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THE DEMOGRAPHIC EXPLOSION*

1. On July 11, 1987, it was estimated that our planet achieved the dubious distinction of reaching the 5 billion mark in aggregate population. This event—which for other than strictly scientific reasons was estimated to have occurred in Yugoslavia—was not greeted by world public opinion, not even concerned about the UN Population Fund, instead of decrying the fact and echoing some of the stirrings felt at the World Population Conferences of Bucharest and Mexico in 1974 and 1984, signalled it as almost a triumph for Humankind. It is particularly surprising that the almost unrelenting drive of fertility, especially in the developing countries, where the world economic and financial crisis has been at its worst, does not appear to be a cause for much alarm, as it had been some years before.

2. The facts are the following:

- the 5 billion people of mid-1987 have grown by now to almost 5.1 billion;
- about 90% of the increase, close to 90 million people, has taken place in the developing countries;
- the annual rate of population growth in the developing countries is estimated still to be nearly 2% per year, whereas it is 0.6% in the industrially-advanced nations as a whole;
- between 1974 and 1984, world population growth remained at 1.7% per year (a doubling every 41 years), in spite of population policies directed at lowering fertility in many countries, including a number of large nations in the Third World;
- although significant and in some cases drastic declines in fertility have taken place in countries such as the P.R. of China, Indonesia, Mexico, Costa Rica, Colombia, and some West Indian islands, in most countries where fertility was high or in territories which contain large populations—e.g. Brazil, India,

Pakistan, Nigeria, Kenya and a number of Arab nations—there has been no significant decline in the rate of demographic growth (in some it has even risen);

f] the past momentum of population growth, especially in these developing nations with 44 to 48% of inhabitants under the age of 15, 15 influencing the prevalence of high growth rates and will determine, for at least 15 to 20 years, a rate of growth of the labor force of 2.5 to 3.5% per annum, despite further declines in fertility;

g] future population is likely, according to reasonable UN estimates that assume a steady fall in fertility, to reach an aggregate of 6.1 billion by the year 2000 and 8.2 billion by the year 2025. It is unlikely that world population will be stabilized—even assuming further declines in fertility—before the last quarter of the 21st century, at some 10 billion people.

3. It should be noted that at the second International Conference on Population, organized by the UN in Mexico City in 1984, a significant sector of opinion among the delegations of the industrially-advanced countries, particularly the U.S. and the U.K., showed much less fervor in favor of family planning as a means of achieving declines in fertility than had been the case at Bucharest 10 years earlier. Paradoxically, a larger number of developing countries announced population policies favoring fertility reduction with the aid of family planning, while financial support for the UN Population Fund and for other forms of aid for population policies was beginning to dry up. The U.S. delegation seriously tried to advance the notion that while it was true that population policy should be regarded as part of the development process—as the Bucharest Conference had been at pains to maintain—, it could only happen through the espousal and extension of free enterprise and free trade. The net result of the 1984 Conference was to dampen, in many countries, the efforts towards fertility decline by means of articulated policies favoring, among other things, family planning.

4. There is no need to be catastrophic about the future as far as population growth is concerned. It suffices to be realistic, if the following points can be accepted as valid:

a] the pace of population growth, particularly in the developing countries as a whole and specifically in a large number of countries in this category, is already too high and is likely to remain so;

b] even if demographic expansion continues to slow down, the prospect for economic growth and development for most developing countries, especially in Africa and Latin America, does not seem to be favorable enough to allow them
to meet basic needs and eradicate absolute poverty within the life span of the next generation;

c] a particularly serious problem—both economic and social in nature—is that to absorb the rising young labor force into regular employment over the next 15 to 20 years, it would be necessary, given the labor force projections, to achieve and maintain rates of economic growth far in excess of past experience. But there is nothing in the immediate or the medium-term economic outlook that would indicate that such a pace of development may be attained. Exceptions to this can only be expected in certain dynamic Southeast Asian economies, especially those where fertility rates have already declined substantially. It should be recalled that during the ongoing seven-year economic and financial crisis, accompanied by GDP stagnation, high rates of open unemployment have prevailed in many semi-industrialized countries, above all in Latin America; thus the targets for the near- and medium-term future should also require absorption of the unemployed into regular employment.

d] barring adequate employment prospects, the new entrants into the labor force will only be able to find their way into a variety of forms of underemployment, informal activities, underground economies, and... non-employment, however defined. The prospect of reaching the end of this century with vast masses of unemployed and underemployed, in countries without adequate systems of social security, should be a prime concern of governments and international agencies.

5. Although South-North international migration has increased in the last ten years, it has tended to be minimized by a number of international reports and agencies. Both the Western European experience with temporary and other migrants, and the U.S. experience with undocumented migrants from Latin America, have produced a backlash and a tightening up of migratory regulations. Nevertheless, South-North migration has continued to flow, in search of security, employment, higher income, educational opportunity and the amenities of urban life. It includes a rising share of semi-skilled and skilled emigrants. Such migration, from developing countries to industrially-advanced nations such as the U.S. and Canada, Western Europe and Japan, is encountering opposition, both legal and socio-cultural, as well as political, in many of these nations. The immigrants may frequently be needed for unskilled work in farming and services, but public opinion is fearful, among other things, of a change in ethnic composition, of permanent jobs being lost to immigrants, and of the cultural implications; in some cases, vicious racism has raised its head. However, the flow of immigrants is not likely to slow down.
6. There is need for a concerted consideration of the future of international South-North migration, both at the UN and its specialized agencies and in regional and other organizations. It should be recognized that out migration will, despite its problems for senders and receivers, bring some relief to the oversupply of labor likely to be encountered in most developing countries over the next 15-20 years. This should not excuse any country from pursuing development and employment opportunities within its own territory, but given the dynamic demographic pressure, as argued above, it is unlikely that the rising young labor force in the developing countries will be adequately absorbed through successful development efforts before rates of fertility fall much lower than they are today.

7. Much has been made in academic circles and even in certain projects at international agencies, as well as in NGOs, of the concept of carrying capacity, usually referred to as some “ratio” of population to resources. This concept must be viewed with some qualifications if referred to a given country or territory. It must be considered dynamically rather than statistically. “Population” is too broad a concept, and should be analyzed into its age and other components, with due account for the various rates of change of its variables. “Resources” is an even broader concept, which is also dynamic in the light of technology, or is negatively affected by environmental damage; it should not be confined to “natural” resources, but should include man-made industrial and service facilities, incorporating physical productivity changes and also intangibles such as environmental factors and quality of life. But, essentially, the carrying capacity of a country, in terms of population, is a vague, non-operational concept — since in the medium- and long-term outlook net migration must be taken into account, as well as many qualitative and cultural changes. It can be applied, with some qualifications, to isolated areas, or to small nation-states, or those with a high ratio of poor rural population to arable land.

8. However, what seems more relevant, from a global point of view, is the “carrying capacity” of the planet as a whole. The history of Humankind so far, and its projection to at least the year 2000, does not indicate that it is probable that absolute poverty, or even basic needs, will be met for a majority of the peoples of the developing nations, or that inequality will be substantially reduced, or that employment will be seen as a reasonable outcome of society’s endeavors. It might even be argued that we are beginning to envisage a “world without employment”. If this is the outlook, it will be necessary for the notion of carrying capacity to be seriously considered at national and international levels, in a
dynamic and all-embracing, systemic approach. If by the year 2025, a total of 8.2 billion people cannot be taken care of by development and societal behavior, then the next 2 billion, toward the end of the 21st century, will certainly be redundant in respect of any reasonably foreseeable “carrying capacity”.

9. In international fora, in academic circles, and elsewhere, the relationship between development and population has not been sufficiently elucidated. Experience over the last ten years has shown that fertility has declined in both rich and poor countries, in those that have been able to maintain a fairly high rate of economic growth and in those that have had a slow pace of development, in those that have prospered and in those that have undergone a severe crisis of stagnation and inflation, or have suffered a significant fall in income per capita. The converse is also true: fertility has not declined or has only imperceptibly changed in countries in which all these various conditions have been present. It is now doubtful that the simple prescriptions, “development will lead to a fall in fertility”, or its converse, “fertility decline is necessary to speed up development”, can be found sufficiently valid. The problem is much more complex, and quite apart from the projections over the next 15-20 years, a host of social, cultural, political, administrative and organizational, psychological and other factors must be borne in mind in advocating and successfully implementing population policies. (The plight of the ageing populations of certain industrially-advanced countries is no less to the considered.)

10. If a new approach is needed to population policy, a newly emerging one is almost ready-made: population policy, everywhere, should be increasingly related to environmental criteria. The recently published Bruntland Report (by the World Commission on Environment and Development) argues strongly for adoption of the concept of sustainable development, such that the resource and environmental base should not become degraded and deteriorated as the development process goes on. There is no reason to attribute environmental deterioration necessarily to population growth, since other major factors are at work, essentially the nature and intensity of industrial development, the basic technologies regarding energy use, the mode of urban transportation, the chemical implications of modern agriculture, the technical input requirements of high consumption standards in the countries with high incomes per capita, and many others. But population growth in some parts of the world, mainly in the developing countries, has also contributed to loss of natural resources, degradation of soil, rising urban and rural pollution. The problem is not just one of numbers and rates of growth, but also of patterns and techniques of production.
Paradoxically, if income levels are to be raised through development, it is likely, given present trends in the use of technology and the prevailing cultural patterns, that environmental pressures will increase and make sustainable development even more difficult to manage. A massive reorientation of development strategies, a worldwide adoption of environmentally safe technologies in agriculture, forestry, fuel consumption, transportation, chemical industry, and so on, would be highly desirable. However, this is not likely to happen, or may occur only in a minor fashion and in the long-term.

11. In a systemic approach to sustainable development, the population variables must be taken fully into consideration. It is not enough, as the Bruntland Report seems to argue, that family planning should be extended and intensified to help reduce fertility rates, while other measures are directed toward the enhancement of the quality of human resources through health, education, housing, etc. The full implications of the demographic trends and projections of our planet must come to bear in the espousal of sustainable development, including international migration and rural-urban migration, as well as levels and rates of fertility and mortality. Renewal of international support for development, including debt-relief, the sharing of appropriate industrial technologies, the lowering of trade barriers by the advanced countries, and higher aid transfers to the least developed countries, will be no less important. But clearly, in a global perspective, population policies intended to lower fertility can undoubtedly play a role, and will probably have to be justified increasingly on environmental grounds rather than on present vague notions about development and population.