

Performance of Bucharest Conference: A Recollection*

THE World Population Conference was held in Bucharest, Rumania from 19 to 30 August, 1974. I have had the opportunity to participate in the Conference as a member of the Indian Delegation and to undertake also the responsibility of reporting on its proceedings. The meetings of the Conference were divided into five parts, including the Plenary, three Committees and a Working Group. In all these different sessions, there was full representation of all delegations attending the Conference.

The Plenary was addressed in the course of this period by some 137 speakers for an average duration of over 25 minutes. These speakers were drawn mostly from among the heads of official delegations sent by as many national governments of the world. They included politicians, statesmen, diplomats, bureaucrats and the like power elite of the world. This general debate, perhaps on that account, turned out to be a *mixed* fare of polemics and platitudes ; of some idealism and a dash of realism; of pragmatism, sense, common sense or even horse sense ; and often of words, phrases and slogans barren of meaning. All this was immensely interesting, if not illuminating, but at the end one was left wondering if he was any wiser than before.

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The plenary was, however, an impressive side-show, as were the three committees which had, during the same period, considered at great length three more specific relations of population with Economic and Social Development; with Resources and Environment; and with the Family. As a result of the deliberations of these committees the Conference adopted 21 resolutions and 4 recommendations on diverse topics of greatly varying relevance to the main focus of the conference. The substantive content of these resolutions and recommendations ranged from consequences of the demographic phenomenon of ageing, rural family and status of women, to food production, fertiliser shortages and charter of economic rights and duties of states, and further to decolonisation and apartheid in South Africa.

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The main business of the conference was conducted in the Working Group comprising the representatives of all the delegations to the conference. These meetings of the Working Group, held during the same period, gave a thorough and painstaking consideration to the centrepiece of the conference deliberations, called the Draft World Population Plan of Action, a document which the conference secretariate in the United Nations had prepared in the course of the preceding period of nearly two years. The performance of the conference was in this set-up virtually confined to the job of finalising this World Population Plan of Action for its adoption, without vote, by acclamation in the closing sessions of the Plenary meetings. The Plan was so adopted. In the process it had retained its form but lost much of its content giving place to presumably newer notions relating to originally unintended dimensions of population phenomena.

Before focussing attention on this transformation of the Plan of Action, it should be interesting to note that this was the fourth of the world conferences dealing with population. The first of the preceding three was held as far back as in 1927, in Geneva, under the auspices of the League of Nations and the next two were held under the auspices of the United Nations in 1954 and 1965 in Rome and Belgrade respectively. The purpose of these earlier meetings was fact-finding in nature. They were meant to facilitate consideration of statistical and scientific matter relating to population and to promote understanding of the many facets and dimensions of the population question. In contrast, the Bucharest conference was avowedly political in nature and the participation therein was

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confined to accredited representatives of the Member States of United Nations, the Specialised Agencies and the International Atomic Energy Agency. The underlying presumption was that the time was now ripe for taking demographic matters into the realm of government responsibilities.

As it happened, of the 148 governments invited to the conference, as many as 137, had sent in their delegations. This proved thus to be the largest and the most representative of the international conferences so far sponsored by the United Nations on any subject of common interest. This nearly universal participation was indeed claimed as an evidence of the universal interest evinced by the peoples of the world in matters relating to population.

It is interesting to note also that the sponsors had contrived of the conference as one link in the extended series of international deliberations focussed on several important issues facing the world at large. The conferences that had preceded the Bucharest in this series had resulted in several formulations, including the FAO's Provincial Indicative World Plan of Agricultural Development, the UN/FAO's World Food Programme, the ILO's World Employment Programme, the Stockholm Declaration on Human Environment, the United Nations World Plan of Action for Application of Science and Technology to Development, and the Declaration on the Establishment of a New International Economic Order and the Programme to Achieve it adopted by the sixth special session of the United Nations General Assembly- In continuation of this series, there will follow three more world conferences ; the first of these, in Rome, will deal shortly with the World Food Problem, and the next two to be held in the course of the next two years will deliberate on problems relating to Role and Status of Women in Bagota and problems of Human Settlements in Vancouver.

Granted that the Bucharest conference did not stand alone add that it formed but one link in the series of events occasioned by the United Nations, it remains to be seen how these steps will hang together—whether they would lead to the evolution of an integrated or unified strategy of international action and cooperation in these diverse fields. Each of these international deliberations has been, and will be, held separately and in-

dependently of others. And there is hardly any evidence that the inter-relationships of the different fields covered are being fully or adequately taken into account. This is particularly true of the so-called Plans of Action. The United Nations seem to have specialised in promoting international dialogue. But on the question of following up these multi-lateral discussions by concrete action their record has, more often than not, been quite disappointing. They have eminently succeeded in generating massive statistical data and distributing publicity materials on a massive scale.

Turning to the centre-piece of the conference deliberations, the Draft World Population Plan of Action had been very carefully prepared by the conference secretariate, obviously with a view to overcoming the diverse problems that could be anticipated to arise in getting it unanimously adopted by the delegations of States who were known to differ greatly in their approaches to population and related problems. As a part of these preparations a series of symposia were organised by the Population Commission of the United Nations for facilitating examination of certain critical areas at a technical level by selected groups of experts. The four critical areas subjected to such expert examination were Population and Development (Cairo, June 1973), Population and Family (Honolulu, August 1973) ; Population, Resources and Environment (Stockholm, September 1973) ; and Population and Human Rights (Amsterdam, January 1974). The first three of these formed at Bucharest the Agenda of the three committees set up by the conference, while the last topic of human rights claimed pervasive emphasis in the entire series of discussions at the Conference.

Drawing upon the authoritative conclusions reached at these symposia and with the help of a specially set up advisory panel of experts, the secretariate prepared a working draft of the plan. This draft was successively revised on the basis of a series of regional consultations with the representatives of Member States held during April-May 1974 at San Jose, Costa Rica; Bangkok; Addis Ababa ; Damascus; and Geneva. The world scatter of these pre-conference confabulations is indicative of the wide canvass organised by the secretariate for maximising support to the Plan of Action at the Conference. The final version of the draft of this crucial document .that emerged from these endeavours of the secretariate was

supplied to all member states invited to the conference and was also widely distributed among all interested parties and persons.

Yet, even as the delegations began arriving at Bucharest, it became evident that the plan as presented had little support beyond those who had helped to prepare it. Strongest evidence of this was reflected in the bid made by the African States in the organisational meetings for the chairmanship of the working group charged with the consideration of the draft plan. Here emerged a clear polarisation between those who desired a minimal or marginal revision of the Draft and those who wanted its complete overhaul. The former group constituted a small minority comprising some of the developed, industrial and affluent nations of the world. The latter majority comprised, to begin with, the countries of Latin America, Africa and Middle East. Soon this majority was turned into a clear preponderance by securing alignment of most of the Asian countries including -some of those, who had, at the time of regional consultations at Bangkok, appeared in effect to go along with the Draft.

Thus, the so-called Third World, by virtue of its numerical strength, prevailed upon the first to get the Chairmanship of the working group for a delegate from Algeria. The African countries, through their bid for this Chairmanship, had wishes to demonstrate their desire to ensure that the procedures followed in the conduct of meetings of the Working Group did in no way curb the freedom of expression in the consideration of the Draft.

So it was that Third World, comprising all the developing countries, took up a common position on the Draft and secured its thorough revision with the active support of Eastern Europe, including the Soviet Group and the host country. The grounds on which they objected to the Draft are too many. We may, however, mention the more important among them. Their main contention was that the basic premises of the Draft were patently unrealistic. They refused to be carried away by the dismal prognostications based on mechanical projections of population trends, as they did not take any account of man's capability of adaptation and progress. They were indeed worried about the present and more concerned with the immediate than with the distant future.

They found that the Draft had completely ignored historical forces, underlying world's demographic evolution. The great diversity of demo-

graphic situations among the countries of the world were not adequately recognised by the Draft. They argued that the principles and objectives were much too narrow, limited and insufficient for devising policies, where needed, in the population field.

While conceding the need of including such aspects as mortality, morbidity, migration and urbanisation in the realm of governmental action, the main thrust of the Draft's recommendations for action was found to be on the limitation of fertility. It was argued with evident effect that the prescription of quantitative time-bound targets for reduction of fertility and population growth in the Draft was not only unrealistic but constituted also an infringement of the sovereignty of nations in dealing with matters strictly of internal concern. They refused to buy the slogan of 'quality of life' or the motto of 'one world for all' and held that the Draft had failed to recognise the primacy of social progress. They rejected the implied thesis that population control was a pre-requisite for economic growth. In their view, the draft had virtually ignored the role of social and economic transformation in moderating population growth. For them the remedy for all the present ills lay in the field of economic and social development and not in that of population. In substance, they held that the Draft smacked all through of neo-Malthusianism and pleaded strongly for its rejection.

The plan did, however, survive this determined onslaught in its formal shape, though its text was almost entirely rewritten and expanded. This revision of the Draft deleted recommendations on the adoption by Governments of quantitative targets for reduction in fertility and population growth rates ; eliminated all references and phrases indicative of slightest suspicion of cognizance of neo-Malthusian position; introduced, wherever feasible, emphasis on the primacy of economic growth and social progress ; and sought to expand the scope of population action by stressing the need for giving priority to mortality, morbidity, health, maternal care and nutrition etc., and also to food production and supply.

The recognition of the need for population policies was qualified by the insistence that such policies, when they are taken up, must not merely be simultaneous and concurrent with development policies but should necessarily be conceived as well-integrated parts of planning for comprehensive development. The revision laid added or new emphasis on the exercise

of national sovereignty in population matters, on the dignity of the individual and the need to secure and preserve fundamental human rights, on social justice and elimination of economic inequalities, on the elimination of discrimination based sex ; or the improvement of the status of women and their integration into, and effective participation in, public life and development effort, on the preservation of the institution of family, on the protection of children and, in general, on the liquidation of diverse elements of underdevelopment.

To illustrate how this process of revision had been accomplished by the Working Group, we might only compare the two versions of the preamble to the Plan of Action. The preamble to the Draft read :

"The world population conference, having considered the present and prospective world population situation and its relationship with economic development and the improvement of the quality of life, decides on the following world population plan of action."

In the finalised version adopted by the Conference the preamble is :
"The world population conference, having due regard to the human aspirations for better quality of life and rapid socio-economic development, taking into consideration the inter-relationship of population situations and socio-economic development, decides on the following World Population Plan of Action, as a policy instrument within the broader context of internationally adopted strategies for national and international progress."

This brief comparison adequately reveals the striking contrast in the approach to population question between the Draft and the final version of the plan of Action. The only part of the preamble commonly shared by the two versions is : "The world Population Conference . . . decides on the following World Population Plan of Action." The grounds for this decision are so different between the two versions. The ground in the Draft related to (a) the present and prospective world population situation and (b) to its relationship with economic development on the one hand and with the improvement of the quality of life on the other; the inter-relationship between the latter two is not quite so explicit.

The substitution of the above by a much longer phrase in the final version avoids reference to the global population situation and focusses attention explicitly on the inter-relationship of population situations, which are known to vary from country to country, and socio-economic, not merely economic, development. The manner of phrasing of the ground for decision is meant to indicate also that the consideration of this relationship arose from the regard to human aspirations jointly for better quality of life and rapid socio-economic development. The addition of adjectives *rapid and socio—the* latter implying a broader scope of development, are quite so relevant, in the present context, to the developing nations of the world. It is notable further that the revised version clearly asserts that the plan is adopted not for its own sake but for the positive role it might play as one of the several policy instruments within a multi-dimensional strategy for both national and international progress.

In conformity with the modified approach, the Working Group relentlessly pursued its task of revising the text of the Draft in the course of its much longer series of meetings which lasted at times beyond midnight. Additionally, the Group introduced several new clauses into the text of the plan in order to elaborate its approach and bring in newer dimensions of the inter-relationship between population and development. To indicate the main thrust of these newer pronouncements we may refer below to sample of the pronouncements from the text of the plan adopted by the Conference.

As an explanation of the predicament of several of the developing countries, the plan asserts, "The inertia of social structure and the insufficiency of economic progress, especially when these do not involve profound socio-economic changes, partly explain why in the majority of developing countries the decline in mortality has not been accompanied by a parallel decline in fertility."

"However", the plan goes on to say in the very next paragraph, "the consideration of population problems cannot be reduced to analysis of population trends only. It must also be borne in mind that the present situation of the developing countries originates in the unequal processes of socio-economic development which have divided peoples since modern era. This inequality still exists and is intensified by the lack of equity in

international economic relations* with consequent disparity in the levels of living."

Against this background, the plan goes on to plead that "Efforts made by developing countries to speed up economic growth must be viewed by the entire international community as a global endeavour to improve the quality of life for all people of the world, supported by a just utilisation of world wealth, resources and technology in the spirit of the new international economic order."

On the main theme of population policy, the plan, however, asserts that, "The formulation and implementation of population policies is the sovereign right of each nation. It is to be exercised in accordance with national objectives and needs and without external interference, taking into account universal solidarity in order to improve quality of life of the people of the world."

For action at the national level, it maintains that "the basis for effective solution of population problems is, above all, socio-economic transformations. A population policy may have a certain success if it constitutes an integral part of socio-economic development."

We must also note that in the light of its anti-neo-Malthusian stance, the Working Group consistently avoided, where feasible, the use of the phrase 'family planning' and spoke with equal consistency of what has been termed as 'responsible parenthood'. According to the revised version, "All couples and individuals have the basic right to decide freely and responsibly the number and spacing of their children and to have the information, education and the means to do so; the responsibility of couples and individuals in the exercise of this right takes into account the needs of their living and future children and their responsibilities toward the community."

The final outcome appeared to foster euphoria among the many and dispondency among the few. There was a general satisfaction of having met, as the distinguished Secretary-General of the Conference had pleaded in the inaugural meeting, "for love of life and not for fear of it."

The discussions, uninhibited and frank, led to clarification of the contrary positions taken by those who had long completed their demographic transition and those who lingered in its initial stages. The discussions left no room for any misunderstanding that a developing country could be persuaded to take up restrictive population policies without acquiring confidence in its own capability of making progress on the path of economic development. Nor was any doubt left that the removal of disparities in levels of development and consumption among countries of the world was becoming increasingly urgent.

It is doubtless true that added emphasis on national sovereignty, dignity of the individual person and the basic right of couples to determine their own process and pattern of family formation, severely curtailed the action content of the plan at least in so far as purely demographic matters are concerned. For the related economic and social matters, the plan expanded the scope for international action and cooperation.

Even so, the plan provides a comprehensive set of guidelines for the formulation and implementation of national policies and progresses in the field of population. The crucial question that remains relates to effective integration of population policies into the whole gamut of policies for comprehensive development. It relates, in other words, to the *modus operandi* of all planning processes and this has to be determined by each country in the light of the specific features of its stage of social evolution.