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POPULATION QUESTIONS

Summary and conclusions of the biennial report
on the world population situation

Report of the Secretary-General

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. The present report has been prepared in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1347 (XLV) of 30 July 1968, in which the Secretary-General was requested to submit to the General Assembly biennially a concise report on the world population situation, including an assessment of the current and prospective trends. In compliance with a decision of the Council of 8 August 1969, only the summary and conclusions of the biennial report are presented here to the Council for transmittal to the General Assembly at its fortieth session.
2. It will be recalled that the previous biennial summary and conclusions (A/39/128) were presented to the General Assembly at its thirty-ninth session through the Economic and Social Council at its first regular session of 1984 when its biennial agenda item on population questions was discussed after a postponement of one year so that the Council could consider, at the same time, preparations for the International Conference on Population, which was to be held in August 1984.
3. In view of the relatively short time span since the submission of the last report containing the summary and conclusions of the biennial report on the world population situation, the present summary has been prepared to reflect the latest additional information about population growth, structure, fertility, mortality, population distribution, internal and international migration and social and economic implications of demographic trends. A summary is also included of the views expressed by Governments at the International Conference on Population which was held at Mexico City from 6 to 14 August 1984; those views will be taken into account in the preparation of the next biennial report on the world population situation.

II. DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS

A. Population growth

4. Since the last assessment of global population trends was undertaken by the United Nations in 1982, 1/ more than 35 countries have released their new census results and many more have published detailed accounts of the latest census findings. Analyses of the data so far indicate that the gradual slow-down of global population growth is still holding. For example, the representative of China at the International Conference on Population at Mexico City reported that China's rate of population growth for 1983 was reduced to 1.15 per cent, which was very close to the estimated 1.17 per cent growth for the period 1980-1985 in the United Nations 1982 assessment.
5. The present rate of global population growth is estimated at 1.65 per cent per year, down from 2.0 per cent during the 1960s. Declines of growth rates have occurred both in the developed and in the developing countries. But the regional diversity of population trends has been so large that such a global assessment seems almost irrelevant for policy consideration at national and regional levels. Among the developing regions in which the annual growth rate declined as a group

from 2.5 per cent during the period 1970-1975 to 2.0 per cent during the period 1980-1985, the decline observed in China is of the most significant importance (from 2.4 to 1.2 per cent per year during the same period). If China were excluded, the decline in the rate of growth of that group would be far less significant (from 2.5 to 2.4 per cent per year). Within the developing regions, Africa as a whole shows a growth rate of over 3 per cent during the period 1980-1985, which is still rising, and Western Asia has a comparable high growth rate of 2.9 per cent, with no sign of significant changes. Other South Asian regions and Latin America have respective growth rates of 2.1 and 2.4 per cent during the period 1980-1985, and have been declining over the past decade.

6. The diversity of population trends is more pronounced among individual countries. Among the 123 countries in the developing world (including territories and areas), 58 showed an increase in the growth rates between 1970-1975 and 1980-1985, 49 showed a decrease and 16 showed practically no change. Those countries with increasing growth rates are comparatively small in population size, amounting to 16 per cent of the total population of the developing world in 1984. In contrast, the countries with declining growth rates accounted for 73 per cent of the population of all developing countries (or 61 per cent if China is excluded from the calculation). Among the 33 developed countries, 25 experienced a decrease in their growth rate between 1970-1975 and 1980-1985, and six had no change.

7. As to the future, the growth rate of population in the world is expected to decline more slowly than it did during the past 15 years, unless Governments' population policies should change significantly. Despite the expected declining growth rate, the annual increments to the world population will continue to increase, from 79 million at present to 89 million by 1995-2000, according to the medium variant projections. By the end of the twentieth century the world's population will be close to 6.1 billion, of which nearly 80 per cent will be residing in the developing countries.

B. Population structure

8. During the period 1980-1985 the working age population (15-64 years) in the developing countries is estimated to have increased, on the average, at an annual rate of 2.8 per cent, the elderly population (60 years and over) at 3.0 per cent and women in the reproductive ages (15-49 years) at 2.9 per cent. Those rates are significantly higher than the comparable growth rate of the total population, 2.0 per cent. The differential growth rates among various age-sex groups of the population, are expected to continue in the coming years.

9. Perhaps the most urgent problem for many developing countries in the immediate future will be the continuing very rapid increase of the working age population. In terms of aggregate numbers, the average annual increment of 44 million in the early 1970s rose to 57 million during the period 1980-1985, and is expected to become even larger in the years to come.

10. The youth population (15-24 years) in the developing countries has also grown, on the average, at an annual rate of 2.8 per cent during the 1980-1985 period; that

rate is expected to decline to 2.3 per cent during the period 1985-1990, reflecting fertility reduction during the 1970s. In the developed countries, the youth population, which has grown at 0.6 per cent during 1980-1985, will turn to decrease at an annual rate of -0.7 per cent per year during 1985-1990.

11. The number of women in the reproductive ages 15-49 has been and will be increasing rapidly in the developing countries, especially in Africa, Latin America and South Asia during the next 30 years. For example, during the period 1985-1990 the rate of increase for this group of women will be 3 per cent in Africa, 2.6 per cent in Latin America and 2.5 per cent in South Asia. Those increases will have a profound effect on the rate of population growth in those regions unless the levels and patterns of fertility should undergo significant changes. The number of women in the reproductive ages in the developed countries will be increasing at a low rate of 0.4 per cent during the period 1985-1990.

12. The aging of the population, which bears significant policy implications, is among the most salient features of population change in the world, except for Africa. For the present, the aging problems are most sharply felt in the developed countries, where the median age of population in 1984 is estimated at 32 years. For the future, however, the process of an aging population appears to be most rapid in Asia, where the present median age of 21 years is anticipated to increase to 27 years by the year 2000, and to 34 years by 2025. Also, in Latin America the median age is projected to advance from the present 21 years to 24 years in 2000 and to 30 years by 2025.

13. If the elderly population is defined as those aged 60 years and over, as recommended by the World Assembly on Aging in 1982, ^{2/} there are 411 million people in that category, or 8.6 per cent of the total population of the world in 1984. Among the developed countries, the percentage is 16 per cent, whereas the percentage is 6.3 per cent for the developing countries. By 2025 those percentages will likely increase to 24 and 12 per cent respectively.

C. Fertility trends

14. Recent declines in the rate of population growth, described in section A above, were largely a reflection of declines in fertility. The fertility declines were most marked in the developed countries and in China and other developing countries of East Asia. They were moderate in most of South Asia and Latin America and were slight or non-existent in most of Africa and West Asia. No new information has become available during the past year that would suggest any significant change in those patterns. However, there are several studies published or in progress at the United Nations and elsewhere that shed light on some social-cultural aspects of reproductive behaviour.

15. In recent United Nations publications concerning levels and trends of contraceptive use, ^{3/} it was found that for many developing countries there is a significant gap between the number of women whose current family size is at least as large as that desired and those who are currently using contraception. The gap appears to be narrow in those countries in which social and economic development is

relatively advanced and family planning services are easily available, but the gap is rather large in other countries. The same studies also reveal that the gap widens progressively within each country from large cities to small cities and further to rural areas, and from more to less educated groups of women, indicating, among other things, the existence of a substantial unmet need for family planning services in many developing nations.

16. According to the same survey mentioned above, as of 1980-1981 the prevalence rate among married, reproductive aged women is estimated at 11 per cent for Africa, 24 per cent for South Asia, 43 per cent for Latin America and the Caribbean, and 68-69 per cent for East Asia and the developed regions.

17. Large families are still desired in a number of developing regions of the world, notably in Africa south of the Sahara and in certain countries of Western Asia, where the average desired family size is six or higher. In most of the other countries studied, desired family sizes are much lower and often exceeded by the actual number of children born. In a few countries there is evidence of a decline in average desired family size over time. It is estimated that in some developing countries, the total fertility rate could be reduced by 15 to 25 per cent if all needs for contraception were met.

18. With respect to the relationship between fertility and the status of women, a recently completed study of 34 developing countries showed a negative association between fertility and women's work participation in modern occupations. ^{4/} The fertility of women working in traditional occupations, on the other hand, was found to be similar to the fertility of women who did not work.

D. Mortality trends

19. In view of the scarcity and the generally poor quality of mortality data from the developing world and the existence of significant annual fluctuations that do not necessarily reflect secular trends, there is no justification for a revision of the assessment presented in the last monitoring report (E/CN.9/1984/2). The report noted an improvement in mortality in most countries since the World Population Conference, held at Bucharest in 1974, but also noted a continuation of the striking heterogeneity in the levels and trends of life expectancy among the countries and the regions of the world.

20. An issue that has generated considerable discussion in recent years is whether the supposed slowing of the pace of mortality decline in developing countries during the 1960s and early 1970s continued thereafter. Two recent United Nations reports found evidence of renewed mortality decline in a number of countries during the late 1970s, although heterogeneity in mortality change appears to be the general rule. The recent rapid mortality declines recorded in China, some countries of the Western Asian subregion and elsewhere demonstrate that it is possible for other countries to improve their chances of survivorship when political commitment and adequate resources are devoted to the problem. Mortality rates in most developed countries continued to improve in recent years.

21. Causes of death which underlie mortality levels and trends are known with varying degrees of accuracy. Infectious, parasitic and respiratory diseases remain the major causes of death through most of Africa and in the higher mortality countries of Asia and Latin America. Malaria remains a formidable problem in much of Africa and early eradication seems unlikely. Cardio-vascular diseases have become a more prominent problem in lower mortality countries in the developing world, such as Mauritius and Sri Lanka, especially in the urban areas. In the developed countries, diseases of the circulatory system and neoplasms account for about 70 per cent of all deaths.

E. Population distribution and internal migration

22. The very high rate of urban population growth currently experienced by many developing countries is perhaps the most vivid display of current population change. For example, the rate of urban population growth is estimated at 6.9 per cent for Eastern Africa and more than 5 per cent for Western and Middle Africa. In other subregions of Africa, as well as in Latin America and South Asia, the current urban population growth is estimated between 3.4 and 4.5 per cent. On the other hand, in the developed regions and in East Asia, urban population growth is relatively moderate at 1.1 and 1.8 per cent, respectively, owing partly to the low level of natural growth of population. 5/

23. The urban structure of developing countries is changing rapidly, increasingly concentrating in the largest cities. It is estimated that the number of cities of 4 million and above in the less developed regions increased from 22 in 1980 to 28 in 1985. In most developed countries no further concentration of urban population into the largest cities occurred in recent years. The proportion of urban population in cities with 4 million and more inhabitants has remained about 14 per cent since the 1970s.

24. Another aspect of urbanization in the developing countries that bears important policy implications is that the rising level of urbanization is only a partial reflection of more complex movements of population within each country. Such movements include not only permanent rural-to-urban migration, but also urban-to-rural, urban-to-urban and rural-to-rural migration, circulation, seasonal migration and regular commuting. Rural-to-rural migration accounts for the major parts of migration in many regions of Africa and is quite common in some Asian and Latin American countries (such as Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines).

F. International migration

25. The few countries that had admitted sizeable numbers of immigrants on a permanent basis in the late 1970s are still doing so in the early 1980s. In the United States of America and Australia, preliminary figures show that the average number of annual admissions increased respectively from about 487,000 and 69,000 during the period 1975-1980 to 587,000 and 107,000 during 1980-1983. In contrast, Canada and New Zealand experienced relatively slight decreases (from 130,000 during

1975-1979 to 120,000 during 1980-1983 for Canada, and from 14,000 to 12,000 between 1975-1980 and 1980-1982 for New Zealand), and Israel experienced a relatively larger decline in the mean number of immigrants and potential immigrants received (from 25,000 during 1975-1979 to 16,000 during 1980-1982).

26. In Europe, the number of foreign workers present in the main receiving countries, namely, Belgium, France, the Federal Republic of Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and Switzerland, declined slightly from 4.9 to about 4.8 million between 1980 and 1982. But the total foreign population living in those countries is estimated to have increased by slightly more than 500,000 between 1980 and 1982, reaching almost 11.9 million in 1982. The latest figures are not available from Austria, Luxembourg and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland which had nearly 1.2 million foreign workers in 1980.

27. The paucity of data regarding the foreign labour force present in the resource-rich countries of Western Asia and Northern Africa preclude the accurate estimation of trends in labour migration in that region. However, data from the sending countries suggest that the flows of Asian workers to Western Asia may have been greater than expected and, therefore, it seems more realistic that the number of foreign workers in the receiving countries is in the neighbourhood of 4 million in 1980-1981 rather than the 2.8 million previously estimated for 1980.

28. The 1980s have failed to witness a decline in refugee flows. In spite of the efforts made by the international community, resettlement and repatriation flows have been offset by new refugee arrivals. Between 1981 and 1984 the number of refugees in Africa remained nearly stable (changing from 2.9 to 2.8 million). In Latin America, the change was proportionately greater and in the opposite direction (from 280,000 to 350,000 refugees between 1981 and 1984), while in Asia a sharp increase was registered (from 3.1 to 5.3 million), according to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. The refugee population in developed countries has been increasing, though at a slower pace.

G. Social and economic implications

29. While the pace and pattern of development can significantly alter trends in fertility, mortality, migration, population growth and age structure, those demographic variables also have a major impact on the prospects for development. Thus, population growth was one of the factors contributing to the persistence of large disparities between the per capita gross domestic product (GDP) of the developed and developing countries. The developed countries, as a group, have experienced rising per capita GDP as the rate of growth of output in 1983 substantially exceeded the rate of growth of their populations. In the developing countries, however, GDP growth continued to decline through 1983, falling well below the rate of population increase, thereby widening the relative as well as the absolute gap in living standards between the two groups of countries.

30. The early years of the present decade have witnessed increases in unemployment in both the developed and the developing countries. The employment problem facing the latter is particularly severe. In addition to the world economic recession of

the early 1980s and the spread of labour-saving technologies, the developing countries faced the task of generating productive employment for a labour force that was growing at a rate of 2.3 per cent per annum. Large infusions of capital were required to maintain even their current low levels of productivity per worker and, in the absence of an adequate expansion of the formal sectors, additions to the labour force were absorbed in sectors characterized by underemployment and low incomes.

31. Depressed economic conditions have severely restricted the ability of the developing countries to pursue their educational goals, while at the same time, the requirements for resources are increasing as a result of continuing population growth. The magnitude of the task is indicated by the fact that in 87 developing countries an estimated 76 per cent of boys and 59 per cent of girls aged 6 to 11 were enrolled in schools during 1980. ^{6/} Furthermore, to maintain in the year 2000 the primary school ratios attained in 1980, the developing countries would have to increase their primary school enrolment by some 25 per cent, according to the low variant population projections, and 40 per cent, according to the medium variant. The lower enrolment rates for females and their higher drop-out rates were a matter of particular concern since female education is an important factor in reducing both fertility and mortality.

32. The incidence of many diseases common to the developing countries increased by the environmental degradation that accompanied the rapid growth of population and the persistence of widespread poverty. In 1980 almost three out of five people in developing countries (excluding China) lacked access to safe drinking water and even fewer had any kind of sanitary facility. Provision of the required facilities would involve annual investments of \$40 billion during the 1980s, ^{7/} thus diverting significant amounts of capital from other development activities. That figure could be lessened by reducing rates of population growth or by altering its geographical distribution.

33. Although total production had increased, world per capita cereal production in 1982 was no greater than it had been in 1978 owing to the growth of population size. Though there are ample grain supplies at the global level, in the first two years of the decade the growth of agricultural production in the developing countries averaged 2.6 per cent per year, providing only a slight increase in production per capita. ^{8/} In many countries of Africa, population continues to grow more rapidly than food production, thereby aggravating already serious problems of undernutrition. Even in regions where total food production is adequate, tens of millions in both rural and urban areas face chronic hunger because of their poverty. Of particular concern is the fact that women represent a disproportionate share of the undernourished. Pregnant and lactating women must nourish both themselves and their infants. Furthermore, in most rural areas women are required to combine family and childbearing activities with full-time work in the fields.

34. The need to provide for growing populations has stimulated efforts to increase the population-supporting capacity of agricultural lands. But unless carefully managed, those efforts may result in erosion, desertification, water-logging and the shortening of fallow periods. One effect of the response to rising food demands is that topsoil is being removed by wind and water at a rate considerably

faster than new topsoil is being formed. Another effect is the continuing loss of forests to land clearing for food production. Deforestation, along with overcultivation and overgrazing, are direct causes of desertification, which threatens 20 per cent of the earth's surface now populated by 135 million people.

III. DEMOGRAPHIC PERCEPTIONS AND POLICIES OF GOVERNMENTS

A. General

35. A systematic appraisal of the latest demographic perceptions and policies of Governments was presented to the Population Commission at its twenty-second session in section II of the concise report on monitoring of population trends and policies (E/CN.9/1984/2) and in the concise report on the fifth inquiry among Governments: monitoring of government perceptions and policies on demographic trends and levels in relation to development as of 1982 (E/CN.9/1984/3). As an addendum to those documents, the following section is based on the positions of Governments as expressed at the International Conference on Population, 1984. The following summaries are largely based on the statements made by heads of national delegations at the plenary sessions of the Conference.

B. National sovereignty, human rights, cultural values and peace

36. In the formal statements to the plenary session of the International Conference on Population 1984, three essentially legal or ethical issues were the most frequently mentioned: national sovereignty, collective and individual values and peace. With respect to national sovereignty, a large number of Governments explicitly reaffirmed that the formulation of population policies and their implementation were entirely within the national prerogative and should be universally respected, particularly when international co-operation was involved.

37. The attention of the Conference was also drawn to the ethical, cultural, religious and spiritual values of the population, as well as to individual and family rights, particularly with reference to governmental intervention in population matters. In addressing any seeming conflict between individual freedom and global concerns over rates of population growth or other population variables, recognition was given to governmental responsibilities for action in this area through education, leadership and political will, but always and only in the context of respect for human rights.

38. Finally, it was widely agreed that peace was essential to the achievement of humane population policies and for efforts to deal more effectively with economic, social and population problems.

C. Population and the status of women

39. A significant number of developing countries emphasized the importance of the close relationship between the status of women, and in particular their education and their involvement in social, political and economic activities, and population changes. It was generally affirmed that one essential step that should be taken to deal with population growth and fertility levels is the improvement of the condition of women; such measures should be a corner-stone of any strategy towards socio-economic progress, as well as a means to solve population problems.

D. Mortality and morbidity

40. In the formal debate on the review and appraisal of the World Population Plan of Action, an area of major concern of many Governments was the persistence of interregional and intraregional differences in mortality. Particular emphasis was placed on the need for measures further to reduce maternal and child mortality. The value of a primary health care strategy, maternal and child health and nutritional and environmental measures related to health, were frequently reaffirmed at the Conference. African countries emphasized particularly the benefits of a healthy population to social and economic development; it was pointed out that when both fertility and mortality are very high, a reduction in infant mortality is usually a necessary prerequisite for any change in fertility.

E. Population growth and fertility

41. Population growth and fertility were frequently discussed together. It was generally agreed that changes in the rate of natural population growth are largely determined by changes in fertility levels and that policy measures intended to influence fertility rates would be the only acceptable way to reduce growth rates. In numerous cases, very high or very low levels of fertility and growth rates were referred to as a matter of policy concern by developing and developed countries respectively.

42. The almost universally accepted view expressed at Mexico City was that activities in the area of population and in socio-economic development are complementary and not competing. Emphasis was on the need to analyse further the complex interrelationships between population and development, but little attempt was made to suggest that either one or the other had any kind of absolute or intrinsic priority.

43. A large number of countries spoke about family planning. The great majority of them considered family planning to be one of the important elements of a global strategy to solve the problem of rates of population growth that were seriously out of balance with levels of social and economic development. For a great many countries, it was considered to be the responsibility of Governments to provide information and access to family planning, but it should be left to the free choice of individuals and couples whether or not to make use of them. In this matter, it was recommended that the role and responsibility of Governments should include

making people aware of the significance of their choices through education and information. Some representatives argued that the norm of the "small family", the concept of "responsible citizen", and public awareness of the "population problems", should be disseminated by the authorities. It was also agreed that even in countries where fertility levels were viewed by the Government as being too low, including those where the rate of natural increase was negative, freedom of information and access to family planning should not be curtailed.

F. Population structure

44. The issue of population structure was also discussed by many Governments. The developing countries stressed the negative impact on their economies, education and employment of the large proportion of youth among the total population. In general, the difficulties of generating employment opportunities sufficient to the numbers of persons in the labour force ages were widely commented on. They also pointed out that the existing large number of women in the reproductive ages would contribute to higher rates of population growth if a significant decline of fertility level did not occur. The aging of the population was the concern of many developed countries as well as of some developing countries. The phenomenon is a relatively new one in human history and Governments will have to deal with its consequences for the economy and the social systems.

G. Migration and population distribution

45. In general, the problems of population distribution and patterns of internal migration are viewed as one of the most acute population problems by countries, as revealed through surveys and national development plans. In the plenary session of the Conference, however, a relatively small number of countries raised those issues, perhaps because many delegations considered them to be a matter of primarily domestic concern. Nevertheless, several countries expressed their concerns about such problems as overly rapid urban and primate city growth, the rural exodus and the urgent need of rural development, as well as the need to redirect migration towards small towns or intermediate cities.

46. In the statements on international migration, the most frequently mentioned subject was the situation of refugees, particularly in Africa and in Asia. In that connection, the issue of displaced persons was also discussed. International co-operation was called upon to help solve those problems. The brain drain, migrant workers and the difficulties faced by children of migrant families were also noted as problems of concern in regard to international migration.

H. Population and development

47. In the statements made at the Conference in Mexico, the question of population and development was discussed with almost equal emphasis on two different aspects. First, many countries argued that without improved North-South economic relations and without the achievement of a new international economic order, as well as the implementation of the International Development Strategy for the Third United Nations Development Decade, it would not be possible fully to resolve population problems. Several representatives emphasized the fact that the world economic crisis was deeply affecting the ability of the developing countries to deal effectively with their population problems.

48. The second aspect stressed was the strong linkage between population policies and economic and social development planning. In that connection, both developed and developing countries called for a multisectoral or a fully integrated approach to solve population problems. Population policies and social and economic development policies were viewed as mutually reinforcing and, indeed, as mutually dependent on each other to achieve their respective goals.

49. Several countries referred to the complex interrelationship between population, resources, environment and development, pointing out, particularly in relation to growing populations, the increasing scarcity of natural resources, their waste, the degradation of the natural environment and the threats that that degradation imposes on human life. Many developing countries called for the achievement of a better balance between population growth and general development, including the production of food and of goods and services.

I. International co-operation

50. Another aspect of population policy frequently discussed at the Conference was international co-operation. Governments stressed the need to increase financial and technical co-operation between the developed and the developing countries, as well as to increase technical co-operation among developing countries. It was emphasized that that co-operation should not interfere with national sovereignty. Some Governments also asked for better co-ordination among the donors to avoid the overlapping of activities.

Notes

1/ World Population Prospects: Estimates and Projections as Assessed in 1982, Population Studies No. 86 (United Nations publication, Sales No. 83.XIII.5).

2/ See Report of the World Assembly on Aging, Vienna, 26 July to 6 August 1982 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.82.I.16).

3/ Recent Levels and Trends of Contraceptive Use as Assessed in 1983 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.84.XIII.5).

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Notes (continued)

4/ Women's Employment and Fertility: A Comparative Analysis of WFS Data (to be issued shortly).

5/ Estimates and Projections of Urban, Rural and City Populations, 1950-2025: the 1982 Assessment (ST/ESA/SER.R/58).

6/ "An overall socio-economic perspective of the world economy to the year 2000", prepared by the Projections and Perspective Studies Branch, Department of International Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations Secretariat, May 1984, p. 93.

7/ Ibid., p. 118.

8/ "Review and appraisal of the implementation of the International Development Strategy for the Third United Nations Development Decade", annex, June 1984, p. 15.
