CAIRO AND THE CHANGING DEFINITION OF POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT ISSUES

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The goal of the United Nations International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), held in Cairo in September 1994, was to agree on a Programme of Action in the field of population and development which would supersede the Plan of Action agreed to at Bucharest in 1974 and subsequently amended ten years later in Mexico City. The main purpose of the present paper is to characterize some of the principal intellectual and ideological developments of the last 20 years which have had an impact on the definition of this goal. I conclude with some brief comments on the Programme of Action adopted by consensus at the Conference.

To many demographers and policy makers the central questions about population and development seemed so much simpler in 1974. The argument of Coale and Hoover (1958) and others was that rapid population growth was detrimental to economic development because a population with a high dependency ratio ‘promotes consumption at the expense of investment’ (Coale and Hoover 1958:333). The solution offered by many, mostly Western, experts who accepted this analysis was to lower fertility in developing countries by promoting national family planning programs. This was the position — called the ‘incrementalist position’ by Finkle and Crane (1975) — incorporated into the initial draft Plan of Action presented for discussion at Bucharest, and promoted mainly by the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada and Germany at the time. It was countered in the 1974 Conference by a group of Third World countries, led initially by Algeria and Argentina, with support from the Socialist nations. They presented a ‘redistribution position’, and argued that ‘population problems are not a cause but a consequence of underdevelopment — and that the most effective solution for underdevelopment [was therefore] a New International Economic Order’ (Finkle and Crane 1975). Population policy in the early 1970s was a novel experience, and the scarcity of relevant research at the time meant neither position could be firmly grounded in scientific knowledge. Classical demographic transition theory, for its part, proved of limited utility for understanding the demographic transitions of developing countries (Teitelbaum 1975), and the incrementalist position, asserting an urgent need to curb rapid population growth by means

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of government-sponsored family planning programs, was a marked departure from the classical theory (Hodgson 1988:542-546). The final Plan adopted at Bucharest was a compromise. The more forceful language of the initial draft was diluted into softer generalities to accommodate the divergent points of view. Bernard Berelson thought the document was so lacking in specific direction it could hardly be described as a 'plan of action' at all (Berelson 1975:143).

To reach a consensus 20 years later is even more difficult. It is true that our scientific understanding of the links between population and development has improved greatly, and other things being equal this should make the formulation of a plan of action easier. But at the same time social and demographic realities have changed, people’s aspirations for development have risen, political priorities have shifted, and the number of important perspectives which have been brought to bear on population and development issues has increased. Furthermore, we still do not have clear-cut answers to many of the central questions posed by the various viewpoints. Getting people to agree on how to characterize the problem and on what should be the solution under these circumstances is no easy task.

The Economic Perspective

One important perspective on the problem is the economic view which has evolved since the early Coale and Hoover formulation. The central question here is: does rapid population growth hinder socio-economic development? And if so, by how much, under what conditions, and as a result of which mechanisms? The problem when viewed from this perspective today is no longer couched simply in terms of the relation between the rate of population growth and the rate of growth of gross domestic product per capita. Today we also consider the effects of population growth at the household level as well as at the macro-economic level; we try to consider systematically causality in both directions and through various feedback loops, and assess overall long term impacts as well as short-run costs; and discussion of investment no longer concentrates so heavily on physical infrastructure but includes investment in people, particularly their health and education. The linkages studied between population and development now embrace social development, and not just economic development narrowly conceived. Exemplars of this expanding economic perspective can be found in the World Bank Development Reports for 1984 and 1991. Most government policy makers and planners in developing countries use the economic perspective.

Research in this perspective continues (see United Nations 1953, 1973; National Academy of Sciences 1971; National Research Council 1986). The simple clear-cut formulation of Coale and Hoover has not stood the test of time. Analysis of data for the 1960s and 1970s consistently showed ‘a general lack of correlation between the growth rates of population and per capita income’ (Kelley and Schmidt 1994:18), although it is widely recognized that the interpretation of such simple correlations is fraught with difficulties. Some, notably Julian Simon (1981) maintain the evidence shows that rapid population growth is no detriment to economic growth at all. Most