INTERVIEW WITH CARMEN MIRÓ
FOR BOOK-HOMAGE
TO GUSTAVO CABRERA

José Luis Lezama

In your opinion, how did people regard the population problem in Latin America in the 1960s and early 1970s when Gustavo Cabrera was embarking on his career as a demographer?

During the 1960s and 1970s, the main concern in Latin America regarding the population is what was regarded as “high demographic growth.” In fact, at the time, Latin America had an average growth rate of 2.8%. This average was calculated by including Argentina and Uruguay, which grew at an average rate of 1.7%, and six countries with a growth rate of over 3%, Costa Rica being the country with the highest growth rate (3.9% annually).

The fact that Latin America had a high average population growth rate meant that people thought it would continue to grow rapidly, since there were no signs of a decrease in fertility. In at least fourteen countries in the region, the percentage of inhabitants under the age of 15 was 42%, rising to 48% in a minimum of three countries, and it was estimated that this figure would continue to grow. It seems hardly necessary to stress the importance, in terms of the demand for education, health and nutrition services at least, of this group among the population as a whole.

In the 1970s in particular, the North issued several warnings to the region that unless steps were taken to reduce demographic growth, Latin American countries would be unlikely to be able to promote economic growth.
After the 1974 Bucharest Conference and its Plan of World Action on Population (PAMP), when Mexico already had a General Population Law, this climate gradually began to change. By this time, Cabrera was already actively involved in population-related studies and activities in Mexico.

What role did Celade, El Colegio de México and Gustavo Cabrera play in the analysis, teaching and management of demographic problems in Latin America and Mexico?

As far as I know, CEED Mexico was founded in 1964 with the collaboration of Celade faculty. In my opinion, the most important initial contribution of both institutions was the training of personnel capable of applying demographic analysis techniques to the study of the different characteristics of Latin American populations, including Mexico’s.

After Bucharest, population departments were created in planning ministries or similar offices and attempts were made to provide elements to contribute to the design of population policies. Mexico was one of the few countries to set goals for population growth, which it did through Conapo. Gustavo Cabrera was a key figure during this stage and his management of Conapo as Secretary of the Council and Conapo’s contributions placed Mexico at the forefront of population studies.

What was the link between Celade-Colmex and how did this translate into benefits for the research, teaching and management of population problems?

After contributing to the initial organization of CEED and the training of two Mexican demographers whose contribution proved crucial to the development of demography in Mexico (Cabrera and Benítez), Celade continued to collaborate with CEED through visits by Celade faculty to teach subjects on CEED’s curriculum.

Through Benítez’ participation, Mexico was present in the Program of Comparative Fertility Surveys in Latin America, which made a significant contribution to the study of various aspects of
one of the key variables in demographic behavior. In Mexico, the results of these surveys proved invaluable in determining the main characteristics of fertility. In 1970, Mexico hosted the Latin American Population Conference, in whose organization El Colegio faculty played a key role. The participation of several Mexican demography scholars in various sessions at the Conference proved that CEED had played a key role in their training. During the early years of CEED's development, Cabrera's contribution as Academic Coordinator and subsequently its director was a crucial factor in the prestige and recognition the Center soon earned in Latin America.

After all, it was the second institution in the region that was able to train demographers capable of contributing research and studies on Latin American populations.