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Development Policy

World Population Year 1974

by J. H. Richards, Cardiff *

UN Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim has officially designated 1974 as World Population Year and requested Member governments to prepare "the broadest and most comprehensive possible plans for participation in the Year's activities."¹

The main event of the activities will be the World Population Conference 1974, in which all member countries in the United Nation system will be invited to participate. The 1974 Conference will provide a forum for international exchanges on population questions. It will also discuss a plan of action to assist Governments as well as international organisations in working out the best response to the challenge of the population problem.

At a special session, held in New York 1972, the Population Commission of the Economic and Social Council approved a provisional agenda for the 1974 Conference which includes: recent population trends and future prospects; population change and economic and social development; population resources and the environment; population and sociocultural aspects of family well-being, and a world population plan of action.

Although the Secretary-General pointed out that the highlight of World Population Year is to be the intergovernmental conference, he also emphasized² that, "from the start of its involvement in population matters, . . . it has been a fundamental tenet of the United Nations that there must be freedom of choice for individuals to shape their family life according to their beliefs and aspirations . . . Thus, while it is hoped that the conference will "assist governments in working out the best response to the challenge of the population problem," it is also appreciated that "there must be freedom of choice for individuals." There would appear to be scope for conflict here.

The purpose of this paper is to emphasize the main problem that is likely to be encountered in preparing and implementing a national population

programme in such a way that potential conflict between government and individuals is kept to a minimum if not completely eliminated. But a prerequisite is an appreciation of the current situation and the effects of potential change in population.

Appreciation of Current Situation

Based on United Nations estimates, the world's population was about 3,600 mn in 1970 compared with about 1,650 mn in 1900. For every 100 persons alive in 1900 there were 220 in 1972. The rate of increase has been accelerating and was, in the decade 1960-1970, equivalent to two p.c. per year. As population expands at compound rate of increase, this implies that the population more or less doubles every 35 years. Hence an extrapolation of the current forces at work will result in figures of, 7,200 mn in the years 2005, 14,400 mn in the year 2040, and 28,800 mn in the year 2075.

Even in isolation, these figures suggest that something should be done to curb rates of population growth. When looked at in the context of food supply, labour demand, housing and educational requirements, the supply of natural resources and environmental problems, the figures assume more alarming proportions.

The present high growth rate is due more to falling mortality than rising fertility. "Death control" has been one of the more significant innovations introduced into developing countries during the past thirty years. As a result, life expectancy at birth has increased substantially so that on average it is now 60 years in Latin America, 50 years in South-East-Asia and 40 years in Africa, but in all the developing world it is still below the Psalmist's "three score years and ten",—a target which has virtually been attained in the developed world. Therefore it can still be argued that death control

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¹ UN Information Centre, London, PR/72/41 dated September 21, 1972, p. 1.

² Ibid. p. 2.

has not gone far enough in the developing world. As an example of this change one may look at Mauritius. There, life expectancy at birth increased from 33 to 51 years in an eight year period — it took Sweden 130 years to make such progress.

Death Control vs. Birth Control

But declining mortality subsequently affects birth rates. More people survive to become adults and have children of their own; females who perhaps previously would have had a few children before dying young now live through the whole reproductive period: For example, when India achieved independence in 1947 female life expectancy was 24 years, but by 1967 it had increased to 48 years. There is, therefore, little doubt that the current high rates of population growth may be attributed to the rapid decline in mortality rates in the post war period. To counterbalance such a *favourable* movement in mortality rates it would seem logical to attempt to reduce fertility rates. But this has not always been an acceptable proposition. The introduction of "Birth Control" as a balancing factor to "Death Control" is still not universally accepted, although one may begin to discern an erosion of entrenched positions in recent years. It is possible that this change in attitude might be accelerated if there was less talk of a world population problem — a global crisis. This is a point that must be emphasized: *there is no world population crisis!*

Varying Patterns and Trends

There may not be a global problem as such, but there are individual national problems—one for each country—but these national population problems cannot be aggregated into a global one. The reason for this is simple. The stage of interplay between the various causal factors differs in each and every instance.

Demographic patterns and trends vary significantly from region to region and from country to country and even between regions within an autonomous country. While a large proportion of developing countries are characterised by rapidly falling mortality, high levels of fertility and hence accelerating population growth, the pattern and intensity of these factors vary considerably. Again, in many developing countries, the density of population is not invariably high and few such countries apart from the "city-states" of Macao, Hong Kong and Singapore and small islands such as Barbados and Mauritius have density figures of the magnitude of those existing in England (but not Wales or Scotland) the Netherlands, Belgium and Japan.

No one can dispute the fact that certain countries have room for larger populations, but in the case

of many developing countries their existing population growth rates can only intensify their present problems of malnutrition, poverty, and unemployment, and hinder their development efforts. It is no exaggeration to say that all developing countries find themselves in a situation where they have a high ratio of population not necessarily and exclusively in terms of available land but relative to available capital. Such countries would therefore benefit from a more modest rate of population growth and certainly one in which the rate of growth of population did not exceed the rate of growth of capital accumulation. While one may argue against the concept of a world population problem, one cannot get away from the fact that each developing country faces a population problem of one sort or another. In addition, it must be recognised that while industrialised societies have, on the whole, more modest rates of population growth, these countries, nevertheless, pose a danger to mankind given the menace to the human environment of present patterns of production and consumption. While the United States contains 5.6 p.c. of the world's population, it consumes 40 p.c. of the world's primary raw materials. Add to this the "over-consumption" taking place in Western Europe and Japan, and one quickly appreciates the existence of population pressures in the developed countries.

National Population Problems

If one analyses the short-fall in employment opportunities; the availability of food supplies; the lack of educational facilities; the inadequacy of housing conditions; the significant deficiency in trained medical personnel and the whole balance of the ecosystem as highlighted in the documentation prepared for the UN Conference on the Environment held at Stockholm in June 1972, the significant point that emerges is the magnitude of the adverse repercussions one may anticipate if human reproduction is allowed to continue to grow even at current rates. But these are *national* issues. National facts have to be examined and such an exercise can only indicate national problems which can be tackled by means of a national policy. But it has to be and also has to be seen to be an indigenous national policy. It is abundantly clear that only those policies and programmes which are rooted in national need and decisionmaking have any chance to gain the popular support necessary for their success. A number of developing countries, particularly in Africa and Latin America, fear that certain developed countries desire to exert pressure for population control on developing countries possibly by substituting assistance to this end for more general development aid. Such intentions will only aggravate rather than alleviate the situation. If na-

tional population programmes are to succeed they must be free from external pressures.

Primarily it should be to provide assistance for each member of the population to satisfy his own personal wishes. If there are persons who wish to conceive and cannot, they should be assisted. If they wish to limit the numbers of children in their families, they should receive help towards that end. Whatever the national view on these matters, there will always be some, perhaps a minority, who think differently from the majority—perhaps even a majority who are not in agreement with some aspect of the national policy—there will always be some doubt about the extent to which it is reasonable for a national policy to deny to the individual the opportunity to make his own choice in such matters. This is not to say that a national population policy should be confined to meeting the wishes of individual members of the population. National policy, on this subject as on any other, is decided by the government. While they may have a mandate on policy from the electorate, they will also be expected to act on expert advice which is available to them but which may not be available or significantly apparent to the population at large. They may see more clearly the consequences for the nation of the aggregate result of decisions being taken individually on population matters. The aims of a national population policy should therefore be to enable individual members of the population to achieve their wishes in the composition of their families; but where the fulfillment of those wishes may have serious consequences for all, a national policy should bring this to the notice of all individual families and attempt to persuade them to change their attitudes wherever necessary.

Comprehensive Development Strategy

An awareness of population pressures has led some 40 governments to formulate population policies and to undertake programmes to regulate family size. One important point in the formulation of national policies must be emphasized: this is that population policy must not be treated as a thing apart. It is essential to focus on its integration in a more comprehensive development strategy. Governments have the duty to inform individuals clearly on the implications of accepted population policies, so that their citizens may take these into account in planning their families. But both information and medical services for family planning provided by either public or private agencies are not likely to have much success unless they are closely associated with identifiable efforts to achieve social and economic progress. Such changes are essential to reinforce the motivation of individuals towards

changing their concepts concerning the number and spacing of children. Examples of the necessary changes in the social and economic environment needed include programmes for child feeding designed to reduce infant mortality; improved educational facilities and opportunities linked to expanded employment opportunities including opportunities for women; measures to increase productivity thus raising living standards; and effective security for old age thus reducing dependency on children and hence the desire for large families.

It cannot be too strongly emphasized that family planning programmes are not an alternative to economic, social and political development, but rather, they are a vital integral part of such development. Many countries now chart their future development in terms of needs, resources and goals in an integrated form. Governments prepare five-year, ten-year and even longer term plans. These plans look carefully at the nation's need for houses, jobs, schools, hospitals, roads, etc., and in evaluating future needs, potential population size must be a significant factor; but it should not only be regarded as a causal factor, it can be a dependent variable as well. When population is regarded in this way, then its impact can be reduced.

In general terms the major requirement at the present time is in the nature of a mind opening exercise. The basic facts and potential repercussions must be widely propagated and specific answers sought. But those participating in the search for solutions must be aware of the many-sided nature of the problem: there are too many facets for one specialist, hence an inter-disciplinary approach is essential. No one will deny the inadequacy of demographic data in many developing countries, but the training of demographers, while improving the quality of national statistics, will have little effect on the spread of family planning techniques and hence on population growth rates. The need is for administrators, educators and motivators.

If World Population Year 1974, is to be a success, emphasis must be placed on the situation in each individual country. The presentation of global figures can well create the impression within a country that its own national problem is really infinitesimal in a world context. Domestic problems can then be evaded, as the crisis is regarded as someone else's responsibility. By presenting national data in a national setting, the significance of the national problem can be emphasized and, it is hoped, appreciated. The goal is then a national one requiring a national effort. Only by tackling the individual national problems will the global situation be improved.