THE ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR ASIA AND THE FAR EAST
PROGRAM TO ASSIST FERTILITY CONTROL

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“ECAFE Leads the Way”, the caption used by the Victor Fund Committee in its summary of the work of the regional commissions of the United Nations, is a tribute to the steps taken by the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East towards developing a program of assistance in family planning to member countries. ECAFE was urged to get into the action field by the Asian Population Conference of 1963, which requested the Executive Secretary to expand “the scope of technical assistance available to governments in the region, upon their request, for data collection, research, experimentation, and action on all aspects of population problems, including family welfare planning programs, through regional advisory services, development and strengthening of regional, sub-regional and national training and research institutions, study tours, fellowships and meetings of technical groups.” A direct effect of the Commission’s support of the recommendations of the Asian Population Conference, at its Twentieth (1964) Session held at Tehran, was the expansion of the regional advisory services on population questions and the appointment, in 1965, with initial financial assistance from the Rockefeller Foundation, of a Regional Adviser on Population Policies and Programs.

Another regional adviser in the field of general demography with responsibilities to assist in problems of demographic analysis and in promotion of demographic research and training programs in the various countries of the region had been in position in ECAFE since 1962. Hitherto ECAFE’s program of assistance in the field of fertility control has consisted largely of provision of technical advice at the request of individual governments with respect to their population and family planning programs; supporting research both at the ECAFE Secretariat and in collaboration with the Demographic Training and Research Center, Chembur, Bombay; clearing-house operations, especially the preparation of bibliographies; and the holding of a series of technical group meetings on various aspects related to family planning programs. The deliberations of these group meetings, their outcome and their significance for successful planning, implementation, and evaluation of family planning programs will form the subject of this paper.

Proposals for an expanded program in the field of population at the ECAFE secretariat—the Asian Population Program—received warm support of the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East at the annual session held in Canberra in April, 1968, and, with generous financial assistance from the government of the United States of America, the program of expansion is being effected. Research and advisory services oriented to planning and policy formulation in the field of fertility and family planning are important among the activities to be promoted in this program.

Another recent development is the project which envisages the appointment

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1 The Victor Fund Committee, The United Nations and the Population Crisis, The International Planned Parenthood Federation, New York, No. 8 (1968), p. 34.

of Population Program Officers to assist in the preparation of schemes for subsequent financing by the United Nations Trust Fund for Population Activities, United Nations Development Program and other related agencies. Under this population programming machinery to be located at various points including the headquarters of the regional commissions such as ECAFE.

TECHNICAL GROUP MEETINGS

ECAFE has arranged three technical group meetings in the field of family planning so far. The first, on Administrative Aspects of Family Planning Programs held in March, 1966, was sponsored in co-operation with the Population Council, New York. The second, on Communication Aspects of Family Planning Programs was held in Singapore in September, 1967, and was supported by funds provided by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The third, an Expert Group on Assessment of Acceptance and Use-Effectiveness of Family Planning Methods was held in Bangkok in June, 1968, and received financial support from the Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA).

In addition to the mandate given by the Commission, the need for holding technical group meetings by ECAFE had also been emphasized by a group of administrators closely associated with family planning programs in the region who attended the International Conference on Family Planning Programs held in Geneva in 1965. In a memorandum dated September, 1965, outlining the views of this group, Mr. Haldore Hanson, Ford Foundation Representative, Pakistan, stated: “We believe ECAFE should bring together persons working professionally in family planning, from countries in the ECAFE region who have active family planning programs, to exchange experience in depth on specified topics . . . . The meetings should be small enough to . . . get down to candid problem solving.”

Five topics that needed to be covered by such meetings had been suggested by this group. These were (1) problems of the administrator in government programs; (2) contraceptive supplies; (3) estimating fertility trends; (4) family planning personnel and training; and (5) communications strategy and content.

The program of meetings drawn up by ECAFE also owed much to the suggestions received from time to time from officials of foundations such as the Ford Foundation and the Population Council working in several countries of the region. The close contact which Regional Demographic Advisers and other ECAFE staff members could establish with program officials in different countries made it possible to select topics of common interest, and orient the agenda and discussions at the meetings towards problems of current importance.

A central motivation underlying the planning of these technical group meetings should be noted. This motivation is to transform family planning program administration from an art to a science. It is well recognized that when Asian countries embarked on large-scale national family planning programs in the 1950’s, they were getting into an unexplored field, since there was little knowledge of how the programs should be administered. The experiences in the different countries which have undertaken these programs can alone provide the empirical bases for testing out ideas and theories, and for formulating general principles on which programs should be developed. The technical working groups provide the forum for exchange and whetting of views on these experiences.

Another underlying idea in arranging the technical group meetings is that family planning administration not only involves a multidisciplinary approach, as is well-recognized, but also is composed of several distinct aspects such as communications, training of personnel, evaluation, etc., on whose individual strength, the strength of the total program will depend.