

## **Developing a Demographic Information System\***

THE IASP has come a long way from being a fledgling institution to a fully professional body today. In the report on the activities of the IASP which is before us, the range of the activities that the IASP has undertaken has been described and we can all take some pride in its performance upto now. The IASP can now look forward with a great degree of confidence to meaningfully expanding its activities in a manner So that Government and institutions concerned with population issues increasingly come to look upon it as a professional body whose advice and services can be called upon with advantage. In this process of continuing improvement in professionalism of the IASP, I thought I might place before you for consideration the issue relating to the need to develop a data bank on research results in the field of population studies.

In recent years, with increasing recognition that issues relating to population lie in areas beyond family planning as such, the demand for and generation of data relating to population aspects have had quantum jumps in quantitative and qualitative terms. The National Population Policy refers to the goal of planned development as being socio-economic growth with distributive justice realised by all groups of people and the improvement of the quality of life of the people at large. It goes on to refer to certain aspects of the population profile of the country such as the population size, health conditions and mortality levels, the inadequacy of nutrition etc. It also refers to the linkages between economic

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development and the acceptance of the small family norm. In order to be able to implement these policies and monitor the progress towards the broader goals of the development planning, it need hardly be said that one would need a strong and reliable data base on almost all aspects on what might be called "connected issues".

While doubtless we have achieved considerable progress in building up such a data base and monitoring system, it would seem desirable that a hard look is taken on the information systems in the field of demography and population so that maximum utility is derived from current work in these fields and necessary direction given. The concerns that the Government and the public have with regard to fertility, mortality, migration and other characteristics of the population, including rate of growth, age structure and spatial distribution, are prompted by various factors and result in demands for information. Individual agencies have, therefore, been concerned with specific issues and seek information in relation to these issues resulting in a wealth of available data spread over various agencies and institutions. The consolidation of this vast data of demographic interest and relevance is, to my mind, a necessary imperative. The developing of a strong information system which would collate and preserve data relevant to population issues needs urgent attention.

The establishment of an information system on population issues is also important in the context of the larger role of social sciences in policy making. There is a growing awareness that research input is a valuable aid in policy formulation. Social sciences, in which I would include demographic studies make useful contributions to the determination of alternatives for socio-economic development. The important linkages between economic development and population growth scarcely need any emphasis and it is, therefore, all the more necessary to ensure that the data base relating to population is firmly established.

The acceptance that population factors are relevant for development planning is doubtless by itself a major step forward. Specifically, this has meant that population issues are to be taken into account in determining programmes in the various sectors of development. However, it would still seem rather doubtful how far this acceptance has gone beyond the stage of theoretical recognition and dutiful homage. I am not quite convinced that the findings of research in these fields are always utilised in designing and formulating the wide variety of policies and schemes which are being implemented. Probably one of the reasons may be that those deciding such policies do not quite see the relevance of existing knowledge in these fields or are unable to have easy access to the results of such research. One of the constraints may be that those involved in development planning have a stronger background in economics than in demography. One of the greatest strengths of economics is its strong theoretical framework and it is doubtful whether one can assert with confidence that demography has yet

been able to establish an equivalent theoretical framework, particularly in relation to the linkages between demographic, social and economic factors. It is not unlikely, however, that this strong theoretical framework of economics itself is a disadvantage which results in the economic planner being reluctant to consider the linkages of population issues with development issues.

Though there have been determined and persistent efforts to show that population growth has an adverse effect on most socio-economic goals, it would still not be possible to assert that demographic research has fully demonstrated the existence of these links. The present state of knowledge on the relationships of demographic factors with socio-economic variables is still somewhat vague and important areas remain where contradictory views are still permissible. Disagreement on questions such as the determinants of fertility decline, the consequences of urbanisation, the influence of literacy and work participation and similar issues continue to exist. It is in this context that the collation, consolidation and ready availability of the results of demographic research in the country need consideration. In evaluating the work that is being done in relation to population issues, one could probably apply certain criteria from the point of view of those involved in development planning. Among these criteria would be whether information on levels, trends and differentials in fertility and mortality are easily available, whether it measures the demographic impact of development projects and policies and whether it takes into consideration the political processes through which socio-economic policies are determined.

If policy making must have the benefit of available demographic information, it would be desirable to consider how such an information system can be developed and what precisely should be its scope in substantive terms. Such a system should not undertake a mere service function of making the information available but it should, in combination with an overseeing mechanism, also co-ordinate demographic research undertaken in different parts of the country. Except for sporadic attempts to prepare directories of research carried out in demography and associated fields, there has been no attempt to build up a data bank and information system.

The sheer abundance of information which needs consolidation so that it might be most useful and available at appropriate times, is not a new experience. More than 200 years ago Leibniz, commenting on the amount of new publications presented at the Frankfurt Book Fair had said, "All sciences are so snowed under that one scarcely knows why one needs such quantities and where one is to look for the individual pieces of information". Again, in 1874 Lord Rayleigh had said "Scientific men must experience a feeling not far removed from alarm, when we contemplate the flood of new knowledge which each year brings with it. New societies spring into existence, with their proceedings and transactions, laden with the latest discoveries . . . additions to the common stock of knowledge become more bulky, if not more valuable; and one is impelled to ask—where

is this to end?" These sentiments are as valid today as they were when they were first expressed.

I would, therefore, urge that consideration needs to be given to an assessment of the demographic research being carried out in the country today in terms of its content, its relevance and the utilisation of its conclusions and statistical information. The term demographic research, in this context must encompass other socio-economic lines of investigation which have a relevance to population issues. The necessary organisational and institutional systems that would be capable of performing such overseeing and evaluatory functions need consideration and I would strongly urge that the IASP plays a key role in this matter. In this context, the discussions in the plenary session relating to research priorities would be of great utility and I am sure we all look forward to the conclusions of these discussions and the crystallization of ideas on this subject.

When one considers the desirability and need for the building up of an information system relating to demographic issues based on research in appropriate fields, it would also seem necessary to consider the possibility of co-ordinating research in these fields. It would be useful to consider the organisational mechanism that could be set up for overseeing demographic research in the country from the point of view of content, utility, data preservation and that could also serve as a clearing house of ideas; such a mechanism need not necessarily be considered as constricting or limiting the authority and freedom of research workers in the field. The utility of a group that is aware of work being carried out in the country in these fields and which is able to contribute usefully to co-ordinating such work would, in my view, be a worthwhile structure to achieve. In this connection, it would be relevant to recall the constitution of the Population Research Advisory Committee which met only once and which had, by and large, a role similar to what I have described. It would seem useful to consider the revival and reactivation of this committee by way of a beginning towards establishing the type of structure which may ultimately be considered as appropriate.

In conclusion, I would urge that the IASP should consider taking a lead role in establishing structures which would co-ordinate and oversee demographic research and also in the establishment of a system of data preservation and retrieval. Obviously, these are matters which would require far more detailed consideration but the need to take up these issues urgently seems to me fairly evident.