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Summary and Conclusions
taken from the Report

"EVALUATION OF PROJECT ON POPULATION DATA SYSTEMS

CONDUCTED BY

COMMITTEE ON POPULATION AND DEMOGRAPHY

NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

UNDER CONTRACT WITH THE

AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT"

(CONTRACT NO. AID/pha/C-1161)

Project No. 932-0649

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Copies of the complete Report may be obtained from AID's Office of Development Information & Utilization or the Demography Division of the Office of Population.

VIII. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In 1977 there was disagreement among both expert and lay observers and between AID and the Census Bureau concerning the extent to which fertility was declining among the two-thirds of the world's population living in the less developed areas. AID turned to the NAS for assistance as the most prestigious scientific body available for attempting to resolve the major questions under debate. Under the three year AID-NAS contract, the National Research Council the action arm of NAS, appointed a Committee on Population and Demography composed of twelve distinguished demographers, who in turn set up a number of special panels for country reports and other studies, ultimately including well over 100 population specialists, of whom a large number were from developing nations.

Under revised terms of the contract (July 28, 1978) it was specified that the Committee and its panels should hold eleven international workshops as a step in preparing the country reports. Nine have been held and a tenth was planned for Colombia in late September 1980. The Committee has thus essentially met its commitment in this regard. The project staff and the Committee feel that these workshops made an essential contribution to the project by educating local demographic personnel in the application of sophisticated methodology in estimation of demographic parameters. The evaluation team recognizes this value but has little basis on which to judge its significance

Also under revised terms of the contract (September, 1979) the Committee was obligated to produce some 20 country reports and two methodological studies, one a manual on Demographic Estimation: A Manual of Indirect Techniques and the other a study of Collecting Data for Demographic Estimation: The State of the Art. As of the initial date for termination of the contract, April 15,

1980, only two of the reports (on Korea and Thailand) had been published; in the course of the extension to June 30, 1980 only one more (on Honduras) was in print. In June the contract termination was extended on a "no cost" basis to December 31, 1980. As of mid-September 1980 apparently only one other report (on Bangladesh) had completed the review process and was at the printer. In the view of the evaluation team the project is far behind any reasonable schedule and it is unlikely that a majority of the reports, much less all of them, will be ready in final draft to enter the NAS review procedure by the end of calendar 1980.

It should be reiterated that the serious delays in output are not due to any disinterest or lack of involvement by members of the parent Committee. Furthermore the small project staff of three professionals has had a highly commendable record of productivity and accomplishment. The delays were attributable to (1) failure of the Committee to realistically evaluate what could be accomplished in the time available, (2) a cumbersome panel and review structure including a conscious trade-off by the Committee between delays in preparation of the reports and the educational functions to be served in country and regional workshops, and (3) reliance on unpaid panel members for leadership and authorship.

The few available published reports have been more fully discussed above and in a Technical Appendix on the Korean report.

As earlier noted, the initial procedures developed some years ago for making indirect estimates of fertility and mortality were successful in providing estimates of vital rates of variable quality for the majority of the world's countries that do not have adequate registration of births and deaths. Growing sophistication in such methods has not led to a similar quantum jump in the state of knowledge. The situation is illustrated by the published reports of the Committee available at this time.

The report on Korea, using excellent data for an LDC, illustrates the possibilities for "fine tuning" that may be achieved with sophisticated methodology, but does not evaluate alternative estimates available to AID and other policy makers.

The Thailand report, again using an atypically abundant body of available data, is unable to resolve the question of variable results from alternative sources of data. In using ranges of estimates rather than single point figures its conclusions are analytically honest but frustrating to those seeking the "best" estimates of fertility reduction.

The Honduras report illustrates the dilemma of sophisticated methodologists when confronted with the poorer empirical data of a kind more typically encountered in the Third World. More sophisticated methodology was simply unable in this case to make up for the basic deficiencies of the available data.

The Bangladesh report (available to the evaluation team only in advanced draft) drew on an abundance of census and survey data only to come to no conclusion as to most reliable estimates or even with respect to the rate of population growth.

The available country reports thus are scientifically useful in their application of sophisticated methodology but (with the possible exception of the Korea report) of limited value in adding to previous knowledge of fertility trends in the countries concerned.

AID reasonably had hoped that the most advanced methods of indirect estimation presently available would give answers to the questions of fertility trends with which it was concerned in 1977. However, the slow procedures of the project and the rapidly expanding evidence of fertility declines have

led to a changed situation by 1980. Furthermore, 1980 and 1981 censuses will soon make some of the country reports substantively obsolete. Delays in output and the character of the NAS reports have been such as to make them more of scientific interest[1/] than of current policy significance for AID.

IX. RECOMMENDATIONS

A. The Goal

The evaluation team recommends that the NAS Committee and staff be given encouragement to complete a carefully selected subset of its current list of remaining reports (see Table 1).

B. The Context

In light of what has been accomplished so far and what still remains to be done, completion of the current schedule of reports appears to be unattainable by December 31, 1980. There is a high probability that the schedule cannot be met without endangering the quality of the reports.

C. Specific Recommendations

Therefore the evaluation team recommends that the following specific actions be taken:

1. As soon as possible, a meeting should be held between representatives of AID and members of the NAS staff/Committee.

a. At this meeting a priority should be assigned to the various countries for which reports still have to be written. In the evaluation team's opinion, Brazil, Mexico, India, Indonesia, Pakistan and Egypt are among the leading possibilities for consideration as high priority.

[1/] E.g., hopefully of value for future application in measurement of fertility and mortality in the absence of reliable official data.

b. Subsequent to such assignment of priorities, each country and regional report should be evaluated according to two basic criteria: (1) its priority as relating to a country or region of importance, and (2) the amount of time and effort required to bring the report to completion. Reports for countries of high priority that are close to being done should be finished as soon as possible. Reports for countries of low priority that are a long way from being done should be jettisoned. A careful evaluation should be made of the costs and benefits of completing reports that meet one criterion (high priority or little work remaining) but not the other.

2. Consideration should be given to the most efficient means for finishing the reports given priority. Thus it may prove expedient to give subcontracts for the writing of those reports for which unpaid panel members have been or seem likely to be unable to complete assignments.

3. The period of performance of the contract should be extended for a limited time (up to six months). Relatively small additional funding (not exceeding 10% of the present contract budget) might be made, provided that the opportunity exists for genuinely novel additions to knowledge as judged jointly by the Committee and by AID.

4. Further consideration should be given to how the remaining reports could be improved in terms of their quality and utility.

a. The organization of the reports could be made more consistent. Following the emerging patterns in the Bangladesh and Brazil reports, a brief description of the demographic history of the country could be provided, followed by a review of the state of knowledge concerning the country's fertility and mortality trends, a description of available sources of data,

a comparative evaluation of existing estimates, and a discussion of the contribution of results obtained by application of additional "indirect" techniques.

b. Where feasible, estimates should be presented in both "probable range" and "best point" terms.

c. Each report should show how data emerging from the country can best be assimilated into the findings presented. That is to say, each report should provide a ready framework for rapid extension of fertility and mortality trends, as new data become available.

d. As feasible, the manuals on estimation, the data collection report and the country reports should be more closely coordinated. For example, the estimation manual could use more examples from the country reports. The country reports could refer the reader to the estimation and/or data collection publications for further details on analytic techniques used or sources of data analyzed.

D. The Future

The evaluation team does not recommend that NAS undertake additional work under the contract as proposed in Dr. Lapham's letter to Dr. Brackett, AID, dated March 26, 1980, with the possible exception of a brief summary report on the demographic situation in the Third World based on the work of the Committee (as noted on p. 25 above). The NAS Committee and staff should concentrate on completion of work required under the present contract and on continuation of work required under the NAS-AID contract on Determinants of Fertility Change.