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**Fertility and Family :  
New currents and emerging emphases in  
research and policy<sup>x</sup>**

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**Overview of the U.N. Expert Group Meeting on Fertility  
and Family (New Delhi, 1983), preparatory to the  
International Conference on Population**

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OVERVIEW OF THE MEETINGFERTILITY AND FAMILY : NEW CURRENTS AND EMERGING EMPHASES IN RESEARCH AND POLICY

H. J. Page

1. INTRODUCTION

The task assigned the Expert Group on Fertility and Family was to identify those areas in current scientific knowledge and concerns regarding fertility and family that are of greatest salience for policy formulation and implementation ; particular attention was to be paid to shifts that have occurred since the Bucharest Conference in 1974. The task is challenging because the last decade has been one of unprecedented changes in terms of social and economic transformations and one of not inconsiderable advances in our grasp and perception of them : this was very evident in the richness and complexity of some of the papers prepared for the Group. This overview does not seek to provide a comprehensive summary of the Group's work - the text of the report does that : rather it attempts to highlight some major issues and currents that ran through the meeting, whether explicitly or implicitly, drawing not only on the papers but also on the unusually rich discussions

We should note at the outset that although the main focus of the Group's work was, quite naturally, on the problems of developing countries, discussion cannot be restricted entirely to them. The problems currently being faced by developed countries not only warrant some consideration in their own right : they may well be able to serve as a kind of early warning system and testing ground with respect to some of the problems that developing countries may also face when their fertility reaches low levels.

The overview will be organized around three main themes :

- (i) Advances in our knowledge of fertility levels and trends
- (ii) Advances in understanding of the relationships between development, fertility and the family
- (iii) Theoretical advances and practical experience with respect to policy formulation and implementation.

First, however, it is necessary to review very briefly the most salient changes in the situational context that have occurred since Bucharest.

## 2. THE SITUATIONAL CONTEXT : SHIFTS SINCE BUCHAREST

The 1984 Population Conference in Mexico City and the four Expert Group meetings preparatory to it are embedded in a situational context that is quite different from that which surrounded Bucharest and its preparatory symposia. This is particularly striking with respect to fertility and family.

Firstly, the world demographic situation and trends have changed in ways that, although not necessarily dramatic, are very significant. At the same time, awareness of local and global patterns has increased quite markedly. Among developing countries, the beginnings of fertility decline, though far from being universal, are no longer confined to a few "exceptional" countries : fertility decline is now becoming discernable in an increasing number of countries. This does not mean of course that absolute population increase is also starting to decline : on the contrary, because of a youthful age structure (inherited from high fertility in the past and intensified in most cases by recent declines in mortality), absolute increases in most countries are higher than ever before and likely to remain high for several decades, or even to increase.

Secondly, both recognition that existing fertility patterns may act as a brake on development and acceptance that fertility is a legitimate area for governmental policies and programmes are much more widespread. There may be some minor skirmishes over these fundamental issues at the Mexico Conference, but the battle of Bucharest is now essentially part of social history. The main thrust of the debate now is likely to be directed at definition of the most desirable goals and at consideration of the legitimacy and desirability of particular types of intervention.

It is important to note that these two sets of changes have not been restricted to developing countries : parallel changes have occurred elsewhere. For decades most of the currently developed countries were able to coast on fertility trends which, for one reason or another, did not have serious adverse consequences for their development and which, in addition, took place with relatively little explicit and direct governmental intervention. During the 1960's and early 1970's - the run-up period

to Bucharest - only a handful of these countries were deeply concerned about the possible implications of very low fertility for their further development. These are not exceptional any more. An increasing number of developed countries have now approached or even gone below replacement level fertility - a threshold that is largely symbolic but one which does draw public attention rather effectively to the presence of very low fertility and to its implications (especially its long term implications for the age structure) - and have been considering forms of intervention that might stem or reverse their fertility decline.

Finally, we must note that the Mexico City Conference will meet in a period of deeper world economic crisis than the Bucharest Conference and that concerns with, for example, unemployment are likely to be paramount.

### 3. ADVANCES IN OUR KNOWLEDGE OF FERTILITY LEVELS AND TRENDS

Our knowledge of existing patterns and their composition has increased markedly over the last decade, largely as a result of the exploitation of

- more data (virtually world-wide census coverage, plus large-scale survey efforts like the World Fertility Survey), and better estimation techniques for measuring overall fertility levels and trends;
- new approaches to studying the reproductive process and family formation.

In the latter category the most significant advances have resulted from the increasing attention paid on the one hand to the different ways in which fertility was held below its biological potential in traditional societies and, on the other hand, to the development of analytical models and decompositions<sup>x)</sup> with relatively simple data requirements that permit quantification of the role of the various proximate determinants of fertility (in particular, the patterns of entry into union and of union dissolution, use of contraception and its effectiveness, resort to abortion, and length of the post-partum non-susceptible period during which the woman, by virtue of anovulation and/or abstinence, cannot conceive again).

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x) most notably that due to Bongaarts

The combination of new methods and data has made systematic examination possible for the first time for several of the proximate determinants, and has considerably improved the state of our knowledge for those for which some information did already exist. It has also permitted evaluation of the potential contribution of changes in each to fertility trends. Widespread appreciation of the major role played by traditional practices that restrict fertility (such as prolonged breast-feeding or abstinence) is quite new.

One of the most far-reaching off-shoots has been the spreading and deepening realisation that the various proximate determinants of fertility can vary independently; that they may all respond to the same set of factors but that their responses may exhibit different elasticities, and may even be in opposite directions. In particular, not all the proximate determinants necessarily shift in the direction of lower fertility in the process of modernisation: the changes that occur in some, especially early in the process, tend to push fertility up. The most obvious examples are reductions in breast-feeding and in observance of prolonged post-partum abstinence (other examples include possible reductions in infecundity and sub-fecundity resulting from improved health conditions, and possible increases in coital frequency related to closer conjugal bonds). It is now abundantly clear that changes in these proximate determinants can act as a sponge, sufficient to absorb for a time the impact of fertility-reducing changes in other determinants (and thus giving rise to a sort of "germination period" during which overall fertility levels remain constant although fertility transition has, in a sense, already started) or even outweigh them temporarily (leading to an initial fertility rise rather than a decline). Widespread awareness that overall fertility levels may not fall, or may even rise, in the early stages of a fertility transition as a result of these forces is quite new. Its relevance is not restricted to those populations that are still in or just approaching this stage and are thus facing a potential fertility rise: it may also be at least a partial explanation of why fertility did not decline for a while in some countries despite social and economic transformations and/or energetic family planning programmes, an explanation that forces us to reassess past experience.

More on the debit side we must note that calls continue to be made for people to devote more attention to a life-cycle approach to the study of fertility, and to analyses centred on the timing of family formation - the patterns of starting childbearing, of spacing births and of stopping family formation - rather than concentrating almost exclusively on just one end-product, the quantum or overall level of fertility. Nor can we fail to note the remarkable persistence with which most policy thinking continues to focus heavily on general indicators of the quantum of fertility. In terms of understanding fertility, the factors governing its tempo may be just as significant, in some cases more so, than those governing quantum, although quantum may be more dramatic and have a slight edge over tempo in terms of its consequences.

#### 4. ADVANCES IN OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN DEVELOPMENT, FERTILITY AND FAMILY

##### a) Overall progress

We are acutely, quite painfully, conscious of our failure to date to provide anything close to a full understanding of the interrelationships between development, fertility and family, to serve as a basis for policy formulation : we are not even particularly confident of our ability to do so (at least in the near future). This does not mean, however, that we should be too apologetic, for significant, even crucial advances have been made in the last decade. In some cases these consist of greater awareness of the difficulties inherent in the enterprise and of a clearing of the undergrowth through identification of approaches that are not likely to be very fruitful : in others we can discern more obvious gains.

Two main areas of concern can be identified : first the type and level of analysis, and second, identification of those dimensions of family structure and function that are most intimately interlocked with modernisation and fertility change. Finally we should note an increasing awareness that a number of aspirations regarding fertility and family may be contradictory.

b) The type and level of analysis

Most of our analyses to date, especially the empirical ones, have been carried out at the micro-level, focussing on the individual decision-maker. A number of very useful analytical models have been developed, such as the currently very popular framework for analysing the determinants of fertility<sup>x</sup>), that sets off factors determining the demand for children (the costs, broadly defined, of children, the social security they provide, et.) against the supply of children in the absence of fertility regulation (the capacity for bearing children) and the costs of fertility regulation.

Such models are clearly an advance over earlier models of the determinants of fertility developed largely from classical demographic transition theory. Our use of them to date has, however, not been entirely satisfying. In large part this is perceived as being due to a common failure to specify adequately the concepts involved and/or to their substitution in empirical work by broad socio-economic indicators. Plugging in education, for example, without specifying what it is about education that impinges significantly on fertility and why, has not always produced the neat, clear answers that many, whether naively or optimistically, have hoped it would : but if we use black-box approaches we must expect to get black-box results.

The second major source of the spreading dissatisfaction with the use of these models to date stems from the fact that they are most easily operationalised, indeed often actually cast, in terms of purely micro-level analysis. The institutional supports for and interrelations with particular patterns of fertility and family have tended to be neglected, with resulting theoretical and practical impoverishment.

The increasing stress on understanding the institutional supports for and interrelations with fertility patterns is a very significant trend in recent research. It leads immediately to a shift in level as well as in perspective. Multi-level approaches, such as analysis of the individual in context, have been suggested and considerable research effort is now being channelled into such multi-level work. There is a feeling among some, however, - one might even say a nagging worry - that even this may not be fully appropriate.

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x) due to Easterlin.

The dominant theoretical context of our work is modernisation - whatever the exact definition used a process of radical structural transformation with increasing differentiation based on division of labour. As soon as this is said, however, we are inevitably referring to an entire social system. The very words imply the need for a macro-level approach, - that the structure of the group and the interdependencies are of prime importance : they also imply that trying to isolate and measure the impact of changes in certain variables (viewed as independent) on others (viewed as dependent) as we often do, may lead to misleading oversimplification or may even be irrelevant. Fertility and family change are just one aspect of a complex of interlocked changes in an integrated social and economic transformation : we cannot hope to understand the phenomenon fully if we restrict ourselves to the individual level, particularly if our approach is rather mechanistic.

The historical tendency for most demographers to shy away from macro-level work is doubtless related to the tendency to shun ideas that cannot readily be operationalised and expressed in terms of simple numbers that "speak for themselves". It is true that macro-level theories are often extremely hard to operationalise and particularly hard to quantify effectively. However, the field's concentration on quantitative (and rather mechanistic) work has tended to extend to all levels of analysis, including the micro-level. While not denying the significant contribution of quantitative work to our knowledge of fertility patterns, there is a growing, though still not yet widespread recognition of its limitations and of the need for more good qualitative work and, in particular, for more attempts to combine the two.

#### c) Modernisation, family and fertility change

The discussion here focussed on the interplay between modernisation and two relationships that lie at the heart of the family - the relationship between generations and the relationship between the sexes.

We are more deeply aware than we were of the extent to which fundamental change in the family is an intrinsic feature of modernisation. Although the family retains many of its functions, notably most of its reproductive and early socialisation functions together with many of its affective functions, it is shorn almost entirely of its economic function as the main unit of production and loses much of its role as a source of security for individuals as they pass through vulnerable stages in the life cycle. And while it

retains, by definition, the essence of its composition as one of the very few social groupings that bring together members of both sexes and of more than one generation, it loses the traditional heart of this structure as a result of far-reaching changes in the relationships between generations and between the sexes. More specifically, emerging imbalances in the old exchange systems mean that traditional patterns of prolonged dominance of parents over children and of men over women undergo radical change. The two sets of changes are quite different from each other, however, because of fundamental differences in the exchange patterns and in the asymmetries involved.

#### Modernisation, fertility and the relationship between generations

One of the most important advances of the last decade or so has been the development of greater insight into changes in the relationships between successive generations. The idea that fertility declines in the process of modernisation because the cost-benefit ratio of children to parents declines has been with us for a long time, but more recent work<sup>x)</sup> has not only reformulated the idea but generalised it by setting it squarely within the broader context of intergenerational relations.

In the long run, intergenerational relations must take such a form that they ensure continuity of the population, essentially through the care and socialisation of the young (but in most cases extended also to support for others at vulnerable stages of the life cycle, most notably the aged), largely through allocation of the time and redistribution of the products of those in other age-groups, mainly those in the active age-range. To be stable they must also be perceived as providing long-term distributive justice viewed over a typical individual's life-time.

Traditional societies are now usually seen as systems in which individuals have a direct interest in relatively high fertility in that advantages tend to accrue with age, with net transfers from young to old ; in particular, goods, services and prestige tend to flow to middle-aged and older adults from children and young adults. The legitimacy of the system is usually not questioned because over a life-time an individual who survives can reckon to break even. We are becoming more deeply aware of the ways in which demographic change, socio-economic development and modernisation all combine to destabilise the system : the terms of the intergenerational contract change, with fundamental implications

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x) by Caldwell for example

for fertility and family on the long term and with considerable, sometimes dramatic, implications for cohorts caught in mid-stream.

By definition, any marked demographic change will act as a destabilising factor by changing the relative size of cohorts (and hence the magnitude of potential intergenerational transfers at any point in time) and/or by changing the length of time individuals stay in a given status with its associated rights and obligations. Mortality declines, for example, both increase the ratio of surviving sons to fathers and prolong the period in which adult sons are not themselves the senior generation. The first can be compensated by a reduction of fertility (although this may not occur immediately), the second cannot. Overall, what may appear at first sight to be a change that favours the older generations at the expense of the younger ones carries the seeds of its own destruction : the younger generations are increasingly likely to seek other institutional outlets outside the family, a process that ultimately reduces the functions of the family and the extent to which parents can exercise control over their children.

Any socio-economic change will also tend to destabilise the system, since its impact on the various cohorts is differential. A general destabilisation may occur simply because change affects the various cohorts for different proportions of their lives : indeed, a change in the relationship between generations is a hallmark of development, for development can only be said to occur if younger generations experience better conditions than their predecessors. The potential disruption of existing intergenerational relations comes not simply from the younger generation being able to enjoy the expanding cake for longer than their parents and grand-parents, but rather from the fact that the older generations may even lose opportunities, status and authority to the younger because they are often less able to adapt to and acquire expertise and authority in the new ways. An additional destabilisation comes from the fact that since any change catches the various cohorts at different points in the life cycle, it catches them at different stages in their progression through the succession of rights and obligations to their elders and their younger. As a result a particular gain may be amplified for some generations and decreased (or even negated) for other, leading to marked potential imbalances and subsequent system adjustments.

Finally, the forms that modernisation usually takes -in particular the spread of non-familial forms of production and of prolonged and non-familial forms of education that is associated with increasing specialisation (and combined in most cases with the spread of welfare measures such as child labour

laws and community-based rather than family-based old-age support) - reduce both the role of the family and the relative advantage to parent of high fertility. Under extreme (unstable?) conditions, children can even become a bad investment for individuals, for example where some of the net costs of child-bearing are still born directly by the parents but where there is a non-negligible risk that these direct costs may not be recouped in the form of greater support or prestige later in life.

#### Modernisation, fertility and the roles of women

The interrelations between modernisation, fertility and the relationship between the sexes are quite different : the issues are simpler in that the time element, so important in the system of intergenerational exchanges, is not so central here. Again, however, there are emerging imbalances in the exchange system (here in the traditional concentration of child-rearing and domestic responsibilities in women and of many other functions in men) as the family sheds many of its functions and, in particular, as the centrality of child-bearing in a woman's life diminishes. Here too we can detect a trend towards a more integrated approach in both research and policy formulation.

The general impact of modernisation and development on the roles and position of women is a topic that goes well beyond the group's mandate : attention was focussed on the interplay between fertility decline and the roles of women. Even within this more restricted area it is hazardous to generalise about women's position because of the tremendous variety of situations, and especially because of the great variations found in both traditional and modernised societies with respect to the visibility and recognition of women's economic roles and contributions and in their degree of independence. Some generalisations can be made, however.

The policy environment with regard to issues concerning women's position is significantly different in the mid-1980's from what it was at the time of the Bucharest conference. The movement to improve women's condition has gained more momentum and wider acceptance. In particular there is a growing wariness of interventions designed to change the maternal role without appropriate associated changes in other spheres : these are increasingly being perceived, especially by women themselves, as unacceptable manipulation as much as, or even more than, improvements in their situation. This does not mean that policies for fertility and the advancement of women have become disconnected - far from it : it means that the interlocks have to be considered more, not less, closely.

Fertility transition drastically reduces the extent to which child-bearing and early-child-rearing is a woman's life-work in the sense that it is a central function and activity that absorbs much of her energies during most of her productive adult years. This fundamentally disrupts the exchange system between the sexes to the extent that women traditionally provided child-bearing, and child-rearing (together with domestic services) in exchange for economic support for most of their lives. It generates everywhere not just the possibility but also the necessity for women to be able to engage more in other economically and socially meaningful activities. Awareness of the magnitude of this change and of the extent of its implications is still spreading. Many women are unaware of its implications, especially in developing countries. Even in developed countries with their longer experience of relatively low fertility, the implications are still sinking in : one can cite here, for example, the reluctance with which some politicians have accepted that women cannot be viewed as a convenient reserve labour force that can be sent back to domestic activities and dependence whenever labour markets contract.

At the same time there is a growing realisation that improvement in women's condition itself implies the provision of real social and economic options to them, and that this in turn may moderate fertility. On the one hand it is now fairly widely recognised that where the maternal role is still central, greater access to other meaningful activities in general and the acquisition of economic dependence in particular may facilitate fertility decline by reducing the centrality of motherhood. On the other hand, where other roles are already more central and are potentially in conflict with family formation, realistic provisions to make it easier for couples to combine parenthood with other activities may be needed to prevent fertility declining to extremely low levels.

Given all these changes, one might expect the Mexico conference to show major advances in the spelling out of ways in which governments can simultaneously achieve desirable fertility goals and improvement in the position of women. To go beyond the level of simple platitudes, however, may require some hard thinking, courage and ingenuity, for there are still effective brakes and vested interests that slow down the improvement in women's situation.

A major undercurrent in much discussion to date has been the understandable but potentially misleading tendency to avoid confronting some of the implications, to present improvement in the condition of women without reference to that of men. While it is obviously desirable to improve the situation of women without deleterious effects for men - by enlarging the cake rather than by redividing it - there is, of course, a sense in which that is by definition impossible : where women are dependent and subservient they cannot cease to be so without men ceasing to exercise authority and control over them, and they cannot be freed of 'inferior' status unless men cease to have 'superior' status. The potential unpalatability of these long-term implications has understandably tended to focus attention on more specific short-run goals.

Even with specific short-run goals, however, we cannot always avoid the problem. The most striking current example relates to the fundamental issue of women's changing economic roles and the increasing of their economic autonomy. Considerable attention was paid by the group to the special difficulties of increasing women's economic autonomy in a period of economic recession in general, and to the conflicts that might result from their entering the labour market in competition with men. Considerable concern was expressed that although encouragement of women to enter the informal rather than the formal sector or to focus on new (usually small-scale) income-generating projects might provide a short-run solution, the implied perpetuation of sex-segmented labour markets and the risk of marginalisation would not just be deleterious on the long run but also inequitable now.

Equally striking is the resistance one can discern to the small but growing body of evidence that an increase in egalitarianism in marriage (including a greater direct participation by men in domestic activities) may well exercise a moderating influence on fertility as well as improving women's position, facilitating fertility decline where fertility is high, yet also preventing it declining to extremely low levels where women have other time-consuming roles and responsibilities that are hard to combine with the traditional concentration of domestic responsibilities on the woman. Taking the notion a stage further - that men not only have a responsibility to take a fair share of domestic duties (which was already included in 1974 in the World Population Plan of Action), but also a right to participate directly in the early socialisation of their children (rather than being effectively obliged to delegate this important activity to their wives) - seems, however, to be regarded as currently unrealistic: it is perhaps an idea whose time has not yet come for widespread implementation, but one that should now be aired.

To sum up, there is now a greater awareness of the compelling need in both research and policy formulation to examine more closely not only the direct

links between fertility and the position of women, but also the indirect links, including the other supports for existing power structures within the family and for sex-segmented labour markets.

#### d) Contradictions

We have become increasingly aware of a number of potential contradictions in common aspirations, some of which are reflected in the World Population Plan of Action. One contradiction noted quite forcefully is that between the desire to preserve the family and yet at the same time to reduce fertility and to enhance the condition of women (and improve life for younger generations) : to paraphrase one of the participants, "we men want educated but obedient sons, high status but dependent wives". Indeed not all the concern we hear for preservation of the family refers to what is probably its most essential function, namely that of providing an appropriate institution for ensuring the physical and cultural continuity of a population. Some may indeed veil a concern to protect particular power and authority structures, structures which, with modernisation and fertility decline, tend to become increasingly inequitable.

It is probably impossible to achieve modernisation in general and fertility decline and improvement in the condition of women in particular and still "preserve" the family, at least in its traditional forms. It is often the case that we cannot have the best of both worlds. We may have to make our choice and pay the price. Elimination of newly or increasingly inequitable asymmetries within the family is not the price. The price is located rather in the need to build up appropriate non-family based support and solidarity systems to take over those functions that the family is decreasingly able to fulfill as the kin network shrinks and as the commonality of interests between family members also declines (as the family ceases to be the unit of production in particular and as development means that successive generations have quite different experiences). The most appropriate level for such systems - whether large-scale, e.g. national (comprehensive but anonymous) or small-scale, e.g. local (less comprehensive but more personal) - is a question that emerges again in the following section on policy.

A second potential contradiction is located in the ideal of the individual's freedom of choice with respect to family formation and the uncomfortable likelihood that individual decisions may not add up to what is in the collective interest. Discussion of this point belongs more properly in the next section, however.

## 5. POLICY FORMULATION AND IMPLEMENTATION

With respect to general advances in policy formulation and implementation, attention tends, understandably, to be focussed predominantly on fertility rather than the family. Four important trends can be discerned. Firstly, trends in the definition of desirable goals. Secondly, new directions in terms of the institutional means for achieving those goals. Thirdly, shifts in perception of the individual's freedom of choice. And fourthly, assessment of the potential utility and effectiveness of policy and programme efforts.

### a) The utility of policy and programme development

Turning first to the initial premise that policies can have an impact, there seems to be a general consensus that policies to reduce fertility, either directly or indirectly, can indeed have an effect.

This is significant, perhaps surprising at first sight given the fact that most attempts to measure the impact of population policies in general, and of family planning programmes in particular, have been suggestive rather than conclusive. Not only have there been difficulties in defining appropriate measures of programme input but also the fundamental difficulties of controlling for other factors in a largely non-experimental field. Moreover, one cannot deny the existence of mixed feeling about the effectiveness of policy measures intended to affect fertility whether upward or downward. While there is some evidence that population policies can have an impact, there is also a sense amongst some that, viewed in a longer-term perspective, we may be in a sense spectators at a largely autonomous social change, with rather limited scope for intervention.

Nevertheless, the evidence appears to be sufficiently strong to convince most of those present that strong family planning programmes can indeed have a fertility-reducing impact and that when combined with strong socio-economic measures they can have a significant impact. Evidence that programmes to increase fertility can lead to a sizeable sustained increase is more meager : in part this is due to the relative recency of most measures, in part to the fact that many of the interventions tried to date have been rather superficial and/or piecemeal in nature.

b) Policy goals : the setting of demographic targets

There also appears to be a broad consensus that it is now more acceptable for governments to set explicit, quantified fertility targets than it was ten years ago. Greater awareness of the consequences of demographic trends is part of the reason : there is certainly a widening awareness that demographic trends may jeopardise attainment of other goals (such as provision of education or health services in many developing countries) or put the meeting of existing commitments (such as old-age security schemes) at risk. The harsh realities of the world economic situation and competing demands for scarce funds is another part and probably the main direct cause in many cases : in developing countries in particular, the role of the major funding agencies and their (increasing) tendency to stress explicit fertility goals has doubtless been a major element in this shift.

The way in which demographic targets are usually framed and discussed seems to deserve some reflection, however. It is striking that, just as a large proportion of demographic work continues to focus on overall fertility levels, so does most discussion of fertility goals continue to be framed in terms of overall indices such as birth rates, total fertility or completed family size. There is no reason, however, why targets should not be set in terms of other, more specific, fertility characteristics. A policy framed in terms of other characteristics may often be more relevant, more meaningful and/or more easily realisable. In many cases these targets will serve as a specification of how the broader demographic goals might be attained, but they may also be viewed as demographic goals in their own right; Reduction of child-bearing at very young ages is a very strong candidate since it can be proposed for a combination of widely acceptable social, economic and medical reasons as well as for its demographic impact, and is usually the first to be suggested. One can think of others. For example, the reduction of fertility rates among older women to reduce the number of high-risk pregnancies and permit improved medical care for those that do occur, or maintenance of adequate birth-spacing, could both be promoted for health as well as demographic reasons.

It is also striking that demographic targets are almost always couched in terms of averages. Again there is no reason for this to be the only approach : it does not require much imagination to see the relevance of goals framed in terms of the distribution around that average, the variability. There is often little explicit reference, however, when demographic targets are spelled out, to which groups will contribute most to the projected change, and which will reap the greatest benefits (or pay the highest price). It seems self-evident that in order to reduce inequities we should at least consider phrasing our targets explicitly in terms of reduction of inequitable variability. For example, a reduction in the proportions involuntarily childless may well be an appropriate target in populations afflicted by high levels of infecundity ; or, if a sharp fertility decline is considered a high priority, then the reduction of the number of families that exceed a certain size - or even the establishment of a maximum desirable family size - may help spread the burden of fertility change fairly equitably over all individuals. On the other hand, if we are to maintain some freedom of individual choice, targets intended to maintain or even increase variability may be preferred (so long as this does not result in increasing inequities in other respects) - a given proportion of small families if fertility reduction is desired, for example, or a given proportion of couples choosing to have more than two children where low fertility is considered a problem.

c) Institutional means and the organisation of policy formulation and implementation

The most appropriate types of organisation for policy formulation and implementation, together with the level at which they best operate, constitute one of the central thrusts in current population policy debate. A fundamental shift in the last decade is the current emphasis on mobilising organisations at the community level (particularly in policy implementation) rather than relying on national effort from the top down. In part this shift may be simply a reaction to bad experience : the family planning community in particular was disappointed by poor results of centrally organised programmes and even burned its fingers. But we can recognize some sound theoretical reasons too.

Two distinct arguments have converged here. The first concerns the specific nature of fertility and family as policy variables. Policy variables in general have typically been tackled through vertically-integrated, sectorally-managed organisational systems, either grafted onto existing specialised agencies or forming new, independent ones. Unlike some policy variables, however, fertility and family structure and functions are so deeply embedded in cultural and value systems that we should not have expected them to be readily amenable to change through this type of approach : a comprehensive rather than a sectoral organisational framework would appear to be more appropriate (and, since it would probably be less strongly vertically-structured, might also be more sensitive to local variations).

The second argument concerns the level at which policies for a wide range of policy variables are best formulated and implemented - more specifically the level at which the relevant social support and control systems can most effectively operate. It is a commonplace to say that modernisation is associated with a decline in family-based support, allegiance and authority structures and with an increase in the influence of those of the state. There are, however, other social groupings than family and state, often intermediate in scale between the two : individuals and families continue to exist in a local context, for example, which shapes many of the ground rules within which they operate. Local community and state are simply two extremes of scale on the present range of community-based as opposed to kinship-based support and control systems. An overly strong concentration on the national level may lead to neglect of other possibilities based on the smaller-scale non-familial social groupings.

The idea of mobilising institutions at a level intermediate between family and state - such as at the level of the local community - also has practical advantages. It not only permits better integration of fertility policies with other changes, it also brings the costs and benefits to the group of the decisions made by an individual closer to that individual than is the case with a state-level system, going part of the way to internalising externalities. In addition it permits greater attention to be paid to the difficult task of actualising a policy - of translating the intentions into the mechanics of field operations that are sensitive to local conditions and appropriate to particular local needs. Finally, we cannot

fail to mention the funding advantages - the piggy-back effect - of linking fertility policy implementation to other institutions wherever appropriate institutions already exist or can be developed.

"Community level approaches" is rapidly becoming a rallying-cry for those involved in population programme efforts. It is, however, questionable whether the necessary institutional frameworks already exist or can be rapidly developed everywhere. A number of populations exhibit integration patterns that are not very promising because they lack the stable, broadly-based and comprehensive organisations (such as stable and effective local government structures) that appear to provide the most promising base. Moreover, even where suitable organisational bases exist, the local structural transformations that would be required in order to achieve a desired fertility change have barely begun to be investigated. The idea of community level programmes is thus still a rather vague notion at the moment. Finally, although there is a strong feeling that small-scale support and control systems are needed to ensure a relatively direct and personal involvement, there is also a sense of caution among some, based on an uneasy feeling that attempts to stimulate small-scale institutions may be swimming against a strong current of long-term increases in scale (for risk-spreading, for example). The results of the approach might fall short of what is desired if an inappropriate level is chosen, and over-optimism now could mean an exaggerated backlash later. It is certainly a challenging prospect - the approach is very attractive, but marching behind its banner means we are marching into largely uncharted territory with only a few models on which to base our efforts."

d) The issue of choice

Finally in the context of means and ends, the fundamental issue of the potential conflict between individual choice and societal goals continues to underlie much of the fertility policy discussion.

Given the secular trend towards increasing individualism in general and, especially during recent years, the trend towards the spelling out of a growing number of individual right and their recognition as basic human rights, it is not surprising that the emphasis on individual rights found in the World Population Plan of Action was reaffirmed and, if anything, stated more strongly than before in the Group. Not only was the right of the individual/couple to choose with respect to family formation reaffirmed but a particular emphasis was put on the requirement that people have a real choice, that realistic options

be open to them. In this vein, considerable concern was expressed about those types of incentives and disincentives that drastically restrict the range of options, especially if they are discriminatory, and certain other forms of manipulation of free choice (such as the withholding of information).

At the same time, however, a feeling that a greater stress should be put on the individual's responsibility to society when exercising that choice can be detected. It is improbable that states systematically and increasingly tend to underestimate the individual's responsibility to them : the source of this feeling must, therefore, be sought in other explanations. One explanation is that the potential discrepancy between the sum of individual fertility preferences and the collective interest may have been underestimated. The observation that fertility decline tends to occur spontaneously in the process of modernisation (if one can afford to wait long enough), with its corollary that fertility reduction programmes are essentially releasing, facilitating or accelerating an existing process, has probably played a significant role here<sup>x)</sup>. That any intervention, even one designed to harness and direct an existing force can lead to new, albeit temporary, imbalances between individual and collective interests was perhaps given too little consideration ten years ago. The structural changes needed to make it in the individual's interests to take family formation decisions that are in accordance with the collective interest may also be harder to identify and to implement than was once thought. Certainly exhortation alone in the case of discordance is unlikely to have more than a marginal effect. A second potential explanation can be located at a totally different level. The feeling may also reflect a more general shift within the scientific community that is not restricted to fertility and family issues, a retreat - as individualism spreads - from the prospect of unbridled forms of it and the widespread anomie and social fragility that might result.

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x) Recent survey findings that a sizeable proportion of women in a wide variety of situations say that they do not want another pregnancy although they are not taking any active steps to prevent one, have tended to boost the comfortable notion that individual and collective interests are broadly concordant (although some researchers question whether the findings reflect predominantly an unmet need for family planning services or an unmet need for other, structural change).

## 6. SOME FINAL REFLECTIONS

There remains a final group of comments on two themes that have received relatively little attention, both of which are essentially anticipatory.

### a) Anticipating potentially negative consequences of fertility decline

Can we not anticipate better some of the less desirable consequences of fertility decline, in order to avoid or at least reduce the problems that may ensue?

The consequences of declining fertility for the age structure have been known for a long time, but the stresses that a marked aging of the population may put not only on the economy in general but also on inter-generational social and economic solidarity have received relatively little systematic attention in most countries until recently. This is true even in many low-fertility developed countries, partly because their post-war baby-boom gave a temporary respite to aging (although it will, in its turn, aggravate the problem twenty years from now). There is only the beginning of a realisation in most of these countries that it will be extremely hard to maintain old-age care at current levels and to meet the commitments and expectations built up in a period of relatively favourable economic and demographic conditions.

Similarly the shrinking of the network of kin that is a corollary of declining fertility has been obvious for a long time, but seems only recently to be beginning to be seen as having potentially stark consequences. In part the delayed reaction can be explained by the fact that the social security risks for exposed individuals can usually be spread over the wider community relatively easily when the number of isolated individuals is relatively small, and partly by the fact that the family and kinship group can still fulfill many of its integrative and affective functions even when the numbers of close kin are rather limited. It is, however, obvious that a significant rise in the proportion of one-child families and childless couples, like the rises we are now seeing

in a number of countries, inevitably implies that a sizeable proportion of the population will have very few or even no close relatives at all for long periods of their lives. The possible implications of this for social integration in different cultural settings and the potential alternative institutions that might effectively fulfill the necessary integrating functions are still areas where we have barely begun to scratch the surface.

b) What if we should want to halt or reverse the trend?

Finally, once the genie of change is out of the bottle, where will it take us? Or, more specifically, once fertility, together with all that is interlocked with it, starts to change, where will it stop? There is no guarantee that a new stable equilibrium will be reached and that the long term fertility decline will end with fertility hovering around some desirable level (however defined). The hazardous nature of demographic forecasting is too well known for us to make predictions, but the current wisdom does suggest that, short of the emergence of some new configuration of natural forces, fertility decline may well continue below replacement levels, with all that this implies for the population in general and the family in particular. Very few of the dimensions of modernisation that we have witnessed to date act in any way other than towards reduction in both fertility and the functions of the family, and some of these (the emergence of women as more autonomous individuals, for example) have far from run their course even in developed countries. Moreover, many of the forces of modernisation appear, at least from our present viewpoint, to be difficult to reverse if not well-nigh irreversible.

We have perhaps a couple of decades before the problem may start presenting itself more widely and more urgently : a period in which at least some attention should be paid to identifying new or existing forces that might halt or reverse fertility decline, and to pinpointing potential interventions that could be adopted if necessary, without at the same time turning back the clock on what gains we have made so far in terms of the position of women and children and respect for the individual.

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