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Priorities in Population Research

THE theme of this plenary session deals with the bread and butter of the participants in this Conference. I am grateful to the President of the IASP and the organising committee for naming me the organiser for the session. Fortunately or unfortunately, there are no papers on which I can draw to generate meaningful discussion. But I am sure that the rich experience that each participant has behind him in this field of research will find this session as a congenial forum for expression and something worthwhile may hopefully emerge from these expressions. I will, therefore, only try to set the ball rolling and look forward to the points of view that are expressed following my remarks.

In making these remarks, I would like to take a cue from the two remarkable presentations of yesterday morning by Dr. Gopalan who dealt with the qualitative aspect of population processes and by our President who provided us with valuable guidelines for conducting our deliberations. I am sure that most participants will share my admiration of the forthright exposition of Dr. Gopalan when he maintained that in dealing with population, we deal with people-not merely with quantity but with quality as well. The scenerio he presented of the food, nutrition and health situation yesterday is admittedly frightening. That scenerio is based on the currently prevailing trends-that is, trends which we have not been able to reverse during the 35 years of our independence and 32 years of planning. The present state of the physical quality of our people as a nation is as disquieting as it ever was in the days of our subjugation. He candidly warned us also that if the same trends continue, the situation will only aggravate further. I should also underscore the futility of pointing to population

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growth as an alibi for the continuation of these disquieting trends. For me at least, the inauguration has left a chastening impact. I feel that we face here a challenge that cannot be met, or even understood, unless we undertake a deep introspection in order to realise where we, as population specialists, have gone wrong. It is this introspection that I would urge you all to mutually share in this session on research priorities.

Our President has spelt out the manner in which we may go about it. I would like to, but unfortunately I cannot, share the ambition that he has foreseen for the Association. Are we today or are we likely to be in the near future, a professional association whose advice and services are called upon by the Government and the concerned institutions? Some among us have been, and are at times, required to attempt this honourable task but as a body, as an association, we have not yet earned the merit to exercise any weight in the decision-making processes relating to population intervention. Though we may call ourselves a professional body, we must learn to eschew the word 'professionalization', lest we attract the same criticism as modern medicine has from the authoritative ICSSR-ICMR report.

Further, we have chosen not to limit ourselves to technical demography but to extend our scope to the much broader field of population studies. Accordingly, we may explore the unending series of interrelationships between the varied dimensions of the unceasing phenomenon of population change and development processes or processes of social change, both of positive and regressive kind. And it is to serve these broader purposes that the President has advanced the plea for the creation of a consolidated data base and the establishment of an information system. Underlying this proposition is the assumption that planners and policy-makers, whether in population or in development, are, as a rule, receptive, or could be made receptive, to research findings that we might produce. As of today, there is little evidence that they are duly or unduly concerned about what researchers in the field have to say. At times, they do look for endorsements and prevail upon some of us to take up research on the plane of verification. They would like us to highlight the consequences of population change but are inclined to discourage our exploration of its determinants. Perhaps those determinants are embedded in their own decision-making processes which are, whether in economic, social or population field, directed toward the preservation and protection of the power base.

Under the circumstances, for the very purpose of determining research priorities, we must define our own commitment as social scientists, not merely as individuals. Individuals are, of course, free to join in the band wagon and, if they are so inclined, to engage in jockeying for positions of status and power. But as a scientific body, and that too in an applied field, there is the need to preserve its integrity which can be done only if we make an abiding commitment to the higher purposes of serving the general good of the people at large.

If, in doing so, it becomes necessary to take up research which produces reservations about the way the establishment is running the show, we must, without giving offence, candidly offer the unsavory advice.

This raises, therefore, the question about whom to address our research results. Some time back, I was inclined to believe that the scientific community, including the so-called intellectuals, and those in the administration may combine to influence the courses of political interventions in the field of health, population, rural development and the like but my confidence has weakened and I am persuaded that even while maintaining a good enough rapport with the concerned bureaucracy, it is necessary to reach the people, illiterate and ignorant though they are assumed to be. Our commitment is, thus, to the cause of removing the many ills that we as a nation have become famous or notorious for. If our research contributes to the resolution of these problems-of-poverty, disparities, inequities, injustice, exploitation, be it peacefully or even otherwise-that should be a good enough reward for our labours. If we take the present powers on their own word, we would only be doing what they profess should be done. This looks much too simple. It may not be so in reality. Yet, we do not have any alternative; we must believe what they say and overlook what they do. Let us then interact with the planner and the policy maker but without bargaining away our option to go directly to the people, through the press, for example.

In saying this, my purpose is to suggest what may appear to be an objective criteria for considering the priorities. The first thing is, of course, to improve and continually upgrade our own competence for research to be carried out in our cultural setting. Hence, the need to develop innovative methodologies of research for obtaining valid and consistent results from a highly complex set of realities characterizing the prevailing socially and economically dynamic situation. The next Step is evaluation and consolidation of the enormous data base that already exists. I believe this is a task which the Association may have to take up on its own. I am not sure that the revival of the Population Research Advisory Committee would be of too great a help in this regard. If it revives, it may look forward to the work that the Association may accomplish in this direction.

These methodological priorities will need to have a substantive orientation. This raises a rather unpalatable issue, for in substantive terms, those occupying key positions in the existing infrastructure of demographic research have been habituated to take up only issues that are perceived to be commanding priority attention of policy makers. At times, even results of research are selectively processed and presented in the light of these official perceptions or predilections. Hence the plethora of family planning and mechanical fertility research. Additional factor in this situation has been that these official perceptions are shared, and at times even perpetrated, by foreign funding agencies and establishments that carry on their crusades against mortality-decline-induced population growth

in developing countries. Fertility may retain importance but it is time that it is focussed more on the determinants of fertility behaviour than on the mechanics of inducing its reduction.

If, however, we consider the evolving situation, to which our failure to reduce fertility has contributed, priorities will have to be reordered. Research attention of a problem-solving kind will have to be urgently paid on employment, on education and on health, including the problems of food and nutrition which were highlighted in the inaugural address. In pursuing these fields, the demographer must display his modesty and see himself only as a collaborator in the common endeavour of many different social science disciplines. That is one of the main reasons why the Association must bring together sociologists, economists, geographers, anthropologists and others having an interest in population dynamics for a common research endeavour directed toward the resolution of problems in the path of general social progress. In this regard, I must confess my inability to arrange these topics in any order of priority but I do indeed feel that the problem of employment must be our first choice, for on its resolution depends the progress we may make in any other subfield of demography.

Without going further into details, I wish to direct the attention of the participants to the problems of logistic support that is necessary for the pursuit of these priorities. Demographic researchers in general and those working in the centres and institutions supported by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare have been labouring under all conceivable handicaps in carrying out even the research that the Ministry is keenly interested in. There are among the participants several representatives of different research centres and institutions and I am sure they will freely express their difficulties in this forum. If they do so, they will only be helping the Ministry to understand what comes in the way of their getting what they want from us.

In concluding my remarks, let me once again emphasise that population research will derive meaning only from our common commitment to contribute to the improvement of the quality of life for the common man of this large but poor country. We can do so by generating knowledge and helping to diffuse it widely. An unequivocal recent expression of this commitment is spelt out by an eminent American economist who has extensively explored the subject of population, which I must share with you. He says, "The main fuel to speed our progress is our stock of knowledge, and the brake is our lack of imagination. The ultimate resource is people-skilled, spirited, and hopeful people who will exert their wills and imaginations for their own benefit, and so, inevitably for the benefit of us all."*

*Simon, Julian L. *The Ultimate Resource*.

I would like, therefore, to advance a suggestion that the IASP sets up a group on which all the varied disciplines concerned with population are represented to take a stock of this body of knowledge and information and to consider ways and means of applying imagination to transform that stock into intelligence that the planner, policy-maker and, above all, the people themselves could use for the cause of ushering in this country a social order of which this nation had dreamt while fighting for political independence.