

# SUMMARY OF THE DEMOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND OF PROBLEMS OF UNDEVELOPED AREAS

FRANK W. NOTESTEIN<sup>1</sup>

THE problem of modernizing undeveloped areas may be usefully approached from the point of view of population changes for two reasons: (1) It is from the demographic point of view that the interrelated nature of social, economic, and political change is most apparent in long-range perspective; and (2) for a large proportion of the world it is the impact of economic and social change on population growth that presents one of the major obstacles to modernization.

The purpose of this introductory note is to serve as a background for the following papers by indicating briefly, even dogmatically, the nature of the impact of social and economic change on population growth, particularly in the undeveloped regions of dense settlement. In addition, some of the things that need to be done at the international level in the field of population studies will be suggested.

The common element in the demographic situation of undeveloped areas is the capacity of the population for rapid growth, given political stability and economic expansion. Some of the areas are sparsely settled, some are among the world's most densely populated regions; some have recently had declining numbers, others are growing slowly, and still others at a very rapid pace. In matters of density and current rates of growth there is no uniformity. The common characteristic is that, in virtually all, more stable government and economic development would produce a rapid and somewhat prolonged population increase.

There is no mystery about the rapid population growth that accompanies modernization in undeveloped areas. The process has been observed many times and the general principles are well understood. Societies with low levels of technical skill are

<sup>1</sup> Director, Office of Population Research, Princeton University, and Consultant-Director, Population Division, United Nations.

inevitably poor, ill-housed, ill-clothed, ill-fed, and subject to the uncontrolled ravages of disease. Such populations must have high birth rates to match their inevitably high death rates. Those that did not have high birth rates are no longer represented in the world. The very existence of such populations in the race of the toll of heavy mortality proves that the birth rates are high, and that the societies have developed the social structures essential to produce and maintain high birth rates.

Mortality can be quickly reduced from the high levels characteristic of most undeveloped areas without any substantial modifications of the social structure, at least in the initial stages. Political order, minimum efforts to control epidemics, rudimentary transportation, and slight improvements in the techniques of agriculture and industrial production bring death rates down with remarkable speed.

Human fertility, on the other hand, responds scarcely at all in the initial, and often superimposed, stages of such changes—changes that too often influence only the externals of life and leave the opportunities, hopes, fears, beliefs, customs, and social organization of the masses of the people relatively untouched. These latter are the factors that control fertility, and since they are unmodified, fertility remains high while mortality declines. Hence there is a substantial margin of population growth.

The small family pattern to which we are now accustomed in the Western world is not in any important degree due to the biological incapacity to reproduce. For that conclusion there is ample evidence. The change from the pre-modern levels of high fertility to the present-day small family of the Western world came about primarily from changes in the age at marriage, in the proportion marrying, and in the prevalence and effectiveness of the practice of birth control. It must be emphasized, however, that the decline in fertility requires more profound changes than the mere availability of the convenient contraceptive. Whether or not a population restricts its fertility severely (and every population restricts it in some degree) depends on the social organization, customs, and beliefs from

which arise the aspirations of its people with respect to family size. These matters, the heritage of past ages, lie at the core of the society and are scarcely modified by relatively small changes in government, in modes of production, and in sanitation.

The trend toward the small family in the West came typically in an urban setting. City life stripped the family of many of its functions. These functions were progressively filled by secondary groups in which the individual was in large measure on his own. Urbanization did much to weaken the ties of older beliefs and customs, and the community sanctions with which they were maintained. On the positive side, urban living gave the individual many opportunities for advancement on his own merits. In a word, the whole trend was away from the family and toward an individualistic life in a setting that put heavy pressure on a large family. As a result parents gradually sought to have only a few children to whom they could give opportunity for advancement. They came to adopt birth control in ever-growing numbers and came to practice it with increasing effectiveness. These changes, however, involved changes in man's deepest beliefs and such changes came slowly. The decline in the birth rates, therefore, came long after death rates began to drop. In the Western world birth rates have only recently come again into near balance with the death rates. It is the lag in the decline of fertility behind that of mortality which accounts for the epoch of population growth resulting from modernization. Europe's transition took approximately three hundred years and resulted in something like a sevenfold multiplication in the population of European extraction. There is no past transition that involved less than a century and less than a threefold multiplication of population.

It should be clear that there is nothing inevitable about the exact amount of time and the precise amount of growth involved in the demographic transition. Careful planning, particularly in the early stages, might speed the process and limit the amount by which the population expands. To put the prob-

lem in perspective, it may be over-dogmatically asserted that in many of the world's most densely settled regions a successful transition would limit growth to a doubling of the present population, without major intervening catastrophes.

In such regions the danger is that there will be only moderate economic and sanitary improvement unaccompanied by the social changes that affect fertility. Such social changes will be difficult to achieve unless economic development is rapid enough to lift the level of living in spite of substantial population increase. If gains in production only match those in population growth, "improvement" may result principally in ever larger masses of humanity living close to the margins of existence and vulnerable to every shock in the world economic and political structure. Such "progress" may amount to setting the stage for calamity. Much of Asia seems to be perilously close to this situation.

All of the foregoing is an old story to demographers, but it may help those not primarily concerned with population trends to consider a few illustrations. In such areas as Formosa, the Philippines, Java, and Korea there has been considerable economic development in the past decades. This development has been primarily agricultural and has done rather little to change the structure of the societies. Birth rates have remained substantially unaffected, but stable government and improved productive techniques in agriculture, coupled with a little sanitation, have cut the death rates. Before the war the populations were growing at rates between 2 and 3 per cent a year (3 per cent per annum doubles a population in twenty-three years). The results were mounting densities, ever narrowing bases for future economic development, and populations whose capacity for future growth remained unimpaired.

No more striking illustration of the limitations, from the demographic point of view, of "good government and economic development" can be given than the case of Java. Since 1860 under an efficient regime marked advances have been made in sanitation and in agricultural production. Between 1860 and

1930 the population increased threefold. By 1930 there were more than 800 persons per square mile. Yet there is no evidence of substantial improvement in the level of living of the mass of the population, and the limits within which agricultural production can be extended were becoming narrow. The customary way of life changed rather little, and there was little indication of the sort of changes that presage a decline in fertility. If past rates of increase are to continue unchecked, the problem of supporting more than 1,500 people per square mile will have to be faced by the year 2000. The case is an extreme one because few areas have been as "well managed"; but the principles are characteristic of much in the Asiatic situation.

It should not be supposed from the foregoing that we may expect rapid population growth in Asia. The growth will be large because the base populations are large. It will not necessarily be rapid. Fertility is ample to yield rapid growth if low death rates can be attained. Whether they can be attained for a substantial period of time depends in large measure on whether economic development can come rapidly enough to forestall catastrophes. A sober consideration of the existing situation leads one to expect that catastrophes will in fact check rapid growth. It points to the urgency of rapid economic development on a broad front to forestall such tragedy. It also points to the urgency of giving attention in regional planning to those changes which bring pressure on the birth rate. Today's problem arises in large part from the absence of such planning in the vast agricultural development of these regions. It is clear that in the long run high birth rates are incompatible with low death rates.

With this slight background we may turn very briefly to a few of the things that are needed if international population problems are to be dealt with constructively.

First of all, we need to know how to reduce birth rates in an agrarian society. The problem is too urgent to permit us to await the results of gradual processes of urbanization, such as took place in the Western world. We need to know more about

the causes of the decline of the birth rate in rural France in the early nineteenth century, and in Eastern Europe between the wars. We need concrete experiments in the processes of social change in peasant populations with high fertility.

We also need increased knowledge of the physiology of reproduction. The problem of the voluntary control of fertility when the individual incentives for such control are not strong may prove insoluble with available methods. It is quite possible that an expansion of fundamental knowledge of the physiology of human reproduction would result in much simpler and more effective methods of contraception which would find more general acceptance.

It is also evident that there must be a much deeper understanding of the processes of population change if there are to be wise policies at the international level. At present much of the debate on population policies in international circles is on the ideological level. People are in favor of, or are opposed to, particular forms of birth control; in favor of, or opposed to, large migration; they are neo-Malthusian, or Marxist, or in opposition to both positions. All too seldom is there any appreciation of the complexity of the problems. Mutually incompatible policies are often advocated. Nor is there any adequate appreciation of the substantial latitude that each of the major ideologies provides for a common meeting ground in the formation of policy. There has been too much bandying of slogans, and too little careful study.

We need specific and careful studies of the interrelations of population, social, and economic change. The Population Commission of the United Nations has every prospect of making important contributions in this field. It has in general taken the view that its first obligation is to lay the appropriate analytical and factual foundations before entering upon the discussion of policies. One of its first requests was to call for the submission of a plan by which Member States can examine fruitfully the interrelation of demographic, social, and economic changes tending to hinder the attainment of an adequate stand-

ard of living and cultural development. The discussion of such plans, and still more their execution by a few Member States, should do much to clear up misunderstanding. It should go far toward demonstrating that wise policy in the field of human welfare is not segmented by the boundaries of the intellectual disciplines. The solution of the population problems of the world's undeveloped areas will require that demographic factors be taken into account in all planning for higher living levels, social welfare, and health. Moreover, unless solutions to the demographic problems are found, efforts to advance in these other fields may be self-defeating.