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ARTICLES

New Economic Order

Population Problems and North-South Cooperation

by Dr Benno Engels, Hamburg *

Approaches in the United Nations to solve the problems resulting from world population trends — the so-called “population explosion” in the countries of the Third World — as part of the North-South cooperation are not new; nor are they without their critics. The author discusses the differing arguments.

As long ago as 1962 when Sweden submitted to the United Nations a draft resolution designed to intensify the Organisation's activities in the field of population policy and to extend the technical aid given to family planning, reaction among industrial as well as developing countries was by no means unanimous. Apart from the eleven countries who together with Sweden had sponsored the resolution, support for it was confined to a few Asian and African countries; the Latin-American countries, and Argentina in particular were against it. These countries, and also the Soviet Union, either denied altogether that there was such a thing as a population problem in the Third World or they denied the United Nations the right to pursue a population policy at all. When it came to the casting of votes on the decisive paragraph of the resolution — the granting of technical aid for population policy programmes — there voted against it not only most of the Latin-American countries, but also a number of industrial nations — among them Belgium, France, Italy and the Netherlands.

Disputed World Population Action Plan

The strategy worked out by the United Nations for the Second Development Decade also touches only lightly and in somewhat vague terms on population policy. Under item 65 it says: “Those countries which regard their population growth rate as an obstacle to their development, take the measures which in the light of their development concept they consider appropriate. At their request they can obtain for these purposes help from the industrial nations which provide funds for family planning or research in accordance with their own

policy in these matters. Should the occasion arise, the appropriate international organisations will also be ready to help, if help is requested by a government, but help in this field cannot replace other forms of development aid”. Compared with other passages, this assessment of by far the most important problem of the developing countries looks rather meagre.

In March 1973 the United Nations Population Commission tried for the first time to get a draft plan for concerted action on world population problems adopted. The plan was to be submitted to the World Conference on Population Problems which was due to meet in Bucharest in 1974. But the plan came to nothing, for the meeting of the World Population Commission which was to have adopted the draft plan was attended by no one except observers from ten states. In July, the Advisory Committee for the World Population Action Plan met at expert level but was unable to agree on a draft proposal. The controversial political attitudes towards the plan's objectives are already evident from the different views expressed on the name to be given to the plan. The original proposal was to call it “Global Population Strategy” — a rather ambitious title to which the developing countries objected.

The third extraordinary meeting of the Population Commission in New York was attended by nearly all states which in one way or another were interested in concerted action to solve the problem of the world's population growth rate. The meeting had before it a proposal submitted by India, Great Britain and the Netherlands. These countries wanted the meeting to formulate a political declaration of intent as well as a programme of recommendations on a national and international level. The United States of America for its part

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tabled a draft defining the aims of a world population policy as follows: "In the interests of all nations and in the common interest the following maximum population growth rates should be achieved by 1985: World average 1.7 p.c.; average for industrial countries 0.6 p.c. and 2 p.c. for developing countries". The People's Republic of China, Mexico and Brazil objected and thus prevented a generally agreed decision by the Commission.

The third draft for an action programme on the world population problem which was laid before the Bucharest Conference no longer contained any such global, quantitative aims. At the request of countries of the Third World any binding references to the need for family planning measures in the developing countries were deleted from the final documents of the Conference and, of course, also from the World Population Action Plan. Many observers and delegates from developing countries objected even to other scarcely concrete formulations of a world population action plan, seeing in them an attempt to adopt Malthusian doctrines as official UN policy and thus legitimise them morally.

The realisation that generative attitudes are largely the result of socio-economic factors caused the Conference to turn away from its original objectives and articulate instead development policy positions. In the historico-political context of the raw-material crisis of the industrial countries and the strengthened self-confidence of the developing countries it was in accord with the political and tactical objectives of the Third and the Fourth World to discuss the concept of a world population policy in connection with their demand for a re-orientation of the economic and political relations between North and South.

Population Growth Rates by Regions

Leaving aside the potential causes of conflict inherent in the absolute poverty of the population of the Third World and the widening gap in the standards of living between the rich and the poor, the world population trend and the regional distribution of that population among industrial and developing countries must be regarded as the decisive determinants for the extent of any future conflict between North and South.

The alarmingly self-perpetuating dynamism of the global population trend becomes particularly evident when studied over longer periods. Between 1750 and 1900 the world's population increased from 0.8 to 1 billion; by 1970 it had reached 3.6 billion, and, according to United Nations estimates, a further 3 billion will have been added to this figure by the turn of the century.

The biggest population increase, according to UN-estimates, may be expected to occur in *South Asia*. There a third of the world's population is already concentrated, with India, Indonesia and Pakistan being the most densely populated areas. The United Nations expect that half of the population increase due to occur in the Third World, or 43 p.c. of the global growth, will be concentrated in this sub-region. As opposed to this, the growth rate in *East Asia* should remain relatively low with the result that East Asia's share in the world population will decrease from roughly 27 p.c. to 22 p.c. Nonetheless, measured in absolute figures, the number of people living there will still be more than 0.5 billion higher, and this increase still represents about 15 p.c. of the expected over-all growth of the world population, or 20 p.c. of population growth in developing countries. These trends are primarily due to the population growth in the People's Republic of China, though it is to be taken into consideration that at the Bucharest conference the accuracy of the Chinese population statistics was disputed.

Latin-America shows at present the highest population growth rates. This is due to death rates which by international standards are relatively low. The present high growth rates are expected to decrease only insignificantly in the years until the start of the next millennium. The absolute increase expected to occur until the turn of the millennium — 0.37 billion — should be considerably smaller than that expected for East Asia; Latin America's share in the world population should rise from 7.8 p.c. to 10 p.c.

Africa, whose peoples at present account for 9.5 p.c. of the world population, should, if the expected higher rates of growth do in fact materialise, increase its share in the world population by the turn of the millennium to just under 13 p.c.; Africa's absolute increase, estimated at nearly half a billion, should be roughly the same as that of East Asia.

As for the *industrial countries*, growth rates vary from 0.8 p.c. for Europe to more than 2 p.c. for Oceania (where the high growth rates for Australia and New Zealand are partly attributable to immigration). For Europe a further slight decline is expected. Estimates of population trends in the USA and Soviet Russia, on the other hand, proceed from the assumption that, after a slight rise in the eighties, growth rates will decline.

Looking at the problem as a whole, one is able to perceive that the numerical growth of mankind is at present concentrated on eight developing countries: the People's Republic of China, India, Indonesia, Brazil, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nigeria, and Mexico, with a total of 1.8 billion. These countries

together at present make up nearly 70 p.c. of the people living in developing countries. Although their growth rates are slightly lower than those in the remaining developing countries, their populations rose in the course of the last 20 years by 0.6 billion. Although fertility rates in these eight countries are expected to drop still further, their actual total population should rise in the next 20 years by 0.9 billion; that is to say that more than half the expected increase in the world population will be contributed by them.

However, such and similar prognoses of future population trends must be taken note of and utilized with the utmost caution. The defective statistics on which they are based are reason enough for considerable scepticism. For instance: in 1974, 14 African states held their first national census ever, at the initiative of the United Nations. Or: only about 79 p.c. of the world's population have ever been included in some statistical survey or other, and reliable data are available for no more than one third of mankind.

Interrelation between Economic and Social Developments and Procreation

One of the most important reasons for the fact that future world population trends are capable of being projected only in the form of hypothetical alternatives explains at the same time why population policy measures are regarded by many as practical applications of Malthusian doctrines and as alternatives to measures designed to further social and economic progress. That a link exists between economic progress, on the one hand, and social development and attitudes towards procreation, on the other, is generally accepted as a principle, but how this inter-relationship manifests itself in detail is decidedly unclear.

The arguments about the influence of economic and social development on population trends in essence still circle again and again around the theory of "demographic transition". This theory is based on the experiences of present day industrial countries and experiences which are presented in the form of a model. In its simplest version this model traces the trend of the demographic variable in the European industrialised countries through the 18th and 19th centuries.

In the first phase — end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century, high birth rates corresponded with high death rates — in terms of magnitude 30 to 45 per thousand; in the second phase — the beginning of modernisation — there was an improvement in the preconditions and possibilities for a gradual decrease in mortality, while birth rates were not declining to the same extent and/or considerably more slowly. As a result, population

growth rates rose to a degree never experienced before: During the last third of the 19th century, birth rates ranging from 35 to 40 per thousand and death rates between 25 and 30 per thousand caused population growth rates of between 0.5 and 1.5 p.c. The following phase was characterised by receding birth figures and population growth rates; it was during this period that the ideal of the small family spread among the inhabitants of the growing high-density conurbations. Declining mortality, increased expenditure on food, clothing and education, on the one hand, and at the same time decreasing contributions by the children to the family income, on the other, caused this trend towards smaller family units.

The question which is after all decisive from the point of view of population policy is which aspects of the modernisation and development process exert an influence on the demographic variables, change them and in which manner. No satisfactory answer to this question has so far been provided by the demographers. No published version of the theory of demographic transition describes in a precise manner what preconditions must exist for the decrease in fertility.

As long as population policy is forced to rely on such a unverifiable and hardly differentiated concept with its implications for development policy, every political discussion of the question of birth control in developing countries cannot but lead to equally undifferentiated and general demands for socio-economic advancement. So long, too, the position of population policy within the framework of North-South cooperation must remain vague. This applies all the more as, conversely, it is also impossible to explain precisely what influence population growth has on economic development. Econometric models — such as for instance the Tempo Model — show that in certain assumed conditions the per-capita income invariably rises when fertility decreases. In the theoretical argumentation on development policy — such as for instance the view held by the World Bank — the following problems which are attributed to population growth play a vital role:

- Growing demands on the state budget generated by rising expenditures on education, health, housing and water supplies;
- Prevention of capital formation through the demands of a growing number of unprovided persons;
- Increasing unemployment;
- Growing social problems as a consequence of rapid urbanisation;
- A stagnating agriculture leading to problems of feeding the population.

It is argued that population growth narrows the scope for economic expansion and that in the following manner: population growth adversely affects savings and directs expenditures into non-productive channels. The result is — so the argument runs — that private investments are not what they might have been and that the composition of public expenditures is distorted. About the saving habits of householders in developing countries too little is known to forecast how the size of a family would affect its savings. The arguments advanced by the World Bank state categorically that fast-growing populations automatically lead to a rise in the demand for food, while, owing to the insufficient growth of incomes, the demand for all the other goods does not increase. Besides, rapid population growth with its attendant greater demands on the educational system, the health service and other parts of the country's infrastructure, causes economically adverse changes in the demand structure impairing economic growth.

The larger the labour supply, the greater the need for increased investments, says the World Bank; it has actually calculated for a number of countries how much additional capital they require, given a certain capital coefficient, to maintain their per-capita income.

Deliberations of this kind frequently make unverified behavioural assumptions. Not only that: they also utterly ignore the fact that the nub of the problem lies in the widening gap between a growing population and insufficient development of the country's economic potential. Seen from this angle, the problem simply boils down to an inter-relationship between population growth and economic potential, as was already described in outline long ago by Wagemann in his 'Theory of alternating progressions', although only axiomatically.

From this point of view it would seem completely justified to demand in the place of a strategy of population control a better utilisation of the economic potential of the developing countries by intensifying North-South-cooperation.

Bleak Prospects for NIEO

How closely the concept of a worldwide control of population growth is linked with the demand for an intensification of the distribution contest between North and South within the scope of a New International Economic Order (NIEO) becomes clear when one considers the orders of magnitude implicit in the question.

Whereas in 1970 the world population divided itself into roughly 1.1 billion inhabitants of indus-

trial countries and 2.5 billion people living in developing countries, the proportion will have changed by 2050 to 1.8 and 11.5, respectively, owing to the replacement fertility; the sooner the replacement level is reached, the greater will remain the relative share of the industrial countries in the world population and the less strong the pressure to contribute towards the development of the Third World and to restrict the consumption of scarce resources.

Even if it were possible to reduce birth rates all over the world to the replacement level until the end of this decade — a utopian supposition if ever there was one — the developing countries would have to double their food production within 70 years just to maintain the present food supply level with all its widespread malnutrition and dystrophy. Judging by experience, the developing countries can hardly be assumed to be capable of such a feat; still less likely is it that the present unsatisfactory extent to which basic demands are met will suffice to keep North-South relations in a state of politically stable equilibrium.

Because, and in so far as, the solution of population problems is a question of the development and apportionment of the world's social product, demands and recommendations for birth control in the countries of the Third World must be seen as proposals prompted by economic and political self-interest, just as Malthus' population theory is now regarded as the ideology of the socially conservative liberals of his time.

Considerations like this would suffice to make it clear that a world population conference would of course not rest content with the mere formulation of development-political positions, but would also demand a re-apportionment of the raw materials available for consumption and of world economic growth.

As against this it should be pointed out, however, that even if all demands made in connexion with NIEO are being met, only the transfer of at most 1 p.c. of the social product of the industrial countries can be reached. However sceptically one may regard population forecasts, it can scarcely be disputed that such a transfer is out of all proportion to the regional developments of the world population.

What is evident is that a much vaster distribution effort is required; a process of diffusion must be set in motion and multipliers started in developing countries, if the cooperative solution of the North-South problem aimed at by the NIEO is to be found and a global conflict about the redistribution of the world's social product to be avoided after all.