

Bucharest 1974

Proposed global targets rejected as solution to people puzzle

By Wendy Dobson

The World Population Conference in August marked the first full-scale debate among governments on population matters. Contrary to expectations, the meeting was full of surprises. In view of events at the Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment, and at last spring's special session of the General Assembly on raw materials and development, the nature of the debate should have been more fully anticipated than it was.

Two agendas, not one, existed at Bucharest. The first was prepared by the United Nations Secretariat in response to the 1970 General Assembly resolution calling for the conference. That resolution was concerned with the increasingly-evident problems of rapid population growth. Although two world population conferences had previously been held, in 1954 and 1965, they were convened as technical gatherings and attended by professionals only. The 1974 conference would be attended by governments that would approve an international strategy for dealing with population problems, to complement other UN strategies dealing with food, employment, the environment, technological transfer and the second UN Development Decade. The Population Commission was named the preparatory body, and in 1972 machinery was set in motion to develop a World Population Plan of Action. By spring 1974, the Population Commission released the draft plan for negotiation with governments at UN-convened regional meetings.

Throughout this process, a consensus emerged supporting the document, its backers including Brazil and the United States (which had previously held strong views), the socialist countries, the Asians and Africans and other Latin Americans. Points of controversy persisted over the sensitive topic of target-setting — both for program development and for achieving declines in population growth-rates. In general, however, the document was considered widely acceptable and comprehensive enough to recognize policy options for

everyone's particular population problem. As a result, most delegations arrived in Bucharest expecting consensus.

The second agenda at Bucharest also had its origins in the UN system. Concern with reordering international economic relations to serve better the interests of the developing nations has been the subject of three UNCTAD conferences since 1964. It has also been a growing concern in the General Assembly with the emergence of the Algeria-led Group of 77 and the Declaration and Program of Action on the Establishment of a New International Economic Order accepted by the sixth special session of the General Assembly last spring.

These concerns were brought to Bucharest, and formed a different framework within which to view population problems and population policy. In addition, Argentina, which last spring changed its population laws to stimulate population growth, largely for security reasons, came laden with amendments to the Plan of Action, designed to de-emphasize the objective of reducing population growth. The Vatican arrived with a fixed position and pressed for a number of changes of similar design. Somewhat unexpectedly, China shared similar convictions in several instances, making for somewhat strange bedfellows.

Central arguments

The central arguments debated at the conference have frequently been misreported. Since they have critical importance for the future of the population field,

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