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# Some Ethical Reflections on the World Population

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SOME ETHICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE WORLD POPULATION  
CONFERENCE IN BUCHAREST (August, 1974)

School of generalist  
interdisciplinary  
study - UMPH

Originally I was asked to speak on ethical dilemmas in population which I took to mean in population policies rather than population analysis or population research. I agreed to venture into the non sociological territory of ethics for two reasons: first, as the study of population policies becomes a larger part of the study of population, the impact of values play an increasingly important role in the study of demography and second, more importantly, because it was a concern with population growth which had originally brought me into the field of sociology, the study of population being primarily the province of sociologists on the American horizon at the time. As I sought a means to focus my ethical concerns and communicate them to you, I decided that some reflections on the World Population Conference held in Bucharest last year would be the most appropriate vehicle. From the point of view of the population establishment in the U.S., the historic achievement of Bucharest was that it started to forge a productive union between professional substance and political process. Bucharest had many positive elements, not the least was the very fact of the first-ever meeting of governments on population policy. Furthermore, Bucharest has an informational and educational impact that probably compares favorably with similar gatherings: people and governments heard how others felt about the issues and while minds and positions were not immediately changed as a result, many will not be quite the same again. If nothing else, Bucharest shook up the population establishment in the West and the policy puzzle may fall into a more viable pattern. The Conference did place responsibility for policy and program squarely upon national governments. The World population Plan of Action is hardly an inspired document but it does set forth the basic principles now acceptable to the international community and is thus valuable as a platform. In the grand tradition of such documents, the Plan does contain something for everybody. Its defects are those of a divided and sensitive world. The issue of rapid population growth which gave rise to the recent interest in demographic affairs that culminated in Bucharest DID NOT RETAIN CENTER STAGE at the Conference. Rather, socioeconomic development CLAIMED CENTER STAGE. Yet against the background of these debates, it is even more pertinent than before to ask where the policy debate on population growth now stands, post-Bucharest.

With regard to the crucial question of whether there is a population problem there are three basic positions among the nations of the world. "No," "Yes But," and "Yes." The "No there is no population problem" stance is divided into three points of view. The Peoples Republic of China and Brazil take the position that the population growth allows Third World countries to defend themselves against the attempted domination of the Super-Powers. Brazil argues that rapid population growth is currently a positive force for economic and social development, particularly because it provides sufficient labor and markets for development and a youthful age structure for progressiveness. Given this dynamic relationship between development and population growth, any decline of fertility in the less developed countries will pose new problems rather than solve present ones.

A second "No there is no population problem" position is presented by Eastern Europe (excluding Romania and Yugoslavia). The Marxists perceive no "population problem" in the abstract: each mode of production (feudalism, capitalism, socialism) has its own laws of population. The so-called population problems of the capitalist mode of production are in reality caused by international colonialism, neo-colonialism and imperialism. There is no need for population policies per se; in a properly organized society the demographic trends are adjusted automatically by social and economic forces. The Third World is being exploited, but by the capitalist developed countries rather than by developed countries as a whole.

The Third major "No there is no problem" group of nations include Francophone Sub-Saharan Africa, Algeria, Argentina, Albania, Romania, Cuba and Peru. This was the most influential block of nations at the conference and succeeded in changing the direction of the World Plan of Action with the help of China and the Holy See from an emphasis on population to an emphasis on development. The Holy See was the only delegation not to sign the World Plan of Action despite the fact that they had great deal to do with the negotiations at Bucharest. The View of the Holy See was not too dissimilar from that expressed by the delegate from China. The position of the Holy See is that (1) the vast uncultivated areas of the world could be developed if the labor force and necessary capital were available; and (2) the rate of growth of population should not be limited on the pretext of assuring a higher level of nutrition; but that labor intensive production methods should be encouraged instead.

The influential African-Argentinian position is that the so-called population problems are actually problems of inequality of world wealth and resources resulting from the present world economic order and "super-consumption" in the developed countries. As in the past, growing numbers can readily be accommodated; what is needed is agric-

ultural and industrial development under a proper social structure, and a redistribution of world wealth from the rich to the poor. Therefore the fundamental requirement of population policy is the establishment of a new international economic order that will eliminate the inequity of wealth and resources afflicting the world. Fertility will eventually decline, but as a "natural" process resulting from true social and economic development rather than through "artificial interventions" such as population policies and programs. Key elements of the development process are the improved economic well-being of the population, reduced mortality, improved social security, and better education.

Those "Malthusians" who are urging "artificial" population policies such as family planning upon poorer countries do so out of a desire to DIRECT ATTENTION FROM THE TRUE ISSUES OF DEVELOPMENT and to thereby maintain the status quo of inequality in the world.

Then, there are a group of nations who have a Yes, but position to the question of a population problem. These include India, Egypt, Mexico, Yugoslavia, Italy and some Latin American and African Nations. They say that some countries do have population problems that hinder their social and economic development. The major source of these problems is poverty, poor health, high mortality, and lack of education. The primary solution to rapid rates of population growth is therefore rapid social and economic development. This can be achieved through the establishment of a new international economic order, leading to (1) reductions in both the inequality of wealth and resources in the world; (2) reductions in the "over-consumption" of the rich countries; (3) a more equitable distribution of the world's resources, both through transfers via development assistance and through changes in terms of trade. Countries in this group lay varied emphasis upon the relative importance of socioeconomic development heavily as well as the need for a new international economic order and the reduction of consumption by the Western societies. Others place greater emphasis upon the need for effective population policies and programs in the context of social and economic development.

Finally, there are a group of nations whose position is perhaps best known to us who say Yes, there is a problem in overly rapid population growth. This is the position of most of Asia (excluding China and India), most of Western Europe (excluding France and Italy), Iran, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and some Latin American States. Intellectually, this position is that there are very serious social and economic problems in many countries that continue despite strenuous efforts at social and economic development. Overly rapid population growth is not the cause of these continuing problems, but it does intensify their effects. Economic and social development of the Third World is desirable in its own right and ought to be pursued actively with full international assistance as required. Reductions in overly rapid population growth can make a notable contribution to the ultimate success of these developmental efforts. Both rapid social and economic development and strenuous population policies and programs are required to bring population growth rates into balance with rate of economic and resource development. Hence both approaches are complementary to the furtherance of human welfare, but neither is sufficient on its own. Yet despite this intellectual position, the heart of this camp is in family planning believing it to be the simplest and most direct approach to lessening population growth: as a means to improving the quality of peoples' lives, to help make it possible for individuals everywhere to develop their full potential. This group firmly believes that at the very least rapid population growth intensifies problems in socioeconomic development. Bangladesh is the only one of these nations to say officially that high population growth is a key variable in impeding economic development, but that position undoubtedly represents the attitudes of many individuals in the Western and Asian delegations.

Among the nations participating in the world population conference at Bucharest there was near universal recognition of the environmental and resource-related effects of population growth. Delegates differed in their interpretations of these effects and the approach to solutions. For instance, some delegates stressed the physical limits of this earth's resources; others argue that resources are in no manner finite, but they can be expanded with appropriate applications of knowledge and skills and appropriate organizational and distributional methods. Thus, for example, the Peoples Republic of China argues that the creativity of the masses was limitless and the capacity of man to change and develop his environment would increase. What they all could agree on was the following: the need for more data; the need for the development of central research facilities at the U.N.; the need for participation in a World Food Conference to consider ways in which food and fertilizer shortages may be overcome; that technological expertise be developed to improve, maintain, or enhance the regional and international environment and to prevent pollution to the greatest extent possible; and that the education and training of research workers in the environmental field be promoted and undertaken with a multi-disciplinary perspective upon questions pertaining to the inter-relationship of population resources and the environment.

With regard to the family and population, the Bucharest conference affirmed the role of the family. It affirmed the rights of individuals to determine family size and to have the knowledge and methods to do so. The conference also reached a consensus on the rights of nations to determine their population policies and the need to recognize the diversity of conditions and cultural values. There was a consensus that family planning as a policy is not a substitute for development.

In the area of human rights the conference concurred that individuals and couples have a right to information and means of determining freely and responsibly, the number and spacing of children, and that children have a right to develop to their full potential in conditions of health of material and psychological well-being. At the same time - it was reiterated that governments have the sovereign right to determine population policy and that full and free exercise of these basic human rights could be a reality only where living standards are of acceptable levels. The majority of the delegates considered general improvement of the status of women to be one of the most effective means of promoting responsible parenthood. Elevation of the status of women and their full integration into development on an equal basis also was affirmed as a value in itself. Education and vocational opportunities for women in order that they realize fully their potential in roles and occupations of their choices was amply supported.

The World Population Plan of Action which was the product of the Bucharest Conference also affirmed the sovereignty of individual nations with regard to demographic policies at the same time that considerable expansion in international assistance in population matters was requested. It further more advocated a global ethic and insisted on the necessity of viewing population problems in global terms and insisted on opposition to the attitude that population is a problem of the poor, or of poor nations.

Some of the ethical concerns embodied in the final plan sought to assert the primary and inherent value of life, the protection of the family, and the impropriety of coercion in any form personal, group, national, or international. Thus human, familial and national rights were introduced into the more demographically oriented Draft Plan prepared prior to the conference.

The absence of national and international justice was emphasized with African nations seeing the root cause in exploitation, mal-distribution of income and unfortunate institutional structures carrying over from colonialism. China led the way in eliminating all references to fertility reduction in the plan and supported the demand for a new international economic order.

Before evaluating the World Plan of Action, I would like to make a few comments on the Draft Plan - the Committee of Experts and the Commission which prepared the draft, were both heavily loaded with experts on population issues. They tended to perceive their differences less as matters of right or wrong than as matters of emphasis. The draft plan was a forward looking plan for both developing and developed countries in terms of economic development, resource utilization and population. These underlying premises, especially increased resource utilization by developed countries, in the future came under heavy attack and led to the inclusion in the Final Plan of a demand for the reduction of consumption in developed countries.

The experts' estimate that the population of the world will double by the end of the century was accepted by the Bucharest conference, but most nations did not regard this as a cause for alarm. And even in the West there are those like Professor Colin Clark of Cambridge University who believe that population growth is a positive factor in human development- that population growth forces populations to innovate. Thus the implementation of a plan to colonize the heavens or more precisely the Lagrangian points in the heavens - where objects once placed remain stable could come to pass under the pressure of population. Professor Gerard O'Neil of the Physics Department of Princeton University has detailed plans for hollow cylinders with human beings living on the inner surface, a surface that is designed and contoured into a familiar world with all the accoutrements and accompaniments of the earth. The cylinder would be made up of alternating strips of aluminum and tough plastic. The entry of light could be controlled by mirror-shifting to allow for alternating day and night. Dr. O'Neil sees the building and use of these cylinders as possible even practical in terms of present day technology. It would be expensive of course and getting started would require an input equivalent to that spent on the Apollo program. The first cylinder (Model A) would only accommodate 10,000 persons, but O'Neil envisions larger cylinder pairs as wide as the island of Manhattan and half again as long which would accommodate 20 million people, the equivalent of the population of the Scandinavian countries, or Oceania, or almost all of Canada. Although fewer than that might be more comfortable. But colonizing the heavens will not be necessary very soon if

Colin Clark is correct. He is optimistic about the earth being able to support any foreseeable population from 15 billion to 95 billion by varying the intensity of cultivation, the area cultivated and average level of living of the inhabitants of the earth.

As with many ethical problems there is a disparity of definitions of the situation - population growth is too low, population growth is too high. Partly these varying visions are the product of inadequate data, partly they are the product of different sets of values. One of my announced titles for this evening was "Over-population". What is over-populated depends on the criteria you use to establish the optimum population; total production, per capita output, least labor cost per unit of output, maximum contribution to the welfare of the population, conservation of natural resources, etc. Furthermore, the varying definitions of the situation reflect the existing state of technology and the efficiency of social organization. A high technology world with an efficient social organization can support a higher rate of growth than a low technology world with an inefficient social organization no matter what the ultimate criteria are.

The historical experience of a country undoubtedly affects their definitions of the situation. Thus the French demographers who are well aware that the declining fertility in France in the 19th century put it at a political disadvantage vis-a-vis Germany in 1870, 1914-1918, and 1940 tend to emphasize the disadvantages of declining growth and of small numbers. The less dense nations of African and Latin America are much more concerned with economic development than they are with their rates of population growth, whereas the high density nations of Asia tend to be more concerned with population growth. And so the population question which at first approach seems to be clearly defined turns out to share the ambiguity of definitions of so much of human action. And yet we must evaluate, we cannot evade the burden of making judgments in areas in which we have some knowledge for fear of being wrong.

I would like to explore with you the application of certain ethical principles in evaluating some of the highlights of the World Population Plan of Action developed at Bucharest. Let us ask four questions of these highlights:

- (1) Is there fair distribution of the burden which is imposed by the policy recommendations?
- (2) Is there equality and substantive fairness in the economic consequences of policies recommended?
- (3) Is there respect for rights of men and women in these policies?; and
- (4) Is there respect for cultural values including the right of religious freedom?

The principle of the fair distribution of the burden is exemplified by the following provisions of the World Plan of Action:

- 1st - the advocacy of a global ethic not focused on the poor, or poor nations;
- 2nd - the recognition of the need for expanded international assistance in population matters to be made available by the U.N. to member countries;
- 3rd - the endorsement of international cooperation and the use of inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations:

On the negative side, with regard to the fair distribution of the burden of the recommendations, the World Plan of Action does not discuss the current imbalances of funding in the field of population and development. Furthermore, there is a notable absence of attention given to the interface between foreign policy and population and economic development which is a glaring omission in the light of the clear political considerations that dominate the Plan.

Equality of economic consequences is found in the demand for equitable utilization of the world's resources and in the demand for reduction of consumption in developed countries and especially in the insistence that the primary emphasis must be on the need for social and economic development.

On the negative side with regard to the weighing of economic consequences, The Plan of Action exhibited a lack of attention to the international implications of the Plan and to the impact it might have upon current as well as prospective international developmental efforts.

Respect for human rights is seen in (1) the Plan's encouragement of dissemination of information on responsible parenthood and making contraceptives available to those who desire them. (s) The clear recognition of the status of women and their roles in development, (3) the recommendation that right of all persons to determine in an informed and responsible manner the number and spacing of their children.

On the other hand, the Plan of Action does not address itself to the questions of how quickly to increase education for women when overall educational improvements are painfully slow and costly; of how to increase job opportunities, especially for women, when one of the major problems in many of the developing countries is the growing underemployment of the labor force. Nor is there discussion of how to influence local leaders in the more conservative areas to encourage the development of different roles of women. And no plan for moving toward the improvement in the status of women was delineated.

Respect for cultural values is shown in the plan's objective to recommend guidelines for population policies consistent with national values and goals and to encourage appropriate education concerning responsible parenthood by making available to persons who so desire advice and means of achieving it.

On balance, I believe that it was precisely because the Bucharest Conference was a political meeting rather than a meeting of experts that the World Population Plan of Action in its major recommendations reflects the four ethical considerations enumerated above. A conference in which the small states not only were heard but were heeded was conducive to the enactment of a plan affirming the rights of men and women, and the rights of diverse cultural traditions. The numerous states of the developing world insisted that the burden of the plan be fairly distributed and that economic consequences of the plan for the whole globe be put into perspective.

The population establishment was shaken up at Bucharest, the United States lost its battle to have population targets specified in the plan but the world of man gained with a consensus, tenuous and veiled as it may seem, - with a consensus emphasizing that economic development must accompany if not precede population control and calling for the equitable utilization of the world's resources and especially for reduction of consumption in developed countries. The World Plan acknowledges the mutual dependence and relative autonomy of nations and persons which is the foundation of all ethical relationships and human rights. In summary, the World Plan of Action is but a beginning in the field of population and social and economic development, but it is a good beginning.

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October 15, 1975  
UMPG