

II -- National Effects of Rapid Population Growth

The effects of rapid population growth on individual societies and countries are highly complex, with many interrelated factors, and the experts are not in full agreement on all of them. Yet the general lines are fairly clear.

Economic Effects

It is the **combination of widespread poverty and rapid population growth**, rather than the latter in isolation, that handicaps the economies of developing countries so severely. Surging population growth very often negates all or most of the impact of growth in GNP; and the process of development itself may be slowed or stalled. Yet if an increase in population is an obstacle to economic development, slower population growth will not necessarily solve economic problems; it will however make it easier to take steps in other fields to deal with them.

Absorption of labour is obviously an enormous problem in most countries of rapidly growing population, even if no simple correlation is possible. It is increasingly an urban problem because it is there that population is growing fastest. The result is not so much actual unemployment (since this is simply unfeasible for most people in countries without a social safety net) but a great deal of desperately tenuous, low-productivity underemployment, with pathetic consequences which any visitor to a poor developing country can see. Much of the debt run up in the '70s and '80s by countries of the South was incurred for capital to somehow employ the fast-growing number of radicalised urban youth¹, and massive make-work civil service expansion helped to fuel inflation.

Mass world starvation is unlikely at predicted rates of population growth. Despite local imbalances, world food production has so far been more than able to keep level with population, except in sub-Saharan Africa, where malnutrition has increased. More generally, further expansion is possible through higher investment and technological innovation, although obviously there are ultimate limits². **But broader development goals are already severely affected** by the need for tractors, fertilisers and capital to raise food production. There is also more pressure on increasingly scarce water resources -- a huge problem for the future. The higher food imports required in countries such as Iran and Egypt to feed their growing populations have worsened their balance of payments problems.