Mr. Urquidi, what was the status of population studies in Mexico during the 1960s when Gustavo Cabrera was embarking on his career as a demographer?

I would have to go a little further back. While I was studying economics and demography, a professor at the London School of Economics encouraged my interest in demographic affairs. When I came back after my degree and joined Banco de México, I had never heard about population issues beyond informal talks on the problem of peasants in Mexico, the rural population and the history of its growth. It was not until I joined CEPAL in 1951 to undertake studies on the integration of Central America that I began to become aware of the high birth and demographic growth rates in all the countries in the region.

How did CEPAL contribute to demographic studies at that time, in both Mexico and Latin America?

In 1952, we conducted studies to prepare for the economic integration of Central America: a common market that would include
Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica. We realized that we had an unusual demographic growth rate, so in 1956 we hired an American demographer from United Nations to conduct a study on Central America. We needed an accurate diagnosis of demographic growth and the direction in which it was heading with those high rates. Although I was unaware of this at the time, the study included Mexico. The standard of this CEPAL document, published by United Nations, is excellent. I managed to have the study validated by a resolution from the Committee for Economic Integration, comprising the ministers of economics, and used it to introduce the demographic issue into the studies we were carrying out on economics, industry, culture, transport, energy and other topics.

How did your interest in demographic issues continue after your time at CEPAL and when did Gustavo Cabrera emerge in the field of population studies?

During the 1960s, I grew more interested in population and family planning issues. I used to travel to the United States a lot, where I contacted other demographers, including the wife of the director of labor statistics. I became even more involved because Cosío Villegas asked me to create the Center for Economics and Demography, thereby incorporating the subject of demography into El Colegio de México. He was deeply concerned by demographic growth in Mexico and had a very clear vision of the latter. I therefore decided that the Center for Economics and Demography should invite Gustavo Cabrera, Raúl Benítez, Carmen Miró and the INET in France to organize a demography teaching and research program at El Colegio de México.

In 1963, I was responsible for a study for the Finance Secretariat on the outlook for farming in Mexico. Sixteen agricultural products were chosen to explore their supply and demand and an analysis of cattle raising was also conducted. The reason for the study was that the United States Department of Agriculture had persuaded the US government to undertake studies on this issue in various countries, since they had predicted enormous agricultural surpluses
and were keen to determine the demand for the latter in countries where they felt there was a problem of self-supply. The American embassy approached Banco de México, consulted the Finance Secretariat and the then secretary, Ortiz Mena, and asked me to help organize the study, with the approval of Fernández Hurtado, on behalf of the Banco de México. We hired people with the fund which gave us a million pesos, and when we proposed the study, we realized a number of things, the first being that there were no reliable studies of household income and spending in Mexico that would be useful for calculating the income obtained and thereby calculating the demand for maize, beans, rice, sugar, etc. The second was that there were no studies on the supply side. What was the outlook for the country beyond the fact that agricultural zones were being expanded but that little was known about yields? To make matters worse, farming statistics were appalling. So we had to hire people like Marco Antonio Durán and others from Banco de México, Fernando Rosenzweig and economist Manuel Rodríguez Cisneros, to act as the General Coordinator of the study. Before this study, which was the first reliable survey carried out in Mexico, statistics had been very partial. There was an income distribution study carried out by Ifigenia Navarrete and Ana María Flores, which did not go beyond calculating income distribution. Before our research, population scholars used to predict it in a linear fashion, without taking into account any methodology that would produce a hypothesis on the decrease of fertility, which was not actually measured very accurately, or the decline in mortality. Gustavo Cabrera and Raúl Benítez were asked to conduct this study, which they did using the United Nations methodology. When they handed us the results, there were three definite hypotheses: high growth, medium growth and low growth.

*What was the status of demographic studies in Mexico and the rest of Latin America at that time?*

At that time, Banco de México published a study on the outlook for agriculture in Mexico, which proved extremely useful since without it, we would have been unable to calculate elasticity. It
was a breakwater that was barely acknowledged, since these studies are not widely circulated. We submitted the results in conjunction with the Secretary of Agriculture, Julián Rodríguez Adame. In 1965, the United Nations population division asked me to participate in a conference in Belgrade that was being organized by the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population. It had its headquarters in Liège and its mission was to examine the demographic problem at the global level and by individual countries, including social and economic considerations, such as the labor force. I accepted the invitation to attend and suggested that Gustavo Cabrera and a Bolivian agronomist should also go, so that they could conduct another study that would be useful for us. My talk focussed on the high demographic growth rates and their increase in Mexico, Brazil, Central America, except for Panama, Ecuador, Colombia, Bolivia and Peru. There I expressed my views on the problem that this entailed for Latin America. I had already written a book on the outlook for the Latin American economy, knowing what the educational systems were like, in the sense that there were no training systems for work (except something in Brazil) and that nothing was being done on family planning in virtually any country in Latin America. I was sounding the alarm about what might happen.

Latin American interest in demographic problems became clear during the organization of the 1970 Population Conference (which preceded the UN Demographic or Population Conference in 1974). We organized it because we were worried, myself in particular, since the issue was already being studied in other countries and although Celade was already operating, it did not hold large-scale conferences on the issue and for CEPAL, it was not an important issue.

By the time of the Belgrade Conference, when the earth's population was nearly three thousand million, what was the world's main concern in population terms?

There was a great deal of pressure from the United States and from organizations dedicated to population studies because of
the case of China. There were also people like Eldrich, who had a great impact because of their alarmism before the Stockholm Conference.

*What sort of concerns about population problems were there in Mexico at the time?*

In 1970, there was a committee I used to attend with Gustavo, and there was a great deal of discussion among doctors because they wanted things from the public sector such as hospitals and family planning programs. Why? Because they saw what was going on: women who gave birth often and children who died early, before they were a year old. Women’s health conditions were extremely precarious; they used to have one child after another, many of whom died. There were 500,000 abortions a year in Mexico, which may have been illegal.

Family planning had existed in the United States since the 1930s. In the 1940s, they used to have diaphragms, which were virtually the only way of controlling fertility, because the Pill had not yet been invented. This method was not popular in Mexico because it came from the United States, and was only promoted by a few doctors at the ABC because it was the hospital closest to American medicine. Very few doctors were keen on the idea, as I know, because when the “Small Families Live Better” program was launched, under Echeverría, they put us in contact with the mother and child unit of the Health Secretariat. Dr. Fragoso was aware of this but he was a devout Catholic. Doctors at the time, including those in the government and the Mexican Social Security Institute, either did not know about family planning or did not believe that there was any need for it, although they were aware of the enormous number of deaths caused by illegal abortions and childbirth.

*What was El Colegio de México’s contribution to that problem? What role did the then government play, which led to a change in the 1973 law?*
I wrote a chapter in a book on the labor force with Eliseo (Mendoza) and (Francisco Javier) Alejo. By good fortune, that year, which happened to be election year, Eliseo and Alejo began collaborating with IEPES. I asked them to give Echeverría a copy of the book on *The Demographic Dynamics of Mexico*. I have no idea what they said to him but he took in the ideas, after his gaffe in Hermosillo in the middle of the year when he had remarked on a conference that had been held in Denmark. Speakers at the conference said that $x$ million births would have to be prevented from then until the year 2000 and when a journalist asked Echeverría what he thought about that, he said that he disagreed and that "governing meant populating." Afterwards, Alejo in particular but Eliseo too convinced him that there was a problem with demographic growth. El Colegio de México proved that the figures the government published were very low. These figures were influenced by Echeverría and he needed a technical base to overcome this problem and launch a viable policy.

At that time, Mexico had 4% inflation and a fixed exchange rate. The peso was highly overvalued, which we explained to Echeverría. I came away from that talk with the feeling that he had not understood and was subsequently forced to devalue the peso in 1976, after he had been backed into a corner, and with no monetary reserves. At that time, the country should have promoted imports and supported import substitution, because this was being carried out on the basis of tariffs and permits. There was a great deal of corruption, with committees run by businessmen themselves and there were all sorts of tricks to restrict and control imports using a fixed exchange rate that hampered imports. So I was amazed to be told when I went to the presidential residence in Los Pinos in early 1972, "That we are about to get this population thing off the ground, we need the El Colegio compilation, you are the only ones who have studied this issue." So they asked us to collaborate in the first state, called "Responsible Parenthood," using the slogan, "Small Families Live Better." We started to design a support program and used to meet every fortnight at El Colegio with the Mexican Population Association, which was my idea. We launched all that with the help of Jorge Martínez, who represented the doctors, and then we began to give talks with
demographers and explain the program to doctors, social workers and male nurses chosen by the health division. We gave lectures on demographic issues such as the population policies in place in other countries and the way birth rates are controlled, and the factors that determine it. A survey was undertaken at the time by someone whose name I forget that showed that women with higher educational attainment wanted fewer children and that those with lower educational attainment had six or more offspring.

What I did not know at the time was that there was going to be a conference in Bucharest. But I think that Echeverría knew that Jiménez Cantú (who was a devout Catholic and did not want to have anything to do with us) was going to the conference. Perhaps in his mind he had already made the decision to implement a different population policy that was incorporated into the 1973 Law and drafted by the Interior Secretariat.

That was his mission. It never emerged in our specific discussions, but we know that he was responsible for that, and then Alejo, who was working very closely with Echeverría, was asked to join the team, although not at the beginning. Then Carrillo Flores was appointed General Secretary of the Bucharest Conference. I have no idea how that happened because he had no background of demographic issues and was not even a politician; he was simply a respectable civil servant. In 1968, he was Foreign Affairs Secretary and in Washington he was nominated Undersecretary of United Nations and General Secretary of the Bucharest Conference. He used to come and go, and call me up. We were friends and began to get along very well, and Echeverría started to invite mixed groups to one of the halls in Los Pinos on the ground floor, with secretaries of State and all kinds of consultants that he used to have. I always went, as did Gustavo and he saw that we explained Mexico’s problems in light of the conference. Once there was a very long meeting with Carrillo Flores, which Alejo attended. By that time, they were already preparing things for Bucharest but they still needed to discuss the matter in more detail and then explain it to the press. At the official level, there had already been several obstacles within the government, stupid, negative ideas such as those about the Mexican Social Security Institute. Even
with Reyes Heroles, it was not as easy as people think it was to go
and see him and get him to agree to all that. He always had a
different opinion from everyone else, because of his intellectual
arrogance. In 1977, I think that the Organization of American States
(OAS) organized a highly technical seminar with the BID, attended
by a magnificent Chilean sociologist, to help organize the confer­
ence secretariat. I was also asked to attend and the two of us were
supposed to organize the secretariat to coordinate all the
discussions. The problem was that Mexico had not designated
a representative, so I was asked to go.

The conference was about to start, so they wanted to know
who would represent the Mexican authorities at a technical con­
ference. The thing is that I was going in my capacity as a member
of the Conference Secretariat, rather than representing Mexico.
In the event, no-one went from Mexico.

So it was thanks to El Colegio de México, that from the 1960s
onwards, particularly after the publication of The Demographic Dy­
namics of Mexico, Echeverría finally became aware of the situation.
Despite the fact that he knew about the conference, Echeverría
may have wanted to produce a definite population policy, which
is why everything was drafted at top speed, although only tim­
idly carried out. There is a law of which I was sent a draft. I do not
know how much it influenced the way Gustavo wrote it, but the
part on family planning is extremely weak. It talks about
the authority to regulate the population but does not use the term
"family planning." I put that in a program and sent a memo to
Luisa María Leal, Moya Palencia’s assessor, suggesting that they
rewrite the articles. To make that chapter clearer, they needed
to explain to everyone that family planning was not a crime but a
social achievement.

Finally, by the beginning of the 1980s, was there any awareness of popu­
lation problems or of the possibility of a crisis regarding the latter in
Mexico?

This awareness was concentrated in El Colegio de México, and
nowhere else. There was also a small, pioneering family planning
organization with a doctor who came from Puerto Rico, which subsequently joined Fepac (now known as Mexfam), which was the Population Studies Foundation. It was founded by Eduardo Villaseñor, who was a man of extraordinary vision. He was director of Banco de México and had extremely good relations with the United States and other countries. He joined forces with O’Farrill the elder, a famous physician who was one of the pioneers in family planning in Mexico, and they asked me to join the Board in the early days of Fepac twenty-five years ago in about 1980.

March 2004