

CONFERENCE ON POPULATION PROBLEMS

June 20-22, 1952

Summary Report

This report is based on the verbatim record of the proceedings. The report is arranged by topics rather than according to the order in which the points were made at the meetings.

1. The problems

There was wide agreement that the prospect of rapid population growth poses serious problems in many countries. The difficulty was not only a matter of food supply; population growth must be seen in relation to all the things needed for a full life. So far as food was concerned, attention should be paid to the problems of economic and social organization which are likely to prevent the realization of the technical potentialities of food production. The use of the term "optimum" population to indicate the best relation of population to all the various factors involved was discussed.

Some speakers distinguished between short and long term problems. The short term problems would have to be met by increasing the output of food and other products, in the long run it would also be necessary to reduce the rate of population growth. It was impossible for the birth and death rates in a country to differ over a long period. A balance of a low birth rate with a low death rate was desirable. The urgency of the problem of reducing the birth rate in many countries to balance the lowered death rates was repeatedly emphasized. It was feared that within a few years the situation might get very serious indeed.

Some members stressed the possibilities of increasing production per head both by the application in the underdeveloped countries of the more advanced technology of the West and by new technical developments. Among other possibilities the direct utilization of solar energy was discussed. The amount of energy reaching the earth in the form of sunlight is enormous in relation to the energy being currently utilized.

(For example, six days' sunlight is roughly equivalent to the earth's entire coal and oil resources.) It was emphasized that from the point of view of the "population problem" the rate at which new developments became available was a crucial factor. The utilization of solar energy would not become practicable in the next ten years or so, but it was stated that perhaps something might be done in 25 years.

It was stressed that the practical application of technological improvements on a wide scale (as, for example, the gradual adoption of hybrid corn by American farmers) was necessarily a very gradual process. In the case of the underdeveloped countries cultural barriers were also involved. Thus a change of food habits may be difficult even under the threat of starvation (as in India in 1946).

Special attention was devoted to the question of India. It was feared that India was losing the "race" between production and population. In the next ten years, for example, it might be difficult to increase production by as much as ten per cent and the population might increase by a greater amount, in the absence of disaster. The threat of famine was serious and hampering efforts to modernize the economic system of the country. Much of the current effort for economic development was irrelevant, because it depended on Western technology requiring heavy capital expenditure. It was, however, suggested that in suitable circumstances Western methods were directly applicable; for example, the production of nitrogen fertilizer by Western methods would increase the productivity of Indian farms. A large part of India's labor force was probably underemployed, but it might be difficult to utilize this source of excess capacity. Changes of another kind also, such as the adoption of a single alphabet or modifications of custom or diet, to which one could hardly give an economic cost, would also have important effects on productivity. Some members stated their belief that India was in fact making progress.

In view of the demographic situation in India, it was stressed that it would be important to achieve a reduction of the rural birth rate prior to the transition to an industrial and urbanized society. Such a change was quite conceivable in the opinion of several persons. The Indian peasant had not remained untouched by the outside world. The government was officially interested in the matter and an experiment (using the "safe period" method) had been started. However, others emphasized the difficulty of changing deepseated behavior patterns.

Doubt was expressed whether a transition to an industrial economy was desirable for all countries. Industrialization might damage the resources base. The difficulties of countries which had built an industrial economy with heavy reliance on imports, particularly Japan, were referred to. It was maintained, however, that substantial development of the economy of peasant agricultural countries necessarily involved a shift of a large portion of the labor force away from agriculture. This did not imply the building up of heavy industry in all countries (it might well be a mistake for many countries to attempt growth in this direction) or specialization in manufacturing with heavy importing of agricultural products and raw materials. The main point was rather to achieve a general increase in productivity deriving from improved technology in agriculture as well as the growth of non-industrial activities. It was also pointed out that the decline in fertility in the West and in Japan had been concentrated in general in the urban industrial centers.

One speaker called attention to the function of migration. Migration into cities exposed people to influences which led to the reduction of fertility. The rapid drop in fertility resulting from the urbanization of the American negro population had been especially noteworthy. International migration also could, if present restrictions were removed, play a part in solving the problem. Other speakers, however, were not inclined to attach importance to international migration.

The nature of the population problems of different countries was discussed. Each country had its population problems, including the U.S. (difficulties resulting from the exhaustion of mineral resources were mentioned). The study of the population problems of the United States was important both in itself and because Americans could more appropriately express opinions on the problems of others if they paid attention to their own. It was agreed that the problems of the underdeveloped countries were of a very different kind from those of the United States. It was pointed out also that the discussions at the conference had represented a particular point of view--which might be called the "Western Protestant" point of view. In the world as a whole, this was a minority point of view.

There was a brief discussion of the problem of "quality." It was felt that it was part of the background of the questions to which the conference devoted most of its time. Modern civilization had reduced the operation of natural selection by saving more "weak" lives and enabling them to reproduce. A removal of selection which normally balances the detrimental mutations necessarily results in a downward trend in the genetic quality of a population. There was, however, difference of emphasis between the geneticists present as to the rate at which this process is likely to operate in regard to the qualities, such as intelligence, which are most important in human societies. It was doubted whether this process need cause any concern. More research on heredity in man was needed.

2. Suggested action

General

Much discussion was devoted to the possible efforts to meet the problem. It was pointed out that the scope for action by Americans was limited, essentially it was a matter for people in the countries concerned. Yet there were various things Americans could do, such as research which could be carried on in the U.S., assistance to people in other countries to do their own research, help with education, training, and publicity to enable the people in the countries concerned and particularly the elite to obtain a better understanding of the problem. It was emphasized also that education and publicity were important in the United States to create an informed public opinion.

Most of the suggestions related, directly or indirectly, to the reduction of fertility. However, the importance of concrete and detailed investigation by experts of practical possibilities for economic development was emphasized. One member proposed that research aimed at increasing productivity should be organized at three levels, with a different time scale for each--the suggested first research relating to the immediate application of existing technology, secondly fundamental research relating to the traditional types of agriculture (e.g. investigation of the phenomenon of hybrid vigor) and thirdly, the study of novel sources of food and energy (solar energy, the use of microorganisms, etc.).

Techniques of contraception

Many types of action were suggested which might aid in the reduction of fertility. Both means of birth control and the attitudes relating to their use were considered. It was held that where motivations were not sufficiently strong for the use of methods now available, people might be willing to accept more convenient methods.

It was widely agreed that research on the physiology of reproduction should be developed with a view to finding means of contraception which would be used on a large scale in the underdeveloped countries. The method would have to be safe, convenient and cheap. Various possible approaches to this problem were summarized. It was reported that under the auspices of the Conservation Foundation a survey of relevant scientific work (some of which had been published only in obscure sources) had been carried out. The view was expressed that this survey showed that sufficient "leads" were now available in the area of basic research, so that developmental research was needed to yield products which could be manufactured and applied on a mass scale. Work in this direction both by university laboratories and pharmaceutical concerns had, it was felt, been hampered by various pressures. Others, however, believed that the basic research had not yet provided the knowledge which would justify hopes of development and practical application in the near future and denied that progress had been impeded by pressures against work in this area.

Various suggestions were made for practical steps to stimulate research on the physiology of reproduction directed to the development of improved contraceptive procedures. Fellowships might be set up to attract young men into research on the physiology of reproduction. It was suggested that the National Research Council might stimulate more work in this area. Another proposal was that a group of internationally known scientists in the fields relevant to the problem should be formed. Their task would be to decide on the most promising areas of research, to select the best places and persons to carry out that research and to propose suitable institutional and economic arrangements. The group should have substantial funds at its disposal.

Utilization of the resources of laboratories, clinical groups and pharmaceutical houses in this field might be encouraged in various ways. It was reported that the Planned Parenthood Federation of America was considering this problem with a view especially to pursuing further the leads already available from basic research. Three methods (enumerated in ascending order of expense) were contemplated. The first would be a series of seminars of competent people who could bring together their skills and might be able to commit some resources for the task. The second approach would be to select some where there are facilities for research and clinical testing. Considerable impetus might be given to research in a center of this kind by a group who helped with selection of the objectives, justification of the research and fund raising. The third approach would be the setting up of a special institute for research on the physiology of reproduction and allied subjects, whose main objective would be the control of fertility; though related ends, such as overcoming sterility, would also be served.

Social research and experimentation

The importance of research on population problems in the under-developed countries was emphasized as a means of obtaining more knowledge to deal with the problem and to develop public opinion. Particular attention should be devoted to the social and psychological determinants of fertility and to the cultural barriers to the reduction of fertility. Knowledge in this field consisted mainly of broad generalizations and much more concrete detail was needed. New data would have to be obtained, but the fuller utilization of existing materials which often have to be neglected for financial reasons should be kept in mind. It was suggested that some experiments might be conducted to determine ways in which birth control might be rendered acceptable.

In India both studies and experiments had already begun. It might be advisable to give support both financial and technical to studies of attitudes to fertility control and to experiments both to spread the "safe period" method and other methods of contraception. Control villages where no experiments were conducted should be studied for comparison with the experimental villages. The experiment which was already being conducted

under government auspices used a very expensive time-consuming method to instruct people in the use of the "safe period." It had been suggested that a less expensive and less thorough method to disseminate information concerning the safe period should be tried out. Experiments using other methods than the safe period could perhaps be carried out in some parts of India, though the central government was not at present prepared to support them.

Several institutional arrangements were proposed to encourage research. The people in underdeveloped countries were likely to be suspicious of outsiders meddling with matters which intimately touched the value systems and the structure of their society. It was important that they do their own research. A research center or centers might be set up, notably in the Far East, for research in population and allied questions, to be run by the people in the countries concerned. It was also suggested that it might be possible to interest the proposed international social science research and training center to be set up by UNESCO in population research (some members were sceptical about this). One need of the underdeveloped countries, it was noted, was more trained personnel in the social sciences. Fellowships and scholarships enabling students from the underdeveloped countries to study in the West would help meet this need.

Cultural change

Methods (other than the research and experiments mentioned) for inducing cultural changes and influencing attitudes to fertility were discussed. It was emphasized that little was known about cultural change. However, two very important processes were under way which could act as carriers of change in the field of population and fertility, namely economic development and the improvement of health conditions. The opportunities afforded by these processes should be used as far as possible. For example, the peasant ownership of land is widely held to be favorable to the spread of family limitation because peasants will be anxious to pass on property to their children. The encouragement of peasant ownership might, therefore, be incorporated in economic development programs. Similarly in public health programs services and facilities should per-

haps not be provided free, for this procedure removes one of the financial inducements against having a large family. Every possible way of making children expensive should be considered. It was also mentioned that birth control programs could be put across better as maternal health measures than as means of population control. The suggestion was made that careful studies should be undertaken of the various side effects of public health programs, with perhaps some experimentation with different procedures.

Public opinion and education

The importance of increasing the understanding of population problems in the American public was stressed, in order to promote the growth of information on the subject throughout the world and to permit the United States government to give as much help as possible to other governments and to international organizations in dealing with population problems. It was argued that there were pressures in American society, notably those exerted by the Catholic hierarchy, which restricted the free discussion of population problems. The teaching of population in universities was also discussed and it was held that more attention should be given to the subject.

The possibility of strengthening financially some of the graduate departments which can give graduate training in population ought to be considered. Instruction in population might be included in the curriculum of students who are not specializing in sociology or economics, for example biology or geography students. Research on the population problems of the United States should be encouraged; there should also be research aimed at clarifying the value judgments which are implicit in population policies.

Organization

Various speakers emphasized the need for international effort on a nongovernmental level. Diverse basic points of view and the intellectual resources of different countries should be brought together. On these grounds it was suggested that an international organization be set up for this purpose with adequate nongovernmental support and assured of a long life. Another argument for international action was that it was desirable that efforts in the population field should not appear in other countries as American attempts to interfere in their affairs.

The feeling was expressed that some kind of continuation or repetition of the present conference was desirable. One speaker thought that there should be in the United States a body of eminent persons meeting periodically to suggest and encourage research and influence public opinion regarding the nation's population problems.

It was pointed out that different aspects of the field of population could be served by different organizations and that existing organizations which were already active could be strengthened.

At the final meeting a resolution was introduced empowering the chairman to form a temporary committee "promptly to consider the steps to be taken to bring about the organization at a high level of professional competence and public esteem of an unofficial international council on a permanent basis." The function of this council would be "to assess the facts as to the populations of the world and the resources, cultural and material, available to give such populations a progressively improving standard of living; to consider whether and to what extent these populations are in balance, how such balance can be secured and maintained on a short and long range basis, and generally to acquaint the public with its findings and recommendations, if any."

The resolution was discussed at some length. The fear was expressed that if an attempt were made to recruit the council on too wide a basis, e.g. by representation from all countries, it would be hamstrung in its activities. It would be preferable if the council were started on a small scale and then grew. The membership should consist of persons acting in their individual capacity and selected according to public esteem, professional competence, interest and willingness to promote relevant investigations.

Various amendments were proposed to that part of the resolution which sets out the functions of the council. A second resolution was then introduced empowering the committee appointed by the chairman "to make such amendments as seem desirable having in mind the discussion of the conference" and requesting that "the text of the revised resolution be submitted to the members of the conference for their comments, prior to its final adoption."

Both resolutions were passed unanimously.