

POPULATION DILEMMA IN LATIN AMERICA

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This volume contains the ten papers presented at the Pan-American Assembly held in Cali, Colombia, in August, 1965.

The first three papers refer to demographic facts. Miró characterizes the demographic situation in Latin America by accelerated growth, young age-structure of population and heavy urbanization. As a result of significant declines in mortality and persistence of a high fertility, population growth has accelerated up to an annual rate of 2.8 per cent. The 60 million Latin-Americans of 1900 became 238 million in 1965, and are expected to reach 479 million in 1990 and 612 million by the year 2000. The young age-structure of population is not expected to change substantially within the next 15 years, even assuming a reduction in fertility.

A similar situation is described by Roberts in the non-Spanish-speaking Caribbean, and by Neiva in Brazil. Neiva calls attention to the fundamental decisions on economic policy which should be taken in Brazil between 1965 and 1970 in order that population growth will not create greater difficulties in the political and social fields. Two of these crucial years have already elapsed, under rather unstable conditions.

Speaking of problems, Cabello shows that housing shortage is critical and increasing, and its solution in a short time is beyond the economic capabilities of the countries in the region. On the other hand, according to Arevalo's projections, future demands in

education will depend more on improving present unsatisfactory levels of school attendance than on demographic increase.

Horwitz and Burke analyze the progress in public health, which is associated with substantial reductions of morbidity and mortality. They show the persistence of avoidable mortality and emphasize the need of comprehensive programs of development to increase economic productivity and satisfy urgent social needs.

The interrelationships of economic development and population growth are considered by several of the authors. Notestein strongly emphasizes the role of birth control, since immediate curtailment of the population growth rate in underdeveloped economies will greatly facilitate the technological development that can support populations both large and prosperous. Furthermore, he feels that motivation to restrict childbearing is widely present, and that special efforts to foster family planning are successful in speeding the reduction of fertility.

On the basis of available information in Latin America, Cabello states that "a cause and effect relationship cannot be established between changes in the rate of population growth, fluctuation in the gross national product, and increases in per capita income . . . Thus, it would be risky to affirm that the reduction of the population growth rate can by itself stimulate economic development. It is illogical to hope that a program of birth control alone can contribute significantly to stimulating economic development in this region."

The last three papers are grouped under the title "Solutions." Pérez-Ramírez, a Catholic priest, discusses quite frankly the conflicting situation of many Catholics between the present norms of the Church and the exigencies of modern life. The Church is examining the problem under the light of scientific knowledge about human reproduction, which shows that contraception does not violate natural law. Marriage is considered to have two ends equally good and holy: mutual love and procreation.

Reviewing the perspectives of family planning programs in Latin America, Ramírez-Delgado finds that, although progress is reported, the present scope of these programs is limited and no government

is directly sponsoring them. On the other hand, fertility surveys show that a sizeable proportion of females feel strongly the need for family limitation, although actual use of contraceptives is infrequent and is often restricted to the least effective methods.

Stycos, in an excellent historical and sociological analysis, remarks that "Latin America, with the most acute problem of population growth of any cultural region in the world today, has evinced the least concern about population problems." It is necessary to develop professional training, to alert intellectuals to the significance of population growth and to provide more information about modern contraception.

Another aspect of the above problems should be considered. No doubt efforts to extend family planning in Latin America will be successful in the future. Beyond their implications to population growth, those programs are needed to face the increasing problem of illegal abortion and to satisfy the undeniable right of parents to decide freely about the children they want to bear. The conflicting attitudes appear when the contribution of birth control for actual improvement of levels of living is discussed. The dilemma of population, Horwitz and Burke write, does not mean a choice between development and birth limitation, since they are not mutually exclusive. That is true, but what is the relative importance of both components? The low levels of living prevailing in most of Latin-American countries are due to inefficient socioeconomic and political structures. Unfortunately, countries engaged in effective plans to change those structures are an exception. Such changes, beyond any economic implication, are urgently needed because the present situation is deeply unjust and ethically unacceptable. Under such conditions, the emphasis on birth control—even if its promoters do not think that way—appears to be a secondary alternative when the very root of the underdevelopment is not attacked. Furthermore, as Cabello points out, even if family planning would succeed in reaching a significant level of application, it would have limited effect in improving living conditions unless other components of underdevelopment achieve a parallel progress. The historical experience of Latin America shows how dif-

difficult and slow is the latter attainment. Reluctance toward family planning might be changed if those programs be always present and discussed as an integrated part of underdevelopment, with due emphasis on so-called "other" factors of the problem.

This book is not intended to be a complete analysis of the population dilemma. Nevertheless, it provides valuable information about a crucial problem in this area. It is stimulating reading for thinking and, what is equally important, for action.

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