:** *we don't need to be dictated on how many kids we will have. this is a democratic country where people are supposed to make an intelligent choice...*

**anonymous2:** *... by the way my friend there are lots of things na mawawala [that will be lost]. one of them is the violation of our free will. dont you see the logic behind that policies are made for our limitation. limitation i think is a violation of free will dba? [right?]*

*Population size and population growth.* The online postings also carry strong demographic themes in an effort to present the “good” and the “bad” side of a big population size and a high population growth. Concepts and arguments relating to population and development, population momentum, and sub-replacement fertility rates, among others, often appear in the discourses, in sometimes rather awkward articulations.

To quote a few examples, those in favor of the two-child policy argue that:

**evilsperm:** *...80 million people... about 5 babies born in every 1 minute... in the next decade... we know what will gonna happend [sic] next... economic crisis, energy crisis, employment crisis, monetary system will decentgrade [sic] leaving brothers to kill brother over a grain of rice... and were nowhere to go nah'.. tsk tsk tsk.....*



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**joana**<sup>6</sup>: *lets face it guys, kelangan natin ung bill n un pra di lumobo ng husto ung population natin... d p man nangyayaring dumoble ang population ng pilipinas e nag hihirap n tyo what if nangyari n un... and isa p kung ayaw sumunod ok lng nman cla rin naman ang mahihirapan e. [we need the bill to control our population size. Our population has not doubled yet and we are already suffering, what more if it doubles. Moreover, it's fine if people don't want to follow; they will be the ones to suffer the consequences anyway.]*

On the other side, those against the two-child policy declare that:

**ginesdemaфра**: *The unilinear logic that views population as directly affecting or causing poverty is distorted and distorting. Such a framework validates the absurd notion that if you have no population then you'll have unlimited prosperity.... Rather than wage war against the unborn and the already living, the solutions to poverty, underdevelopment, intellectual infertility, wasted resources, should consist of a mix of economic, financial, commercial, intellectual, natural, moral policies that will unleash the total wealth of our land and peoples.*

**junsarmiento**: *Just food for thought. Countries with low food prices, good education, and a high income have a low birthrate. Is it possible, that when we take care of the economy, education, and food production, birthrates will naturally slow down?*

**hmmm**: *I don't think that our population is totally draining our resources. it's actually the mismanagement of resources that's our problem.*

Thus it can be seen that the posters' discourses conform to mainstream arguments pertaining to the population development-link, population momentum, and declining fertility rates.

*The failure of the government.* Discourses about the government's failures, in the context of the population problem, cuts several ways. As earlier pointed out, some posters see the government's failure in terms of its subservience to the church, its lack of real concern for people's welfare, and/or its failure to diagnose the "real" cause of the

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<sup>6</sup> This entry is written sms-style

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population problem. Another recurring discourse is the government's lack of political will and poor decision-making skills:

**Munggo:** *Two-child policy? I dunno about that. The main point simply is: ENFORCEMENT, ENFORCEMENT, ENFORCEMENT. Nothing more, nothing less.... These guys could pass any old ridiculous law that they could, but I bet my a\*\* they wouldn't enforce it.*

**dknight:** *Government keep [sic] on creating bills, which upon implementation needs more funds, and in the end it cannot be implemented because of the lack of funds. better divert their energy and whatever funds left to increasing the budget in education. educated people will relatively think and consider family planning or limiting their number of children. educating the people will be much more efficient than dictating them on how many children they are allowed to bear.*

**ebayani:** *The bill that is hot in Congress about population is a total waste of time and a distraction from the urgent issues facing the country. The leadership in the Philippines have failed and are still failing to put their heads together to address the real roots of the problem: PRIORITIZING NEEDS.... My knowledge amounts to the conclusion that POPULATION MEANS WEALTH. The problem lies in government and its leaders who do not know how to manage their population.*

*Looking outward: the Philippine population problem from a broader perspective.*

A number of posters have attempted to dissect the two-child policy, as well as the country's population problem, by looking beyond their immediate actors and national context. Along these lines, some have evaluated the two-child policy against the experiences of other countries:

**minette:** *It is not THE solution for [sic] the country's ills. But it can help ease the strain on our natural resources, social services, etc. Besides, looking at its results in countries like China, Singapore and Thailand, don't you even think it's worth a try.*

**ginesdemaфра:** *Macao is a cautionary tale.... Its density is 16,428 per square km. Compare the Philippines. With a land area of 298,170 sq km, its density is 187.81 per square km or a little over 1% of Macao's....Macao, despite its extreme density, has achieved First World status. It defies the wisdom of the "overpopulation" logic.*

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**hmmm:** ...from what I gathered some time ago from a german friend of mine studying on population growths, the optimal number of children per family for a sustainable economy is around 2. I guess that's where the proponent of the bill got the idea and combined it with the China model of 1-child policy. (well, the Chinese have now learned the hard way that the 1-child policy is no good and their population is beginning to age)

Others have factored in the role that other societal institutions and interest groups play in the population issue, as well globalization and neocolonialist forces that impact on the country's development:

**PusongPinoye2:** *There are more serious social and sociological problems than political problems in the Philippines. But there are infinitely more political journalists, political analysts, political pundits, and political gurus, and political propagandists than sociologists. Therefore the social and sociological problems are more often than not simply politicized.... This means that the problems are discussed and debated, written about, publicized and even widely-propagandized, on radio, TV and broadsheet papers (even tabloids) but seldom, if ever, analyzed seriously nor deeply enough, into viable solutions.*

**sociologist\_con:** *...it's not really the population that which is the cause of poverty. Is it [sic] because until now we associate ourselves with the foreign country, specifically, America.... Yes, one child policy is a practical way to lessen the population in the country! but not the answer to poverty!*

### Synthesis and conclusion

The preceding discussions have shown that the higher SES non-elites seem to be equally split between those for and against the proposed two-child policy. Further, if the posters' comments are to be used as the basis, these non-elites' discourses exhibit a relatively high level of complexity, as they endeavor to apprehend and disentangle the impact of different social forces (both local and global), historical experiences, and interest groups on the country's population problem. Further, many of the posters made

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efforts (although unsuccessfully, for some) to analyze the population issue from various perspectives – demographic, moral/religious, economic, governance/political, and social.

Arguments about the role of the church and the government predominate in the postings, which most likely stems from the recognition of the Church's strong hand in determining the course of state affairs. Yet, while the voices in support of the Church's stand on the population issue come out loud and clear, counter-voices are just as emphatic and can sometimes be very scathing in their criticisms of the church. Thus, the argument over the church's weakening hold on its flock seem to gain credence; however, in the absence of comparative discourses coming from the other sectors (traditional politics, subpolitics, and the lower SES non-elites), no conclusive statements about the matter can be proffered at this point.

Disappointment over the government's handling of the population problem – over its subservience to the church, lack of political will, poor management and decision-making skills, among others – is also a common thread in the discourses. Additionally, discourses on the masses' role in the population problem – either as the biggest losers in the competition for resources (and conversely, as the main beneficiaries of a population program), as the direct roots of the problem, or as the (un)willing pawns in the government's and/or the church's schemes – were articulated by a number of posters.

Noticeably absent is the posters' reckoning of their own role in the whole debate. In fact, it seems that the higher SES non-elites regard themselves as outsiders who are

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free to comment on the problem, but are not duty-bound to contribute to its solution. Perhaps it is a reflection of their lower stake in the population debate – as compared to the elites, who have vested interests to protect, and to the lower SES non-elites, who are first to “feel the crunch” of a big population size. Or perhaps, this is a reflection of Philippine society’s tendency to “gloss over” the impact of issues on the middle class, preoccupied as it is with the welfare of the poor and the masses.

As mentioned, there are now emerging discourses (not in the context of the population debate) from the middle class, complaining against the government’s and other interest groups’ seeming disregard for this (middle class) sector. Whether this is indicative of the silent majority finally finding its voice, only time will tell. Yet, one is tempted to ask: If these non-elite discourses are suddenly pushed into the limelight, carrying as much weight as the elite discourses do now, what form would the country’s population policy take? As the current discourses are almost equally split between pro- and anti- sentiments, that is a question that would hold us in suspense for now.

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