

The Fifth Asian and Pacific Population Conference: Towards a Repositioning of Population in the Global Development Agenda?

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Antecedents to the Bangkok Conference

The Fifth Asian and Pacific Population Conference, held at Bangkok in December 2002, followed a little more than 10 years after the Fourth Asian and

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Pacific Population Conference, held at Bali. The Bali Conference was one of the regional conferences leading up to the path-breaking International Conference on Population and Development, held at Cairo in 1994, and was important in the context of providing input into the Cairo Conference, but also in its own right as reflecting the consensus among the Member States making up over 60 per cent of the world's population.

It is well known that the Cairo Conference led to some dramatic shifts in direction in the rhetoric of population and development, as well as in the priorities for and conduct of national population programmes. These shifts in direction had not been apparent at the Bali Conference, which had indeed spelled out a set of population targets in line with sustainable development goals, an approach that came under attack from various sources at Cairo (McIntosh and Finkle 1995: 227). The Cairo document, in paragraphs 3.14, 3.25, 3.26, 3.28, 6.3 and 6.4, gives muted support to the need to reduce population growth rates. But the main thrust of the document lies elsewhere. "Population policy becomes a welfarist activity, seeking especially to benefit women. Effects on birth rates are not so much seen as secondary, but as an inevitable – and desired – consequence of women's empowerment" (McNicol 1995: 334).

The emphasis on reproductive health and reproductive rights was a major accomplishment of the Cairo Conference, though the stress on women's empowerment was arguably taken too far in some areas: for example, by stressing gender inequities in access to education while ignoring inequities in access by socio-economic status (Knodel and Jones 1996) and viewing the gender difference in child mortality as "much more crucial than the high level of child mortality, male and female, in poor societies across the world" (Basu 1997: 226). Be that as it may, the countries and areas of the ESCAP region, individually and as a group, made concerted efforts to orient their policies and programmes to the new emphases of Cairo. This was evident, for example, in the stress placed on adolescent reproductive health in the report of the high-level meeting held at Bangkok in 1998 to review the implementation of the Cairo Programme of Action and the earlier Bali Declaration on Population and Sustainable Development (ESCAP 1998). Adolescent reproductive health had been ignored in the Bali document.

In the decade that passed between the Fourth and the Fifth Asian and Pacific Population Conferences, the world (and specifically the Asian and Pacific region) had moved on, in terms of both its economic and demographic situations. First of all, the demographic transition in the region had progressed considerably. This can be observed by comparing the total fertility rate and expectation of life at

birth in the region at the time of the two Conferences. In 1992, these were about 3.1 and 63 years, respectively. In 2002, they had fallen to about 2.6 and risen to about 67 years, respectively. Not only this, but by 2002 there were few countries where fertility had not started to decline. In 1992, real doubts could still be raised about whether any decline had taken place in Cambodia, Nepal or Pakistan. By 2002 they could not.

At the other end of the spectrum, by 2002, some countries where fertility in 1992 was already below replacement level had sunk to even lower levels, and the implications of this low fertility were causing considerable concern. In general, then, demographically the Asian and Pacific region had become even more diverse than it had been in 1992, but with a clear shift towards lower fertility and mortality levels. Although demographic momentum was clearly going to swell population numbers very considerably, the overriding need to lower fertility rates, which had been recognized in the Asian and Pacific Population Conferences of the 1970s and 1980s, and indeed to a lesser though still substantial extent in 1992, was no longer such a priority concern in 2002.

In terms of economic development, the decade had seen impressive growth in the Asian and Pacific region, albeit with considerable variation. Population and poverty was appropriately chosen as the theme of the Bangkok Conference, but this did not mean that the incidence of poverty was getting worse. Indeed, a recent Asian Development Bank study of 18 Asian countries, using national poverty lines and survey estimates of consumption, found that the poverty incidence in these countries had fallen from 65 per cent in 1960 to 17 per cent in 2000. The biggest decline came during the last two decades.¹ Major countries in the region – China, Indonesia, Thailand and Viet Nam – have seen major reductions in the incidence of poverty (Jones 2002: 6-9). Though there can be (and are) debates about the exact trends, there can be no contesting the reality of a substantial decline in the incidence of poverty in all these countries. Even the Asian economic crisis, which hit countries including Indonesia, the Republic of Korea and Thailand hard from 1997, was not able to put a major dint in the general reduction in poverty throughout the region. Africa was the continent where poverty increases were matters of grave concern; the Asian and Pacific region was certainly not Africa.

The thrust of the Bangkok Conference

The debate at the Bangkok Conference reflected the continuing vital interest of the countries and areas of the Asian and Pacific region in the interrelationships between population trends and development. Many of these countries had

espoused the Programme of Action of the Cairo Conference with a degree of diffidence, recognizing the winds of change that were seemingly unstoppable at that Conference, yet concerned that their continuing strong national emphases on reducing fertility rates through family planning and other measures would be undermined by the new emphasis on reproductive health and reproductive rights. Since that time, debates have continued throughout the region about the degree of compatibility of reproductive health approaches with the aim of lowering fertility, with some protagonists arguing that by diluting family planning resources, the impacts on fertility will weaken, and others making the point that a well-executed reproductive health approach will lower dropout and failure rates and appeal to those younger people whose delayed sexual initiation and longer and effective practice of contraception are crucial to a sustained decline in fertility. However, as noted earlier, demographic trends have reduced the salience of efforts to reduce fertility in many of the Asian and Pacific countries, and for this reason alone, leaving aside changes in the ideology of family planning and reproductive health, reducing fertility is no longer as prominent a concern of the region as it was at the time of the Bali Conference.

There are many issues surrounding reproductive health and reproductive rights, apart from their relation to fertility reduction strategies. At the Cairo Conference, certain of the Asian and Pacific countries shared the concern of some other countries that the sections on reproductive health and reproductive rights in the Cairo Programme of Action might have the effect of promoting abortion or adolescent sexual activity. However, many of them were more concerned that the protracted debate over these issues at Cairo served to constrict discussion of the kinds of broader population and development issues that had received considerable attention at the Bali Conference. On this score, history repeated itself in Bangkok. An inordinate proportion of the time of the drafting committee was taken up with the concerns of the United States of America delegation about language contained in the Cairo Programme of Action, which according to that delegation, tended to promote abortion and adolescent sexual activity. In the event, the Asian and Pacific countries stood firm in supporting the language of the Cairo Programme of Action (the cohesion of such a diverse group of countries in doing so being one of the most striking features of the Conference), but at the cost of minimizing the time and intellectual effort that could be devoted to other important aspects of the Plan of Action.

It is clear that as time has moved on, the Cairo consensus has become entrenched in Asian and Pacific countries' approaches to population issues, and nowhere is this seen better than in these countries' determination to adhere to the

language contained in the Cairo Programme of Action in the Plan of Action finally agreed to at Bangkok. Country delegation after country delegation, in statements from the floor, indicated their conviction that the Cairo consensus did not in any way promote abortion or adolescent sexual activity.

Though the debates in Bangkok were focused heavily on this issue, if we examine the Plan of Action on Population and Poverty that was adopted by consensus at the conclusion of the Conference, it does have a great deal to say about population and development. In this sense, it will serve as a benchmark for policy emphases for some time.

What are the main emphases of the Plan of Action? First of all, in terms of overall directions, the preamble emphasizes the centrality of poverty eradication concerns and recognizes that sustainable development requires an appropriate balance between economic growth, poverty, resources and environment. The preamble recognizes the importance of human capital and in that context refers to the special need to address women's disadvantage and marginalization. Human rights are recognized as central to development and population policies are seen as an integral component of development policies and planning. The preamble then indicates that these concerns are in line with previous consensus by the international community by affirming a commitment to the principles and recommendations adopted in Bali, Cairo, Beijing (Fourth World Conference on Women), five-year review reports on Bali and Cairo, and finally the Millennium Declaration.

As for the strategic recommendations of the Plan of Action, these are set out under 12 headings:

- Population, sustainable development and poverty
- International migration
- Internal migration and urbanization
- Population ageing
- Gender equality, equity and empowerment of women
- Reproductive rights and reproductive health
- Adolescent reproductive health
- HIV/AIDS
- Behavioural change communication and information and communication technology
- Data, research and training
- Partnerships
- Resources

In the end, the reader of the document will find it to be carefully worded, reflecting current consensus about principles and broad directions for action in these important areas, and not distorted by the highly skewed amounts of time spent in debating and discussing certain sections. In this respect, it reflects the considerable work that had gone into drafting the document, large sections of which were able to be adopted by consensus without need for lengthy discussion.

The difficulty of reaching a consensus at Bangkok actually reflected, not divisions within the ESCAP members, but rather their determination to maintain the commitment to the principles and recommendations of earlier Conferences, most notably the Cairo Conference, when that was challenged by one delegation. The publicity given to this issue was described in a statement by the Asian Forum of Parliamentarians on Population and Development as creating “such hype that population has received new energy” (<<http://www.afppd.org/informat.htm>>). Is this just hyperbole, or will a new impetus be given to population concerns as a result of the Bangkok Conference? It is really too early to judge, and a balanced assessment will need to be based on the actions of individual countries, groupings of countries and donor agencies over the coming years. Nevertheless, it is appropriate at least to look for “straws in the wind” at this stage.

What is the general outlook for the field of population now?

The 10-year review and appraisal of ICPD, also known as ICPD +10, is due to be held in 2004. If it is indeed held, the context will be different from that of the Cairo Conference. One of the key differences is that population growth rates are slowing quite generally throughout the world. Not only this, but many countries are now very concerned about excessively low fertility, which will lead in time to a significant downward spiral in population size unless fertility rates can be raised.

The steam has really gone out of the population issue as conventionally understood. Though world population is still expected to grow from the current 6.2 billion to somewhere between 7.3 and 10.4 billion by 2050, the growth will be at ever-decreasing rates. There is now said to be a 60 per cent probability that the world's population will not exceed 10 billion people before 2100 (Lutz, Sanderson and Scherbov 2001: 543), a far cry from earlier projections which suggested the likelihood of considerably larger populations (see also Bongaarts and Bulatao, eds. 2000). Though the need to lower birth rates is still of critical importance in some countries, particularly in Africa and South Asia, nobody seems to doubt any more that these declines will take place.

Popular attention, as guided by the emphases in the news media, has turned to issues that are considered more pressing, in particular, issues of environmental sustainability and poverty. Donor agencies, foundations and universities have likewise moved on to issues that they see as more on the “cutting edge”, matters including environment and poverty, and post-11 September terrorism. Some of them see illegal migration and refugee movements, both of them “population issues”,- as issues of considerable moment.

The general understanding that population issues are a thing of the past is unfortunate for two reasons. First, population and development issues are just as important for countries with low fertility as they are for countries with high fertility. Dealing with changing age structures and declining populations presents formidable intellectual and planning challenges. Secondly, there are important population dimensions of the issues that are currently given greatest prominence (see, for example, Geist and Lambin 2002 on population and the environment), but these dimensions are insufficiently recognized by the agencies dealing with them (for example, population was effectively ignored at the World Summit on Sustainable Development, held at Johannesburg in 2002).

In other words, academics, planners, international agencies and NGOs concerned with population and development issues have not “sold” the population field very effectively, and we are now suffering the consequences. Thirty or 40 years ago, when population growth appeared almost out of control, it was easy to see population as an area of crucial importance. But at that time, most university population programmes, international agencies and foundations dealing with population issues were content to ride the wave of popular concern, without devoting enough attention to educating the public to the crucial demographic dimensions of planning issues, whether in circumstances of rapid population growth or of slower or even negative population growth. Perhaps the greatest indictment of population researchers and planners is that we have been too ready to espouse one-dimensional notions of the adverse impacts of rapid population growth on development, without acknowledging that population trends – and the way in which they impact on society and development – are influenced by the complex sociocultural and political settings in which they occur. It is somewhat ironic that we are now claiming that population itself is being left out of the equation by those from other disciplines when assessing the causes of poverty or environmental degradation.

Trends in institutional and financial support

What does the flow of international development assistance indicate about the importance of the field of population nowadays? Is population being marginalized in the broad context of development assistance?

First, it needs to be noted that the agreed international goals for official development assistance (ODA), i.e., a proportion of 0.7 per cent of the GNP of the wealthy countries, have never been reached, or indeed ever approached. Although reiterated in the Millennium Declaration adopted by the Member States of the United Nations at the Millennium Summit in September 2000, the lack of demonstrated will to reach this goal in practice, at a time of rising expenditures on armaments and security, is one of the most depressing facts of our time. “Compassion fatigue” appears to have become a permanent state of enervation in the wealthier countries. The specification, in the Monterrey Consensus adopted at the International Conference on Financing for Development in 2002, of the need for the adoption of sound policies and good governance in developing countries to ensure the effective use of ODA implicitly acknowledges one of the reasons for such “compassion fatigue”. Unfortunately, it does not necessarily follow that improvements in this direction by the developing countries will loosen the purse strings in developed countries.

As for population activities specifically, many attempts were made, even before Cairo, to come up with estimates of the costs of population programmes. Estimates of global resources needed in the year 2000 ranged widely, between US\$ 600 million (for just contraceptive commodities) to US\$ 11.5 billion (see Zeitlin, Govindaraj and Chen 1994). This highlights one of the problems in tracking how much has really been devoted to meeting the goals of the Cairo Conference: the boundaries of population spending are very hard to define, once broader reproductive health becomes the key objective, and even more so if recognition is given to the demographic impacts of spending on broader areas such as education.

The ICPD Programme of Action specified the financial resources, both domestic and donor funded, believed necessary to implement a wide-ranging population and reproductive health package. For the year 2000, the estimate was US\$ 17 billion (US\$ 11 billion in the ESCAP region), rising to US\$ 18.5 billion by 2005. Approximately two thirds were expected to come from domestic sources and one third from the international donor community (UNFPA 2002). Subsequent UNFPA monitoring of international population assistance and domestic spending

for population activities shows that financial constraints remain one of the chief obstacles to the realization of the ICPD objectives. According to UNFPA estimates, the total sum generated in 1999-2000 was about US\$ 11 billion, with international population assistance funds (which reached only about 46 per cent of the target) falling further short of the target than domestically generated funds (UNFPA 2002). Given the ESCAP region's large share of total required funds, it is clear that the relative shortfall within the ESCAP region must be of the same general order of magnitude as the overall shortfall.

Such broad-grained estimates of funding shortfalls are really of questionable relevance when the complex determinants of population trends are recognized. What other points can be made about the relative importance accorded population issues, especially in the Asian and Pacific region, in the post-Bangkok Conference world?

It would be easy to seize on the downgrading of population activities in ESCAP (already in train before the Bangkok Conference), as well as a shrinking of resources provided by UNFPA, as signs that population issues are no longer as high up on the priority list of development issues as they once were. However, the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank seem to be continuing a substantial level of support for population projects. Although the United States Government cut off support for UNFPA in 2002, this does not mean that it is reducing its support for population programmes, but just redirecting it to other ways of financing those population activities that meet its ideological conditions.

The situation regarding population data is a mixed bag. On the plus side, demographic and health surveys have provided many Asian countries with a sound basis for assessing trends in and determinants of fertility and mortality, for many of them at more than one date, but few Asian and Pacific countries can track annual changes in fertility and mortality from vital registration data. And the problems faced by many countries of the region with their 2000 round of population censuses seem to reflect not only country-specific issues such as the impact of governmental decentralization in Indonesia and the Philippines, but also a squeezing of funds which, even in these times of financial stress, reflects the lowly place in the financial priorities spectrum accorded population data. Population data received more attention when it seemed crucial to know just how rapid population growth rates were, and whether efforts to bring them down were succeeding.

What might be done to follow up on the Plan of Action adopted in Bangkok?

There is an urgent need to reposition population in the global development agenda. In doing so, the first point to make is that people's welfare is the ultimate objective of all development planning. Therefore, we need to know who those people are in the aggregate – what are their characteristics, and the trends in the composition of this population. The second point is that there are demographic components of all aspects of development planning – in all settings, not just those where rapid population growth is seen as a problem. The difficulty of showing precisely how population dynamics are implicated in the key issues of current concern, such as poverty and the environment, should be seen as a challenge to the demographic community rather than a reason to be silent. It behoves the population community in the region to use its influence in a range of settings – government deliberations, planning meetings, seminars and through the media – to drive home the point that population matters.

This implies the need for a good understanding of demographic trends, which in turn implies the need for good data and good research. Increased spending on demographic data collection is vital, as is adequate support for demographic programmes in universities, including programmes emphasizing interactions between demographic and socio-economic trends. Adequate data and research capacity should be seen as the building blocks for an effective understanding of population issues.

Finally, the Cairo emphasis, reiterated at Bangkok, requires continuing attention to reproductive health issues. There are still a tragically large number of people having children they do not want, and also some who are not able to have children they would like to have. There are unconscionably high maternal mortality rates in many Asian and Pacific countries, and millions whose lives are blighted by non-life threatening sexually transmitted diseases and reproductive tract infections. In this context, unmet need and a balanced understanding of its causes should remain a key pillar of family planning approaches (Sinding and others 1994; Casterline and Sinding 2000). Pilot projects are needed to test reproductive health approaches that work, but perhaps even more necessary at this stage is analysis of ways to scale up successful pilot or experimental projects to the larger programmatic settings in which reproductive health services will be provided, beset by the usual problems of large-scale bureaucracies (Simmons, Brown and Diaz 2002). To bring effective

reproductive health facilities to poorer countries requires money, planning and changed attitudes on the part of both those who determine government budgets and many health providers. Serious and imaginative attention to these issues will not only ensure lower population growth rates in countries where these remain troublingly high, but will also have major benefits for quality of life.

Endnote

1. While not denying the reality of these declines, it needs to be noted that the inclusion of an estimate of those living in “near poverty” would raise the poverty group to considerably higher numbers, as many national poverty lines measure mere “survival-level” existence.

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