

CHANGES IN THE DEMOGRAPHIC SITUATION IN ASIA AND THE FAR EAST: 1955-1963

By
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Almost nine years ago, government officials and experts from eleven countries in Asia and the Far East assembled at Bandung, Indonesia for the first regional seminar on population. Organized by the United Nations, the Seminar afforded an interchange of information on population problems and for discussions on ways and means of improving demographic research. The status of demographic information at that time may be discerned from the following paragraphs contained in the Preface of the Seminar Report.

"Most of the countries of the region, are severely handicapped at the present time in taking into account population trends in planning for economic and social development, because of the lack of sufficient information about the characteristics and trends of population in relation to economic and social conditions. The lack of reliable basic data on population is striking in all countries in the region except Japan. In some countries no census has been taken in the last twenty years or more and even the present size of the population is only vaguely known. Current records of births and deaths are seldom available. Where such records exist they are often very incomplete and inaccurate. Consequently, the levels and trends of fertility, mortality and natural increase of the population in most countries of the region can be estimated only with a considerable margin of error. Information concerning the currents of internal migration is completely lacking or grossly inadequate in nearly every country in the region. Important deficiencies in information are also found on such matters as the age structure of the population, the economic activities of the people, and the numbers and characteristics of families or households.

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“The improvement and expansion of demographic statistics are not easy tasks which can be accomplished within a short period of time. However, some of the gaps in demographic statistics could be filled by obtaining some of the most needed information through field surveys and other studies. In addition, available census and vital statistics should be carefully evaluated for their completeness and accuracy. Even fragmentary and inadequate data may be of practical use if the nature and extent of the errors are estimated and properly accounted for.

“Irrespective of the question of the availability and reliability of demographic statistics, analysis of the relationships between population trends and various economic and social factors is needed in order to gain a better understanding of the population problems prevailing and to permit taking population trends into account in development programmes. Although some remarkable demographic studies have appeared in some of the countries in the region, research of this kind has been very scattered and of limited scope. The need for, and practical importance of, expansion in this field is unquestionable, especially considering the tremendous population problems of the countries concerned and the social, cultural, and economic diversity of the population in the various parts of the region, and within the individual countries.

“Improvement in the collection of demographic information and analysis of population trends is hampered in various ways. In almost all the countries concerned there is a severe shortage of persons with training in demography. Facilities available to provide this training are almost non-existent in the region. In some countries even academic courses in social sciences are not offered. Most of the limited demographic research at present is being carried out by government departments in connection with the investigation of problems of planning and development. Closer collaboration and coordination among the various agencies concerned with population problems would be beneficial, so that the limited resources

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available could be concentrated to a greater extent on obtaining information most urgently needed. Cooperation would be advantageous not merely between agencies within a country, but also between offices, organizations and universities interested in demographic problems in the various countries within the region. Through such regional cooperation and exchange of experience in the problems of collecting data, designing field studies and analyzing demographic information could be accomplished. Cooperative training and research activities of interest to all countries in the region might also be developed." ¹

The participants at the Seminar adopted a statement advocating multilateral cooperation in demographic training and research on a large scale within the region in order that each country could benefit from the experience of others in dealing with problems common to the area, and to accelerate the development of demographic services in countries where they were deficient. As a measure of such cooperation, the Seminar supported the plan prepared by the United Nations Secretariat for the establishment of a regional centre for demographic training and research in Asia and the Far East.

I

While many gaps still remain, progress has been made since 1955 in generating information on the demography of countries in Asia and the Far East. At the recently concluded Asian Population Conference held at New Delhi, India last December, the delegates recorded the strides made in satisfying the need of the region for demographic knowledge. Particular notice was taken of the availability of new census data in most of the ECAFE countries, including several where no modern census had heretofore been enumerated and still others where data available at the time of the 1955 Seminar

¹ United Nations, *Asia and the Far East Seminar on Population, Bandung, 1955*. New York: 1957.

were so outdated as to allow only rough estimates of population size. It was also apparent that within the last ten years, concerted efforts had been made by the countries of the ECAFE region to broaden the coverage and to improve the quality of demographic data. The use of sampling methods to augment knowledge of population characteristics, manpower and employment, mobility, levels of fertility and mortality as well as other socio-economic data was brought out in the national statements of various countries. Advances were also evident in the utilization of demographic statistics for analytical studies delving into the inter-relations between population growth and economic and social factors. Recent demographic research has contributed the factual basis for development planning and for decision-making on fundamental questions of public policy. Probably the most encouraging trend since 1955 was the intensification of research on the population of the ECAFE countries—an event unparalleled in the history of demography.

Following the recommendation made during the 1955 Population Seminar, a regional demographic training centre was established in 1956 at Bombay, India. Under the joint sponsorship of the Indian Government, the Sir Dorabji Tata Trust, and the United Nations, the Centre has training facilities for a one-year certificate course and a two-year diploma course in demography. Lectures are given on both substantive and technical demography, statistics, sociology and social psychology, methodology of social research, economics, human genetics and family planning. Under the guidance of a faculty member the trainees are required to prepare seminar papers on demographic problems relating to their respective countries. By July 1963, ninety-seven students from seventeen countries had completed the one-year training course. These trainees are now engaged in demographic research in their respective countries and are assisting planners and policy makers in development work.

Teaching and training facilities leading to a formal degree in demography exist in only four countries of the ECAFE

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region, viz, Australia, India, Pakistan, and the Philippines. However, universities in ten nations provide instruction in demography at the graduate level as part of the curricula in economics, medicine, political science, social welfare, sociology, and statistics. The University of the Philippines recently initiated a graduate program in demography while the Iranian Government will soon organize an Institute of Demography at the University of Teheran. Some countries are currently experimenting with short-term courses in demography to meet the need of specialized groups such as university teachers, health workers, and family planning counselors.

Through the United Nations regional and country programmes of technical assistance, considerable aid has been furnished the governments in the region for planning and carrying out their population censuses. During the period 1959-60 alone, advisers were sent to eighteen countries for this purpose. Technicians were likewise assigned to a number of countries to assist in the analysis of census and survey data. Furthermore, since 1961 Regional Demographic Advisers were appointed and assigned to the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East to consult and assist government agencies and institutions interested in demographic research. The United Nations agencies, in association with member governments, undertook a number of demographic case studies such as the Mysore population study² and the study of population growth and manpower in the Philippines.³ Seminars and training centres were organized to improve the technical knowledge of census personnel and to encourage exchange of experience in census taking throughout the region. Similarly, four short-term training courses on vital and health statistics have been conducted since 1951. United Nations agencies have

²United Nations, *The Mysore Population Study*, Population Studies No. 34. New York: Department of Economic and Social Affairs, UN, 1961.

³United Nations, *Population Growth and Manpower in the Philippines*, Population Studies No. 32. New York: Department of Economic and Social Affairs, UN, 1960.

convened some eleven conferences on demographic and related fields wherein experts from and outside the countries of the region have participated actively. Technical reports on virtually every aspect of census methodology were prepared and published by international organizations.

Demographic research has been promoted through regional cooperation. The Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East engaged in a research project dealing with estimates of the total growth of manpower over the period 1955-1980 in the Federation of Malaya, India, Japan and Thailand. In addition, an evaluation of the population census data of the Federation of Malaya and Singapore was undertaken by the Commission.⁴ The Demographic Training and Research Centre completed studies on the basic demographic processes such as fertility differences in Malaya, Thailand and India, internal migration and migrant characteristics in India, and the status

of migration in Japan. Population projections were prepared for Korea, the Philippines, Ceylon, and Indonesia. At the same time the Center is undertaking a long-term research project in family planning communication, action and research for the Indian Government.

II

To state that gains in demographic knowledge have been realized in the ECAFE countries is not to say that the deficiencies in demographic statistics cited earlier have been supplied. In fact, demographic knowledge is still no more than rudimentary in a majority of countries in the region. Equal emphasis must be placed on what still remains unknown as on knowledge already gained.

1. There are as yet some countries which have not undertaken any modern census or where available data are either

⁴United Nations, Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East, *Economic Bulletin for Asia and the Far East*, Vol. XII, No. 2 (Sept. 1961) and Vol. XIII, No. 2 (Sept. 1962)

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dubious or obsolete. Around five countries in Asia and the Far East have not enumerated the population residing within their territories. For other countries in the region, the increase of population during the past decade cannot be estimated with any degree of assurance. The most important case is Mainland China whose present population size has been estimated at 645 million persons for 1960, implying a rate of growth considerably less than that estimated for other countries in Asia. Although there is no doubt that recent data for the remainder of the region are superior to earlier existing ones, still the precise growth rates of certain nations are uncertain enough to engender caution when comparisons of an international order are involved.

To improve this situation, the scope of censuses could be extended considerably by the use of sampling procedures as pointed out during the Asian Population Conference. Moreover, yearly sample surveys were deemed necessary to fill the gap between decennial or quinquennial censuses. An evaluation of the completeness and accuracy of census data was likewise considered an important task and the delegates emphasized the need for research on the subject to enhance the usefulness of demographic information.

2. **Until now a major portion of the region lacks a satisfactory national system of vital statistics.** The Asian Population Conference working group noted the fact that a vital registration system does not even exist on paper in certain countries of the region. In some other nations there is no comprehensive national law pertaining to the subject.

Statutory provisions for uniform registration procedures for countries were deemed desirable. To provide sufficient incentives for registering births, the working group at the Asian Population Conference suggested that a birth certificate be made a prerequisite for admission to primary schools. It was recommended that no tax or fee should be levied for the recording of vital events in order not to discourage registration. Furthermore, rural health staff could contribute toward

the proper evaluation and improvement of vital statistics by educating the populace on the usefulness and importance of vital registration. Pending the attainment of the ideal situation, it was urged that Asian countries employ alternative procedures for collecting the required data through the use of sample surveys, sampling registration systems, and tabulation area schemes.

3. The supply of trained demographers in the ECAFE countries is disproportionately smaller than the number found in the economically advanced nations. One of the many obstacles a government faces in attempting to carry out a coordinated programme of census-taking plus analysis and evaluation of results is the shortage of trained personnel. The numbers of persons now being trained fall far short of the regional requirements.

The expansion of demographic training as carried on in universities and colleges within the region, at regional training centres, in the workshops and seminars organized by the United Nations and its specialized agencies merits serious consideration. A larger number of United Nations fellowships for advanced demographic studies in the more developed countries is another step towards solving the acute shortage of professional persons. Training facilities throughout the region could be coordinated to minimize duplication of efforts and unnecessary expenditure in a field where trainers are in scarce supply.

As an effective means of solving some of the more pressing problems, some countries within the region might employ demographers from other countries not presently utilizing the services of their experts. To stimulate this program, a roster of trained persons who would be so available could be prepared and circulated among member countries.

4. The resources presently devoted to demographic research in Asia and the Far East are meager. The nature and extent of any program of demographic activities is limited not

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only by the availability of basic data and of trained personnel but also by the financial resources which the government can afford to allocate for this work. The shortage of funds and the competition which demographic research often meets from other types of research recognized as having higher priority in socio-economic development programmes of most governments are problems to be overcome if the situation is to be improved.

More collaboration and coordination among the various organizations and institutions interested in population problems would concentrate the limited resources on the most urgent tasks and avoid overlapping and omissions. Cooperation would be advantageous not merely between agencies within a country, but also between offices, organizations and universities in the countries within the region.

III

In view of the fact that countries in Asia are increasingly aware of the uses of demographic data in their developmental work, it can be expected that fundamental demographic research will be in great demand. Technical assistance and other forms of regional and inter-regional cooperation can do much toward overcoming the handicaps brought about by shortage of experienced personnel, insufficient facilities for training such personnel, and inadequate demographic information. The United Nations and its specialized agencies can strengthen and expand their demographic work to meet the needs for assistance in dealing with the pressing population problems of the developing countries.