

The U.N. Role in the Population Issue

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A review of Richard Symonds and Michael Carder *The United Nations and the Population Question* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), 206 pp.

IN August 1974 an intergovernmental conference on Population of some 130 governments will meet in Bucharest, Romania, to mark the climax of the World Population Year. The purposes of this Conference, as stated by Carrilo-Flores, Secretary-General, World Population Conference, "... are avowedly political in character."¹ The United Nations has identified the population question as a global concern. The major purpose of the 1974 World Population Year is the development of a global action policy and program. The Declaration on Social Progress and Development, United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2542 (XXIV), enacted in 1969 summarizes the spirit and intent of this significant endeavor:

How the United Nations moved from an apathetic, and at times hostile, position on the population question to one of world leadership and active support is of worldwide concern and interest. Richard Symonds and Michael Carder treat this historical

metamorphosis in clear and straightforward language. From the first ill-fared efforts in 1900 to establish an international Malthusian union to the successful operations in the 1970's of the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA), the authors chronologically analyze the "agency mandates" against a rapidly changing demographic and political background.

Opposing Opinions

In the immediate past World War II period, when most of the United Nations bodies and specialized agencies were established or absorbed from the old League of Nations, pro-natalist and anti-natalist groups were almost equally divided. Among the first to draw attention to the exploding growth of world population were the conservationists, Sir Frank Fraser Darling in the United Kingdom and Fairfield Osborn and William Vogt in the United States, warning of the dangers to the human environment of continued, rapid population growth.² Others, such

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¹ Statement by Carrilo-Flores, Secretary-General, World Population Conference, at the opening meeting of the Symposium on Population and Development, Cairo, Monday, June 4, 1973, Cesi Release POP/9, June 4, 1973.

² See W. Vogt, *Road to Survival* (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1948) and F. Osborn, *Our Plundered Planet* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1948) and *The Limits of the Earth* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1953).

as biologist Julian Huxley, expressed concern about the effects of human numbers on the quality of human life.³ Osborn and Vogt, along with others, stressed that the world population was growing so rapidly that it would soon be impossible to provide enough food to feed the already undernourished world. They advocated the spreading of the practice of birth control in the less-developed regions of the world.

The position of these scholars encountered opposition. Their predictions of widespread famine were quickly discounted by leading agronomists and nutritionists. The Food and Agriculture Organization declared in the first report of its Interim Commission that science and technology provided increasing opportunities to produce sufficient food for a much larger world population (p. 36). Several leading French demographers who were associated with the government-sponsored Institute for Demographic Studies (INED) argued that a high birth rate was a sign of national vitality. They contrasted their philosophy of population growth with what they called the "restrictionist approach of Anglo-Saxon neo-Malthusianism" (p. 35).

Following World War II, demography expanded rapidly in the United States. American demographers, largely as a result of new developments in contraceptive technology, became leading proponents in the social engineer-

ing of rapid demographic transitions in the less-developed regions of the world. Their studies showed that reduction in population growth in low income countries would result in substantially higher rates of economic growth (p. 37).

Support for birth control also came from doctors and public health workers who noted serious health problems caused by excessive childbearing in unsanitary conditions and against a background of undernourishment and malnutrition. A leading proponent for this claim was Margaret Singer who took her message throughout the world.

The studies of these persons drew considerable attention and criticism, and especially from Marxian-trained economists in European countries and the Soviet Union. These persons argued, on the basis of European demographic experience, that birth rates would fall spontaneously with rising living standards. The basic strategy in coping with the population question was to accelerate economic development. Advocacy of birth control was a diversion from the needed socio-economic revolution that was required to increase economic productivity and to better redistribute the world resources.

Early initiatives in the United Nations to deal constructively with population growth problems met open confrontation and conflict. Hostile governments voted down measure proposed by such world-renowned leaders as Julian Huxley at UNESCO and Brock

³ See Huxley, "Population and Human Destiny," *World Review*, Vol. . . , No. . . (January-February, 1950) and his introduction to R.C. Cook, *Human Fertility: the Modern Dilemma* (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1951).

Chisholm at the World Health Organization (WHO). During these early controversies, and especially in WHO, a number of nations threatened to withdraw their membership if birth control were supported. The experience of the 1950's casts an ominous warning, so the authors note, that brilliant individual analysis and planning may count less in an international bureaucracy than strong political and economic support drawn from constituent governments and well-organized international groups. While the international bureaucracy may not have within itself the capacity to change, the encouraging aspect that may be implicitly drawn from this study is that the United Nations did respond to constructive organizational renewal brought about by the concerted efforts of external forces, including those of private international bodies.⁴

⁴ The significance in organizational renewal terms of the United Nations' change on the population question is a subject that warrants immediate scholarly investigation. How was this accomplished in social action terms. What may be learned from this event that is useful for other types of international social action programs? For some general references, see Garth N. Jones, *Planned Organizational Change: A Study in Change Dynamics* (New York: Praeger, 1969) and "Change Behavior in the Planned Organizational Change Process: Application of Socio-Economic Exchange Theory," *Philippine Journal of Public Administration*, Vol. XIII, No. 4 (October 1969), pp. 442-14; Robert T. Golembiewski, *Renewing Organizations: The Laboratory Approach to Planned Change* (Ithaca, Ill.: F.E. Peacock, 1972); Gordon Lippitt *Organizational Renewal* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1969); Chris Argyris, *Organization and Innovation* (Homewood, Ill.: Irwin, 1965); and "Planned and Managed Organizational Change: Recent Research Findings and Their Relevance to Technical Co-operation," *Public Administration Newsletter* (United Nations, New York), No. 51 (May-June 1973), pp. 13-26.

The eight-year span from 1961 was designated by Symonds and Carder as "The Period of Quiescence." The United Nations system gave little attention to the population question except for the non-controversial World Population Conference held in 1954. The early mandate of the United Nations Population Commission to study and provide advice on "policies designed to influence the size and structure of population" reflected as much support for measures to encourage larger families as for family planning programs. The 1959 Report of the U.N. Population Commission noted: "It is not the task of the Population Commission to suggest policies that any Government of any Member State should pursue" (p. 88).

Controversies on the population issue were held to a minimum. Primary attention at this time was wisely given in meeting the need for a sound basis of factual information and "an understanding of the implication of demographic phenomena before there would be any meaningful discussion on population policies" (p. 69).

In the early 1960's significant forces were at work to counteract the setback of the 1950's and break, eventually, the deadlock. In the more developed nations, attitudes were changing as a result of the unprecedented increase in world population. The family planning practice, largely through the efforts of voluntary agencies, was being introduced in a number of less-developed countries. These agencies were actively urging governments to adopt positive

measures and accept the responsibility for providing family planning advice and services.⁵

Before 1950 family planning services were only available through government health facilities in the Scandinavian countries and in the United Kingdom, Puerto Rico and Japan. Except in Sweden and, to a lesser case, in the United Kingdom, these governments had no stated population policies.

The earliest and most explicit commitment to population control was made by the Indian government, whose concern dates back to the pre-independence period. In 1959 this Government declared its support for all methods of family planning, including sterilization.

Pakistan's new regime under Ayub Khan attached increased importance to family planning. The second Five-Year Plan in 1960 stressed the need for a conscious population policy and the spread of the family planning practice. Other governments were also actively studying their population problems, although at this date India and Pakistan were the only two governments to declare policies aimed at reducing birth rates through government financed and organized programs.

During the period from 1961 to 1964 the debate on the population question again openly resumed. A

⁵ See, for example, George W. Cadbury, "The Role of the International Planned Parenthood Federation," in Stuart Mudd (ed.), *The Population Crisis and the Use of World Resources* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964), pp. 368-372.

major figure in this new debate was the Director General of the Food and Agriculture Organization, B. R. Sen. As a former member of the elite Indian Civil Service, Director General Sen had witnessed the devastating effects of the 1943 Bengal famine when from one and a half to three million people perished. In 1964 he posed to the International Eucharistic Congress, which held its meetings that year in Bombay, the following soul-searching question: "Can we any more turn our faces away from the concept of family planning when the alternative is starvation and death?" (p. 113).

A new set of world circumstances were emerging. The food population gap was rapidly widening. B.R. Sen very much sensed that a new era was in the making. The authors write: "It seems probable that B. R. Sen's intervention was instrumental in finally committing the United States to the need for population control" (p. 132).

Shifts of Opinion

Sometime between 1965 and 1967, major shifts in the opinions of national leaders and leading interest groups occurred. The population censuses of the early 1960's many of which were conducted with United Nations technical assistance, proved that the Malthusian prophecies of a "population explosion" were actually conservative in many developing areas. There were now factual data to support the need for large scale population control programs. The new technology of the pill and the intrauterine devices (IUD) seemed

more promising for use in the less-developed countries than the nonmedical techniques or abortions which had previously brought down the birth-rates in industrialized countries.

A shift in United States and United Kingdom government policies, dramatized by the speech of Richard Gardner, U.S. Representative to the December 1962 General Assembly session, provided strong reinforcement for the pioneering Swedish leadership in the population field (p. 135). The authors note that the opposition to the population question was somewhat silenced when faced with demographic facts, food shortages, and realignment among member states. Although WHO and UNESCO still hesitated to accept birth control or family planning education as a priority issue in their professional programs, the Population Commission and Population Division within the United Nations itself began moving more resolutely forward in developing in the early 1960's action programs.

In December 1966, the General Assembly approved a historic resolution which in effect authorized and urged "all parts of the United Nations system to assist, when requested, in further developing and strengthening national and regional facilities for training, research information and advisory services in the field of population" (p. 148). Family planning as a basic human right was officially proclaimed in May 1966 at the United Nations Conference on Human Rights held in Tehran. This proclamation states "that parents have the basic right to deter-

mine freely and responsibly the number and spacing of their children."⁶ A unanimously adopted resolution added the language "... a right of adequate education and information in this respect for all couples."⁷

The legal significance of these and related United Nations events is important. As one authority writes:

The achievement of the objectives of social progress and development . . . requires the formulation and establishment . . . of programmes in the field of population, within the framework of national demographic policies and as part of the welfare medical services, including education, training of personnel and the provisions to families of the knowledge and means necessary to determine freely and responsibly the number and spacing of their children.

Since "human rights" impose a legal, and not merely moral, responsibility upon states, there is a legal duty on the part of each government to see that laws and policies which conflict with implementation of such rights be amended or abolished and that new laws and policies be adopted to conform with and further these rights. Furthermore, human rights, *ex-hypothesi*, are rights which attach to all human beings equally, whatever their nationality.⁸

⁶ For details, see John W. Halderman, "The United Nations," in Luke T. Lee and Arthur Larson (eds.), *Population and Law* (Durham, N.C.: Rule of Law Press, 1971), Part VI.

⁷ The additional language is found in Resolution VIII: "Human Rights Aspects of Family Planning."

⁸ Luke T. Lee, "Law and Family Planning" *Studies in Family Planning*, Vol. II, No. 4 (April 1971), pp. 81-82. The author's references for his quotation the last sentence of Sir Humphrey Waldeck, "Human Rights in Contemporary International Law and the Significance of the European Convention," in *The European Convocation on Human Rights, International and Comparative Law Quarterly*, Supp. Publication No.

New Era

If the 1950's were a time of confrontation on population issues and the early 1960's a time of policy and program realignment, the late 1960's and 1970's should be viewed as the period of program development and implementation. To transfer policies and mandates into effective administrative programs is today the major challenge confronting the United Nations system.

To strengthen United Nations technical assistance for family planning, census-taking, and related population activities, Secretary-General U Thant transferred in the late 1960's the extra-budgetary population funds from the traditional U.N. budget accounts to the jurisdiction of the United Nations Development Program. A special Fund for Population Activities was established to support population projects.

It is too early to assess whether the Fund will be completely successful in coordinating diverse and sometimes competitive United Nations activities; whether it will be able to provide the kind of assistance that recipient governments want and need, and whether the donor government will continue to provide the necessary funding. But the progress made in the last few years is commendable. The Fund to date serves as a model for effective coordination

11 (1965), p. 3. Also see Professor Lee's background paper for the UN Second Asian Population Conference, November 1-13, 1972. This was printed in *Journal of International Law*, Vol. XII, No. — (March 1972) pp. 309-325.

and development of United Nations technical cooperation programs.

What of the Future?

The authors conclude that United Nations will play in the future a significant role in the population field. They observe that:

The indirect influence of the agencies of the U.N. should not be underrated. *Firstly*, they produced global figures which could be universally accepted showing that the world's population was in a process of doubling itself over a period of 30 years. *Secondly*, their legislatures provided a forum in which debate on the right to family planning facilities and the need for population control could be staged. *Thirdly*, as the tire turned in favor of these measures, resolutions of the United Nations gave them international legitimacy which made it easier for national leaders to change course. (p. 205, emphasis added).

This sort of organizational change and development augurs well the United Nations' place in the population field. However, the major work lies ahead. The formulating of the World Population Plan of Action (and a means to implement it) called for by the United Nations Economic and Social Council in 1971 will be the major task preoccupying the 1974 Population Conference and Year. This will be no easy task and will constitute in the immediate future the main effort of the United Nations system. Then there is the task of developing realistic national population programs: programs that justifiably cover all the men, women, children (and those yet unborn) who

must continue to share this planet. Progress had been made toward this end, but at the best, it represents only a beginning. The difficult period still lies ahead particularly in the area of program organization and administration. The authors offer us little advice in how to cope with the uncertain future characterized by a "population explosion."⁹

In sum, this book is a readable and excellent introduction to a subject of increasing world concern and importance but it cannot be regarded as the last word, nor did the authors ever intend their work to be so.

⁹ See Garth N. Jones, *Organization and Administration of National Family Planning Programs: A New Challenge for Technical Co-operation in Public Administration* (Anchorage: Division of Business, Economics and Public Administration, University of Alaska, 1973). (processed).