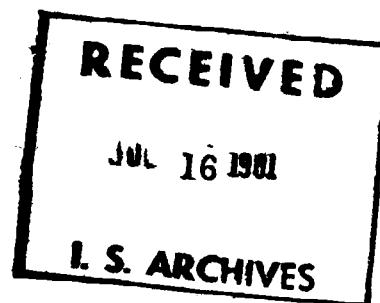


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Population Information Network  
Consultative Meeting\*  
Geneva, 27-30 April 1981  
Item 2 of the Provisional Agenda

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POPULATION INFORMATION ACTIVITIES  
OF UNITED NATIONS REGIONAL COMMISSION AND AGENCIES  
AND OTHER ORGANIZATIONS

*Development Assistance to Population Information Activities*  
- the support of the International Development Research Centre

F. Delaney



\* A joint project of the Population Division, Department of International Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, and the United Nations Fund for Population Activities.

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## Development Assistance to Population Information Activities

### - the support of the International Development Research Centre

"High priority (will be given) to programs that assist the developing countries to build their own scientific and technological capabilities so that they will not be mere welfare recipients, but contributors in their own right to the solution of their own problems."<sup>1</sup> These remarks by Mitchell Sharp, Minister for External Affairs, to the House of Commons in 1970 helped chart the direction of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) - a direction that has been followed by the Information Sciences Division in its support for population information activities.

#### IDRC

The IDRC is a specialized international aid organization. It is a public corporation financed by annual appropriations from the Canadian government and is directed by a 21-member board, 10 of whom are non-Canadians from both developed and developing countries. Established in 1970 by the Parliament of Canada, the Centre's main objectives are to stimulate, encourage and support research into problems that affect the developing countries most directly and to explore methods for adapting science and technology for the social and economic advancement of these regions. These objectives are pursued primarily by assisting the developing countries build their own research capabilities, skills and institutions and by encouraging coordination in international development research activities. The Centre's support falls into four main subject areas: Agriculture, Food and Nutrition; Health; Information Sciences; and Social Sciences.

Established at a time when the results of 20 years of development assistance were being evaluated by world leaders, when foreign aid programs were surrounded by a sense of disillusion and distrust, and when international support for development was flagging, the IDRC adopted an approach to its aid program that was considered both new and innovative. It adopted the policy that Centre-supported projects would be in areas of research considered as priority by the developing countries themselves; that projects would be carried out in developing country institutions and managed by their own staff; that projects thought to be of "high risk" would be considered; that research capacity in the developing countries would

be strengthened; and that South-South collaboration would be encouraged and supported along the lines to be known later as TCDC (technical cooperation among developing countries). The Centre also approached project support with the philosophy that the research workers and the institutions of the developing countries "are the best judges of what is relevant to their circumstances".<sup>2</sup>

### Information Sciences Division

IDRC was considered quite innovative because it established from its beginning a division devoted entirely to the support of activities in the field of information sciences. This reflected somewhat the statement in the Act establishing the Centre, which gave it the power to "establish, maintain and operate information and data centres and facilities for research and other activities relevant to its objects".<sup>3</sup>

Unlike the three other program divisions of the Centre, the Information Sciences Division funds operational activities rather than research. This includes the development of information/documentation systems and services in developing countries for making the results of research more readily known, available and accessible to policy makers, planners and researchers.

Since the Centre's establishment, Information Sciences has provided financial support for more than 310 projects including meetings and consultancies in more than 45 countries totalling in excess of \$27,000,000.

With a professional staff of 44 including librarians, documentalists, information scientists, programmers, systems analysts; a broad base of technical expertise; a program area that supports information activities in developing regions in agriculture, rural water and sanitation, human settlements, fisheries, industrial extension, cartography, education, social sciences, population and computer science, the Division has acquired a significant amount of knowledge and experience about the needs, the goals and the priorities of the developing countries - knowledge and experience that is used and shared in the development of projects.

In its support for projects, the Information Sciences Division has attempted to follow the course charted by Mitchell Sharp in helping to remove developing countries from the information welfare lines. Our approach to date has been to fund projects primarily in national or regional organizations. This approach is based on the philosophy that, unlike research projects in the health or agricultural sciences which have an identifiable start and conclusion with the production of specific

results, the establishment of an information/documentation centre does not have an identifiable conclusion and once started should have some guarantee of existence beyond the life of IDRC support. Our experience has shown that initiatives of private and semi-public organizations, even though well formulated, are unlikely to survive unless they have strong financial backing over the long-term, or have governmental support for their activities.

We believe that one of the most reliable and probably most cost-effective ways of insuring coverage of the literature of a particular country is for that country to assume responsibility for identifying and reporting its own literature within a regional network. The country does the job it is most qualified to do and ought to do for its own purposes; duplication is avoided; and the country has access to the rest of the region's literature if it wants it. This approach is known as the territorial formula and is followed by the international cooperative systems such as AGRIS and DEVSIS which are supported by the Division. It also encourages the use of accepted international standards necessary for compatibility and easy information exchange.

#### Population Information

The Information Sciences Division has spent over \$2½ million in support of population information activities. It first became involved in the population information field in 1973 when it participated at a "Working Meeting on Asian Resources for a Population Library Information Network" in Bangkok. Since then, it has participated in a workshop in Honolulu in 1975 on the "Role of Computers in the Development of an International Technical Information Network for Population/Family Planning", meetings of the Association for Population Libraries and Information Centres (APLIC-International) as well as the Population Association of America (PAA) and the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population (IUSSP). The purposes of attending these meetings are to become familiar with the information needs of the developing countries and the efforts of those already working in the population information field, and to inform attendees of IDRC's support for activities in the developing regions. This support has included helping establish regional and national population information systems, supporting training seminars for developing country personnel and convening informal meetings for the exchange of ideas.

##### a) Population Documentation Centres

In 1975, IDRC received a request from the Latin American Demographic Center (CELADE) in Santiago, Chile, to provide financial support for two years to establish and operate the Latin American Population Documentation System (DOCPAL). This request was approved by IDRC and from March 1976 until June 1980, the Centre provided DOCPAL with both financial and technical support.

With the establishment of DOCPAL, we believe the groundwork for a world-wide population information network was laid. Its progress in the Latin American region can now serve as a model for the rest of the world. IDRC's support enabled CELADE to create a population documentation infrastructure within the Economic Commission for Latin America (CEPAL), collect population-related material about the Latin American region, establish a computerized data-base and develop the associated skills, produce 7 issues of an annotated bibliography in Spanish entitled DOCPAL Resúmenes, provide document delivery services, make inroads towards transferring CELADE/DOCPAL's experience to countries in the region and participate in activities developing at an international level.

In 1980, faced with financial difficulties in the country due to high inflation and budget cutbacks, CELADE/DOCPAL approached IDRC for assistance. Priding itself in being flexible in its ability to adapt and adjust to the varied circumstances that can and do arise in the developing countries, IDRC provided DOCPAL with financial assistance over a short term to enable it to resolve some of its difficulties.

By early 1978, DOCPAL had made significant strides towards developing a regional information system for Latin America. But most of the work was being done in Santiago. Since the aim of DOCPAL from the outset was to work towards a decentralized cooperative system, the request to support a national population information centre in Argentina that would participate in the regional system was received favourably by IDRC. The Fundación para el Desarrollo de América Latina (FUDAL) was a private, non-profit organization with a legal capacity to operate acknowledged by the Argentinian Ministry of Justice. FUDAL conducted a pilot project for one year, collecting population material from three provinces in Argentina, collaborating with DOCPAL, and publishing one issue of a national bibliography. However, financial difficulties and high inflation forced the closure of the organization shortly after the completion of the project and IDRC received no requests for continuation of this activity elsewhere.

A proposal to develop a system paralleling the DOCPAL system was received in 1977 from the Regional Institute for Population Studies in Accra, Ghana. This system, known as the Population Information and Documentation System for Africa (PIDSA), aims to make population information about Africa South of the Sahara more readily known and available to the region. Started with IDRC support in 1978 as a manual system, it has been designed towards computerization using methodologies compatible with those of DOCPAL to facilitate future information exchange. Even though it has been faced with severe economic difficulties in the country, PIDSA has nevertheless managed to produce three issues of its abstract journal with the fourth in press and the first issue of its newsletter.

The experiences of DOCPAL, FUDAL and PIDSA, although all have the same objective, are as different as the environments in which they were established. (The work of DOCPAL and PIDSA are outlined in separate papers prepared by their organizations for the POPIN Consultative Meeting.) Yet they have one problem in common - the effect of financial resources on their operations. Because IDRC is very much aware of the financial constraints faced by developing countries, it has strongly encouraged the establishment of information systems appropriate to the local conditions - even if these systems are manual - so that once IDRC funds are withdrawn there is a documentation unit or service left behind that can be maintained by the recipient institution.

#### b) Training

In many parts of the developing world, people responsible for the libraries or document collections in population centres have had no formal training in library or information sciences, and no specific training related to population or family planning information.

In 1976, a training seminar was held at the Centro Interamericano de Adiestramiento en Comunicaciones para Poblacion y Planificacion Familiar (CIACOP) in San José, Costa Rica for 27 Latin Americans working as population librarians and documentalists. DOCPAL strongly supported this workshop and considered it an opportunity to familiarize the participants with DOCPAL's needs, to develop a network for collecting material for DOCPAL, and to discuss ways in which DOCPAL could help cooperating institutions. With DOCPAL's active participation in the seminar, IDRC joined other donors in supporting the seminar which taught the participants the basic skills in acquiring population information, organizing it and making it available for use, provided an understanding of the role and activities of the information worker in the field, and exposed participants to DOCPAL and its services.

Through its project support to DOCPAL, IDRC financed a training seminar in March 1980 for 33 participants from Central America and the Caribbean. This seminar, called DOCPAL and Latin American Population Documentation Processing Techniques, provided participants with training in indexing and abstracting, as well as how to use the DOCPAL worksheets and the DOCPAL version of the Multilingual Population Thesaurus.

The IDRC will finance another population-related training activity in 1981 through the PIDSA project.

### Efforts towards Systems Compatibility

Anticipating the establishment of an international population information network and recognizing the benefits that can accrue from collaboration, IDRC financed a meeting of representatives of DOCPAL, PIDSA and Population Index in July 1978 in Santiago, Chile, to discuss possible areas of collaboration. This meeting was considered of value because DOCPAL and Population Index use the ISIS software developed by the International Labour Office for maintaining their computer data bases and PIDSA is being developed towards computerization. They agreed that mutual benefits could accrue from the use of standards such as the Multi-lingual Population Thesaurus prepared by CICRED, as well as the geographic and language codes established by the International Standards Organization. They also agreed that because of the similarities in their subject coverage, standardizing the presentation of subject categories in their abstract journals similar to the format already established by Population Index would facilitate usage. The participants agreed to explore ways of arriving at closer compatibility, taking into account existing agreements and methods of operation.

The Information Sciences Division is currently collaborating with DOCPAL and Population Index on an experiment to merge the two data bases. The short-term objectives are to determine how much duplication already exists between DOCPAL and Population Index and how this duplication could be minimized and to develop procedures for the exchange of information and the sharing of resources.

Work on the first phase of the experiment is currently underway. This involves a comparative analysis of the 1978 material from both data bases which will provide statistics on the amount of duplication that presently exists and estimates of the number of documents that could be interchanged annually between the two systems. Preliminary criteria for the selection of material from each data base will be established and mechanisms drawn up for the selection and exchange of data on magnetic tape. It is hoped that the results of this collaborative effort will be a contribution to the efforts of POPIN to improve bibliographic control of the world's literature and reduce the amount of duplication in its acquisition and processing.

### Population Information Network

Two of the main goals of IDRC have been "to encourage generally the coordination of international development research; and to foster cooperation in research on development problems between the developed and the developing regions for their mutual benefit".<sup>4</sup> It is with these goals in mind that the Information Sciences Division has taken such an active interest in efforts towards the establishment of a cooperative international population information network.

Its efforts in assisting in the development of documentation systems and services for population have from the outset been directed towards a system or network with adequate developing-country representation under the auspices of an appropriate international body. The Information Sciences Division participated in the meeting on storage and retrieval of demographic information in September 1975 in Mexico City organized by the Committee for International Cooperation in National Research in Demography (CICRED) which resulted in a recommendation for the establishment of a committee to study the feasibility of establishing an international population information network. The Division was represented on the Interim Steering Committee and the Technical Task Force in 1975 that were set up to undertake this study and, with other agencies, financed its work and the consultancy services of two international experts. In 1978, it seconded one of its staff to the United Nations Population Division to prepare a progress report for the twentieth session of the Population Commission and now cooperates with the newly-established POPIN Coordinating Unit.

#### The Challenge of POPIN

Significant progress has been made since the Bucharest conference where the importance of information in the field of population was first raised in an international forum.

A few years have seen the concept of an international demographic information system (IDEMIS) evolve to become the International Population Information Network (POPIN). This evolution has been the consequence of discussions and reports by demographers and information experts; the recognition of the long-term financial implications of large centralized information systems; the willingness of existing population information systems to provide needed information services and the desire of developing countries to do it themselves in cooperation. The network approach is the result.

The network concept answers a concern to improve the efficiency of the collection, storage and dissemination of documentation on population, and render it of more direct use while keeping costs low. It aims to give each user access to the information he needs for his own purposes and to see that the information is collected only once and made available to all who need it. This implies the adoption of standards (concepts, classification, common identifiers) and coordination between all interested organizations.

Formalization of POPIN by the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations was essential if the network was to become a useful and vital resource and a service to population programs. Once there is political support, the technical people can design the network with some assurance of continuity and a long-term future. To be effective, it is essential now that cooperation, coordination and systematization



exist among the various national, regional and international systems if maximum benefits are to be realized. Differing approaches in the handling of population information are being taken in the various regions in accordance with prevailing needs. Therefore, network policies and agreements must try to maintain the integrity of internal operations of national systems and at the same time promote compatibility and cooperation.

Representatives to the Advisory Committee will be faced with defining the subject scope of POPIN. With many information systems collecting material related to population such as human settlements, agriculture, planning, rural water and sanitation, and biomedicine, it is important to define the boundaries for the network so that members, both users and collectors, know the network's coverage. The Advisory Committee will also need to establish the operating guidelines for POPIN. This will include adopting a classification scheme developed as a guide to the subject areas within the scope of the system; advising on the development of appropriate curricula and training programs for the building of information manpower, particularly for the developing countries; and the development of basic manuals.

The objectives ahead of POPIN are to promote the capturing of the literature of the developing countries for their own use as well as the world's and to improve developing country access to the world's literature.

POPIN should be developed on the idea that the technologies and the mechanisms of industrialized countries must be adapted if they are to assist developing countries in upgrading their scientific and technological skills and resources.

Perhaps the biggest challenge facing POPIN is the education of the researchers, policy makers and planners themselves to the value of information and its availability through the network. Librarians and information specialists, those who are trying to make it more widely available, recognize its value. Regrettably, it is often those who have the greatest need that fail to see its importance. Agencies responsible for funding such activities are all too ready to limit or curtail financial support for information activities and yet are willing to support research that may have already been completed and documented. Scientists, particularly chemists, are all too aware of hours and years of effort gone into research to find that someone has already undertaken the work. Perhaps those working in population need to gain this same awareness.

The first meeting of the POPIN Consultative Group in Geneva is the culmination of several years of effort by many people and institutions interested in facilitating population information exchange.

The future of POPIN now depends to a great extent on the members of the network and their willingness and a demonstration of that willingness to cooperate and exchange information.

The IDRC supports the concept of POPIN because it is based on cooperation among systems. It will continue its efforts to help the developing countries move forward in controlling their own population information activities and will encourage these activities to be developed within the POPIN framework.

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