

New Directions in Population

The World Population Conference in August marked the first-ever full scale debate among governments on population matters. Contrary to expectations, the meeting was full of surprises. In view of events at the Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment, and at last spring's Special Session of the General Assembly on Raw Materials and Development, the nature of the debate should have been more fully anticipated than it was.

Two agendas, not one, existed at Bucharest. The first agenda was prepared by the United Nations secretariat in response to the 1970 General Assembly resolution calling for the Conference. That resolution was concerned about the increasingly evident problems of rapid population growth. Although two world population conferences had previously been held, in 1954 and 1965, they were convened as technical gatherings and attended by professionals only. The 1974 conference would be attended by governments who would approve an international strategy to deal with population problems, to complement other UN strategies dealing with food, employment, the environment, problems of technological transfer, and the strategy for the second UN Development Decade. The Population Commission was named as preparatory body, and in 1972 machinery was set in motion to develop a World Population Plan of Action. By spring 1974, the Population Commission released the draft Plan for negotiation with governments at UN-convened regional meetings.

Through this process, a consensus supporting the document emerged, with backers including Brazil and the United States which had previously held strong views, the socialist countries, the Asians

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and Africans and other Latin Americans. Points of controversy persisted over the sensitive topic of target-setting--both for program development and for achieving declines in population growth rates. In general however, the document was considered widely acceptable and comprehensive enough to recognize policy options for everyone's particular population problem. As a result, most delegations arrived in Bucharest expecting consensus.

#### Another Agenda

The second agenda at Bucharest also had its origins in the UN system. Concern with reordering international economic relationships to better serve the interests of the developing nations has been the subject of three UNCTAD conferences since 1964. It has also been a growing concern in the General Assembly with the emergence of the Algeria-led Group of 77 and the Declaration and Program of Action on the Establishment of a New International Economic Order accepted by the sixth Special Session of the General Assembly last spring.

These concerns were brought to Bucharest, and formed a different framework within which to view population problems and population policy. In addition, two other factors influenced the re-examination which subsequently occurred. Argentina, which last spring changed its population laws to stimulate population growth largely for security reasons, came laden with amendments to the Plan of Action, designed to de-emphasize the objective of reducing population growth. The Vatican arrived with a fixed position and pressed for a number of changes of similar design. Somewhat unexpectedly, China shared similar convictions in several instances, making for somewhat strange bedfellows.

### Central Arguments

The central arguments debated at the Conference have frequently been mis-reported. Since they have critical importance for the future of the population field, and for development strategy in general, it is important that they be more clearly understood. Their essential aspects are as follows:

It was argued that conventional approaches to development have frequently represented rapid population growth as a major obstacle to solutions to problems of poverty. Similarly, conventional interpretations of environmental problems have emphasized rapid population growth as a critical factor in problems of pollution and rate of resource use. It has followed therefore, that a major element in solving problems of poverty, pollution and dwindling resources is reduction of rapid population growth.

These interpretations were rejected as too narrow in Conference debate. It was argued that other factors in solving these problems are as important as population growth, but have often been ignored. We can solve problems of poverty more directly, it was argued, by better distribution of resources, international distribution in particular. Furthermore, it was pointed out, if standards of living were more equal among nations, we could support the present world population, even the 6.5 - 7 billion projected for the year 2000. The argument also asserted that, as a result of more serious development measures and better resource and wealth distribution, high fertility rates would subsequently decline. Problems of pollution and dwindling natural resources are also caused by people's consumption patterns, and such factors as lack of planning of urban environments. Curbing wasteful consumption and changing

demand patterns can reduce resource use as well as polluting production practices.

These arguments have much to commend them. Too often, we have tended to define the development goals of developing countries in terms of achieving western living standards, and we have calculated resource requirements while holding our living standard and its rate of increase, as a fixed parameter. Following this line of reasoning, it is evident that as long as the latter is a fixed parameter, it is impossible to raise all populations on the globe to our levels of living. Thus the obvious alternative is to reduce the numbers to be provided for. But this view no longer holds among the developing nations. Western living standards involving waste and affluence, and the right to maintain such standards is no longer an accepted parameter in their thinking. In this context, curbing global rapid population growth was rejected as a major Conference objective.

It should be stressed, however, that rapid growth, if diagnosed as a problem by a particular country, received much recognition and attention. It was unfortunate that in the general reaction against global diagnoses, certain documented facts were rejected. The draft Plan of Action considered by the Conference pointed out: "Although most countries at present have no explicit policies designed to affect their natural growth rates, and several countries wish to increase them, the majority of the world's people and a large majority of the people of the less developed regions, live in countries whose Governments are attempting, as a matter of urgency, to reduce significantly their rates of population growth." Although this statement was based on information collected by the UN secretariat from national plans and official replies

to UN questionnaires, and was contained in one of the official conference background papers, it was deleted from the Plan of Action. Despite this action, however, emphasis was laid on the diversity of national problems and on the importance of each country defining its own problem. This is a healthy development. It is in the countries themselves that solutions must ultimately be found; the Conference was to recommend internationally acceptable policy options from which governments can select. And many governments particularly in Asia define rapid growth as a major development problem.

The Conference devoted considerable attention to broadening the policy options for dealing with rapid growth. As politicians and development experts have become increasingly concerned with growth rates during the past 15 - 20 years, family planning programs have been the major program effort prescribed as cure. In some cases, unrealistic expectations have developed as to the potential demographic impact such programs can achieve. Yet the available evidence indicates that the supply of family planning programs by themselves do not have the substantial demographic impact sought by nations faced with recent rapid mortality declines and subsequent rapid rates of increase. Increasingly, it has been recognized that such programs are demanded and used by people when broader socio-economic change is underway; one result of such change is increased motivation to reduce traditional family size.

Thus, it was argued at the Conference that population problems must be viewed in their socio-economic context. Both development and demographic measures must be used to influence population variables. The mix between the two will vary with the national or regional setting. It was emphasized that population policy consists of measures which

directly and indirectly affect population variables; and some of these indirect measures are also the common components of broader development programs.

Considering the historical context of population debates, this kind of discussion was inevitable. Doctrinal debate between those espousing so-called "malthusian" and "marxist" views was anticipated at this initial political gathering on population. Such talk was also inevitable considering the heavy emphasis which has been placed during the past decade, on family planning programs as adequate and necessary means to reduce population growth. In some instances, aid donors have urged family planning on poor nations with a conviction that has infringed on national sovereignty. In this context, the Working Group responsible for producing the 109 paragraph strategy document, the Plan of Action, rejected a proposal that family planning information and services be made available by 1985 to all desiring them, and by a vote of 58 - 42 with 1 abstention, replaced it with an Argentinian phrasing considered more acceptable recommending that all countries "Encourage appropriate education concerning responsible parenthood and make available to persons who so desire advice and means of achieving it". Despite the rejection of the target, the right of "all couples and individuals" to decide freely and responsibly the number and spacing of their children and to have the information, education and means to do so (whether to achieve a larger or smaller family size), was included in both the prescribed principles to be followed in formulating population policy, and in recommendations on specific policy options to influence reproductive behavior.

Quantitative targets for reducing population growth were rejected by the Working Group. Debate on growth targets in the Plan was

among the best attended by the participants. By a vote of 72 - 18 with 10 abstentions, the Group rejected as an evaluation device, the use of projected declines in population growth rates which could result by 1985 if nations successfully implement their policies reported in the pre-conference UN Inquiry on Population and Development (projected rates for 1985 are: developing countries 2%, developed countries below 0.7% and global 1.7%). In a paragraph encouraging governments to set quantitative targets and formulate population policies for reducing growth which hampers development, the reference to targets was deleted, by a vote of 80 - 1 with 4 abstentions. The major arguments given against targets were that national situations are too diverse to summarize in global targets and that their existence creates the risk that outsiders will tell countries what they should do.

Subsequently, two other relevant paragraphs were accepted, one pointing out that the projected declines in growth rates referred to above would require declines in birth rates in developing countries by 1985 to 30 per thousand from the present average of 38 per thousand. In the other paragraph, it was recognized that achievement of these levels would require substantial national efforts in socio-economic development and population policy. This was balanced by recognition of the need to give equal emphasis to increasing life expectancy. The paragraph was accepted by a vote of 52 - 56 with 11 abstentions after an attempt to remove all references to growth (leaving only life expectancy) was defeated by 49 - 36 with 6 abstentions.

Then, after two of the closest votes in the session, the following paragraph was adopted: "In the light of the principles of this Plan of Action, countries which consider their birth rates detrimental to their national purposes are invited to consider setting quantitative goals and implementing policies that may lead to the attainment of such goals by 1985. Nothing herein should interfere with the sovereignty of any government to adopt or not to adopt such quantitative goals." Following a move to delete the phrase 'by 1985', rejected by 43 - 40 with 8 abstentions, China suggested addition of a further qualifying rider noting the undesirability of uniform growth goals. It was also rejected by a very close vote of 39-38 with 14 abstentions.

These votes show the sensitivity of the subject. But the concept of targets remains, to be adopted by individual countries as they see fit. It is not useful to attach too much importance to rejection of absolute levels. Very few countries aspire to high growth rates, since there is no evidence that in developing economies, high rates of population growth promote attainment of economic growth objectives. Most countries acting in their self interest wish to reduce growth rates.

The central issue which remains however, is how to achieve reduced growth rates. Development policies and population policies are inextricably linked. People living in traditional subsistence agricultural environments know only too well the characteristics of

their environments: high infant death rates, traditional sex roles, high illiteracy rates, grinding persistent poverty, total dependence on the vagaries of climate, to name some of the most obvious. In such settings the idea of influencing one's destiny, of planning for the future, is foreign. The family is a precious resource; control or planning is anathema. Until changes occur in the wider environment - inevitable if true development is underway - the idea of reducing family size so that each child may benefit more from the fruits of change, is alien - not to mention irrational. Who would have few children if the risk of losing them persists?

This presents a persistent public policy dilemma. We know that family planning programs, while desirable ends in themselves, also have some demographic impact. And we know that much remains to effectively and efficiently deliver such services to all desiring them. But what measures are there to use in addition? What aspects of development strategy influence population factors and fertility in particular? The Working Group talked in general terms about the importance of equity in international economic relations. In the Plan of Action, more specific prescriptions for social change included the following: provision for greater participation of women in the development process, measures to reduce infant mortality, achievement of better income distribution, promotion of universal educational opportunities for the young, elimination of child labor, establishment of old age security, establishment of a minimum age for marriage, and the strengthening of health and family planning services delivery. It is also recommended, "that countries wishing to affect fertility levels give priority to

implementing development programmes and educational and health strategies, which while contributing to economic growth and high standards of living, have a decisive impact upon demographic trends, including fertility..." But one knows how much more must be put into educational or health programs, or into which parts of them, to bring about desired fertility declines. Even with massive programs, the resultant change in attitudes is a long-term process. Many countries particularly in Asia, do not have the time periods implied, before current imbalances between population trends and resources result in rising death rates. In such situations, large scale familing planning programs continue to be a major policy instrument to accelerate population change.

The expansion of knowledge in this area will involve much better understanding of the factors which influence family size desires of individual couples in different developing country settings. This implies a much greater research effort by social scientists in these countries themselves. The list of changes referred to above constitutes a feasible starting point. Some measures, such as creating alternative roles for women, education of the young, establishment of old age security schemes are possibilities which could alter significantly the costs and benefits of additional children. None has been adequately researched in terms of finding public policy measures which are both economically and administratively feasible.

#### Other Problems Dealt With

The primacy and immediacy of population growth, exacerbated by the gloomy predictions of disappearing food stocks, did not completely overshadow other aspects of population problems considered by the Conference. The Working Group on the Plan of Action attached considerable importance to the reduction of mortality, urbanization, and aspects of international migration - particularly the problems of the migrant workers.

One of the heaviest votes in the Working Group occurred in the discussion of the relationship between development and mortality reduction. By a vote of 48 - 47 with 11 abstentions, the Group decided that mortality declines should be achieved with 'massive' social and economic development rather than 'accelerated' development. In its consideration of ways to influence internal migration, adverse aspects of urbanization were accorded prominence and attributed in large part to the dependent position of developing countries in the international economic system. This attribution was accepted by a vote of 64-6 with 26 abstentions. Emphasis was also placed on finding ways to improve conditions in rural areas to stem the rural-urban drift; and it was pointed out that problems of urban concentrations result from consumption patterns just as much as from the concentration of population.

International migration was also an important issue, including as it does, the problems of refugees and migrant workers. Governments are encouraged to facilitate voluntary international movement, as long as that movement is not based on racial considerations which would be detrimental to indigenous populations. This qualification was added by the Group by a vote of 100-3 with 5 abstentions. Problems of 'brain drain' were discussed and it was recommended that developing countries undertake programs to better match skills with

employment opportunities, and to improve the motivation of professionals to contribute to development. Foreign investors should take more seriously their responsibilities of training local talent, and of locating facilities in the countries themselves.

The major purpose of the Plan was to recommend policies to influence population variables. As a result, it contains little in the way of suggestions as to how to provide for the population expected in the years ahead. At present, global population numbers some 3.9 billion, the majority of whom are young people. Even if all couples entering fertile ages during the next 25 years have only 2 children -- almost completely unlikely -- we will number nearly 7 billion by the turn of the century. Demands on resources to feed, clothe, educate, house and employ these additions will be considerable. Drawing on their own experience the Chinese introduced the principle that "of all things in the world, people are the most precious", to emphasize the importance of viewing human populations as resources, not liabilities. Argentina stressed the importance of enhancing our efforts to increase food supplies and of orienting development planning to develop human resources. The United Nations was asked to begin monitoring population trends, the signal for much needed research on the implications of current population trends and policies. But these are only beginnings. At present, our ability to provide even for the needs of present populations looks exceedingly inadequate.

Will the Conference Make Any Difference?

Wide publicity has been given, particularly in the North American press, to uneven representation in Conference proceedings, of the range of national views of population problems. It has been argued that the urgency of current world food shortage makes the refusal to debate world-wide action to reduce population growth look irresponsible, even ludicrous. Did the rhetoric at Bucharest mean anything?

An important conclusion is that there are differing prescriptions for world's social and economic problems. The Conference's de-emphasis of population control can easily be mis-read and over-generalized as the old adage 'Look after development and population will look after itself'. This may be true in thinly-populated countries, with natural resources. The danger exists however, that other countries may be reluctant in such an atmosphere, to take more direct measures. Yet the real message was that in de-emphasizing the universality of population control prescriptions, the intent was to gain greater balance: to emphasize instead that population policy consists of a range of measures, both explicit and implicit. Each country must choose its own mix. Further elaboration of national and regional measures to implement the Plan of Action will be undertaken in each of the major regions in early 1975, when UN-sponsored regional consultations will be held.

Plainly the results of the Conference present dilemmas to aid agencies whose main objective is to provide family planning assistance. These are tangible, direct programs, albeit based on western concepts, which appeal to harried decision-makers looking for simple ways to reduce population growth. Emphasis by developing countries on the less direct measures will be costly, both to population and development agencies. Resource allocation decisions will become more difficult. In addition, demands will be made on budgets for research, and for other pressing population problems, particularly those relating to rapid movements into cities, human settlements, and problems of infertility. Resources are also needed to set up population units to facilitate long-overdue integration of population considerations into development planning. If there is to be greater national commitment to solving population problems, every country must relate population to resources in a much wider sense than they are doing now.

What is the Meaning for Canada?

Canada's statement to the Conference, presented by the Hon. Mme Jeanne Sauvé, was balanced and thoughtful. It indicated Canada's appreciation of some of the complex issues debated in the Conference arising from the inter-relationships among population factors and development, natural resources, the environment and the family. The statement recognized several important principles: that population factors are closely related to other aspects of development and that measures to influence or contend with population trends involve structural and institutional change; that we must seek greater efficiency in resource utilization in national production and consumption activities; that fundamental human freedoms must be observed in the formulation of population policy. It was also pointed out that Canada would be willing to assume its share of the responsibility for meeting increased needs for international population assistance following the Conference.

Let us hope these words were not mere rhetoric, designed for public consumption at the time of the Conference. As a result of the Conference preparations, Canadians increased their understanding of population policy. Now we must build on the experience to shape a coherent set of domestic policies.

As Mme Sauvé pointed out, a crucial factor in the success of the Conference lies in the follow-up activities. There is as yet little evidence of these in Canada. Before the Conference, a preparatory exercise lasting more than six months included inter-departmental consultations at the federal level, federal-provincial and public consultations. A number of Cabinet-commissioned studies of some aspects of

Canadian population are underway, and it would have been improper to expect the Conference to precipitate the formulation of domestic policy. But the preparatory activities created for the first time a mechanism for consultation among the many federal departments with population-related concerns. This process of consultation must not be allowed to die after the Conference. Instead it must become more focussed on substantive questions of domestic policy which fall into two major areas: those policies which influence population events, and those policies which contend with population trends. The Plan of Action recommends that each country create and place "at high level of the national administrative structure" a unit dealing with population aspects of policy. Surely the time is overdue for creation of coordinating mechanism in Canada. Its location should be strategic, so that it can coordinate relevant policies in different departments, monitor trends and provide consultation to the provinces.

The lack of priority accorded domestic policy constrains the role we can play on the international scene at a time when increased assistance is of high priority. The world is in the midst of a complex of crises in which population factors play a major role in many developing nations. The volume of requests for international assistance is increasing at a rapid rate, outstripping the resources available through the United Nations Fund for Population Activities, the major multilateral channel, which the developing nations support with enthusiasm. Canada should follow through on the offers of additional assistance made at the Conference. Not to do so, would confirm the emptiness of our words at a time when international confidence in rich nations is already at a low ebb. It would also be to miss a major point of the Conference.