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National Family-Planning Programs: Where We Stand

Most qualified observers believe that the rate of population growth in the developing countries is too rapid and that something must be done. The something has usually taken the form of national family-planning programs, which now exist in about 25 countries, from India and Pakistan to Tunisia and Mauritius. Where does this effort now stand?

The present state of national family-planning programs is *impressive*, in that a great deal of development has occurred in a very few years; *frustrating*, in that many things that need to be done and are in principle do-able are simply not being done because of weak will or bureaucratic limitations or personality conflicts or inadequate funding or some other unworthy reason; *uneven*, in that a few countries have been able to achieve important targets, whereas others have been unable to do so or have not really tried; *inadequate*, in that "the population problem" has not been "solved" by such programs in most of the countries at issue, and the efforts in several key countries are not adequate to the essential requirements of the task; and, finally, *doubtful or unknown*, in that we simply do not know how well or badly things are going in several places for lack of a proper system of evaluation.

As for the prospects, they are simultaneously *promising*, in that the momentum of effort is still running, though not so strongly as in the mid and late 1960's; and *dubious*, in that the problem itself is terribly resistant, the positive results tend to be concentrated in the more favorably situated countries, the field may be hitting a plateau of effort and results, and the measures beyond family planning—like education or tax incentives or shifts in the status of women—are unlikely to be helpful in the short run.

With so much having gone on in so many places in so few years, workers in this field are now trying to digest the experience to date, to assimilate it, to balance the achievements and the shortfalls, to appraise alternatives even as they seek to advance beyond what is now being done. Nor do they lack for critics on all sides—politicians who suspect the enterprise of impure motives, international civil servants who think the "population problem" has been oversold, financial supporters who want more results, program administrators who want more freedom, demographers who feel the effort has become captured by the medical men, medical men who feel the effort has been captured by the demographers, social scientists who say that family planning will never work in the absence of deep structural changes, doctors who say it will never work in the absence of a complete medical infrastructure.

Where does that leave us? It leaves us, as usual on complex social problems of great magnitude, in a mixed position. Science, both social and biological, has made and will make notable contributions but probably cannot "solve" the problem by itself. Beyond knowledge, the world needs at least the will and the time. At present, the will seems to be greater where it is less needed, namely, among those in the developed world seeking to help. Similarly, the time frame allowed to do the job is perceived as much shorter among those not directly involved. Thus the mixed picture: much done, much more remaining. The honeymoon is over, and the partners in the developing and the developed countries need to settle down to the hard and long task of attacking a consequential problem with no easy solutions.—BERNARD BERELSON, *Population Council*, 245 Park Avenue, New York 10017

This editorial is adapted from a paper presented at a Conference on Technological Change and Population Growth held at the California Institute of Technology.