

Approved For Release 2005/01/10 : CIA-RDP86B00985R000200100008-2

Population growth needs "far more attention"

The following extracts are taken from a speech delivered by Robert S. McNamara, President of the World Bank, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts, U.S.A., on April 28, 1977.

Short of thermonuclear war itself, population growth is the gravest issue the world faces over the decades immediately ahead.

Indeed, in many ways rampant population growth is an even more dangerous and subtle threat to the world than thermonuclear war, for it is intrinsically less subject to rational safeguards, and less amenable to organized control.

The population growth of the planet is not in the exclusive control of a few governments, but rather in the hands of literally hundreds of millions of individual parents who will ultimately determine the outcome.

That is what makes the population threat—even more than the nuclear threat—diffuse and intractable. And that is why it must be faced—like the nuclear threat—for what it inevitably is: both a central determinant of mankind's future, and one requiring far more attention of the world community than it is presently receiving.

Last year the world's total population passed the four billion mark. On the face of it, the event was not very dramatic. It marked, of course, the largest number of human beings ever to have been alive simultaneously on the planet—and thus was a record of sorts. But that particular record is broken every year. And will continue to be broken every year long beyond the life span of anyone alive today.

Barring a holocaust brought on by man or nature, the world's population tonight—as we sit here—is the smallest it will ever be again.

How did it reach a population of four billion?

For the first 99 per cent of man's existence, surprisingly slowly. For the last 1 per cent of his history, in a great rush.

It took mankind more than a million years to reach a population of 1 billion. But the second billion required only 120 years; the third billion 32 years; and the fourth billion 15 years. If one postulates that the human race began with a single pair of parents, the population has had to double only 31 times to reach its present huge total.



Mr. McNamara and senior Bank staff visiting a family planning center in Korea.



At the current global growth rate of about 2 per cent, the world's population will add a fifth billion in about 11 years.

But these global totals, of course, obscure wide demographic differences between the developed and developing countries. . . .

From 1750 to 1850 the developed countries grew annually by 1.5 million people and the developing countries by 3 million; from 1850 to 1950, by 5 million and 7 million, respectively; and from 1950 to 1975, by 11 million and 48 million.

It now appears that a significant decline in fertility may have at last begun in the

The ultimate size of stationary population¹
in selected developing countries
(In millions)

Country	Pop. 1975	Ultimate stationary population		Percentage increase caused by two decades of delay
		NRR ² of 1.0 achieved in Yr. 2000	NRR of 1.0 achieved in Yr. 2020	
India	620	1,400	2,000	43
Brazil	110	275	390	42
Bangladesh	76	245	400	63
Nigeria	65	200	320	60
Mexico	62	175	270	54

Source: Tomas Freika, *The Future of Population Growth: Alternative Paths to Equilibrium*, Population Council, New York, 1973.

¹The stationary population level will be reached about 70 years after the date on which a NRR of 1.0 is realized.

²Net reproduction rate: the number of daughters a woman would have, under prevailing fertility and mortality patterns, who would survive to the mean age of childbearing.

developing countries. The data are not yet fully conclusive, but the indications are that the crude birth rates have fallen over the past two decades by an average of about 6 points, or nearly 13 per cent (the crude birth rate is the number of live births a year, for every 1,000 of population).

By major region, the decline has been 6.5 points in Asia; 5.4 points in Latin America; and 2.3 points in Africa.

Further, the decline appears to have been general and widespread. It has occurred in 77 of the 88 countries for which estimates are available.

If these indications are confirmed by the censuses scheduled for 1980, then what we are seeing here is something of historic importance. It would mean that the period of rapid acceleration in the rate of growth of the world's population has finally reached its peak and is now definitely moving downward toward stabilization.

But, as welcome as this is, the fact remains that the current rate of decline in fertility in the developing countries is too slow to avoid their ultimately arriving at stationary populations far in excess of acceptable levels. (A stationary population is one that for a long time has had a constant replacement-level fertility, and therefore also has a growth rate equal to zero and a constant age composition.)

Unless governments, through appropriate policy action, can accelerate the reduction in fertility, the global population may not stabilize below 11 billion. That would be a world none of us would want to live in.

But governments can take action, and can accelerate the process, given the resolve and determination to do so.

The critical point is this: for every decade of delay in achieving a net reproduction rate of 1.0—replacement-level fertility—the ultimate steady-state world population will be approximately 15 per cent greater (see table).

Governments, then, must avoid the severe penalties of procrastination, and try to hasten the process forward.

But how?

The causes and determinants of fertility reduction are extremely complex, but it appears likely that there are a number of key linkages between that reduction and certain specific elements of socio-economic development.

The factors that appear to be the most important are health, education, broadly distributed economic growth, urbanization, and the enhanced status of women.

These factors are at work in the developing world today, but their progress is too slow to be fully effective.

Without additional intervention on the part of governments, the current population in the developing world is going to continue to grow at rates very substantially in excess of those that would permit far more economic and social progress.

There are two broad categories of interventions that governments must undertake: those designed to encourage couples to desire smaller families; and those designed to provide parents with the means to implement that desire.

The first set of interventions sets out to alter the social and economic environment

And expand present levels of research seeking better techniques and services.

Both categories of interventions are necessary.

Recent studies confirm that the effect of family planning programs is greatest when they are joined to efforts designed to promote related social goals.

We know that eventually the world's population will have to stop growing. That is certain.

What is uncertain is how. And when. And what level. And with what result.

"We can avoid a world of 11 billion and all the misery that such an impoverished and crowded planet would imply . . . if we will but act."

that tends to promote fertility, and by altering it to create a demand among parents for a new and smaller family norm.

And the second set of interventions supplies the requisite means that will make that new norm attainable.

To create the demand for a change in family norm, governments should try to

Reduce current infant and child mortality rates sharply.

Expand basic education and substantially increase the proportion of girls in school.

Increase the productivity of small-holders in the rural areas, and expand earning opportunities in the cities for low-income groups.

Put greater stress on more equitable distribution of income and services in the drive for greater economic growth.

And, above all else, raise the status of women socially, economically, and politically.

To satisfy the demand for a change in family norms, governments and the international community should

Provide a broad choice of the present contraceptive techniques and services to parents.

Improve the delivery systems by which parents can get the services they wish.

We who are alive today can determine the answers to those questions. By our action—or inaction—we will shape the world for all generations to come.

We can avoid a world of 11 billion and all the misery that such an impoverished and crowded planet would imply. But we cannot avoid it by continuing into the next quarter century the ineffective approach to the problem of population that has characterized the past twenty-five years.

Man is still young in cosmic terms.

He has been on earth for a million years or so. And our modern ancestor, *Homo sapiens*, for a hundred thousand years.

But the universe of which he is a part is some twenty billion years old.

And if we represent the history of the universe by a line a mile long, then modern man has appeared on that line for only a fraction of an inch.

In that time perspective, he is recent and tentative, and perhaps even experimental. He makes mistakes. And, yet, if he is truly *sapiens*—thinking and wise—then surely there is promise for him.

Problems, yes. But very great promise—if we will but act.

A copy of the entire text of this speech may be obtained from the Publications Unit, World Bank, Washington, D.C., 20433, U.S.A.



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