

The South answers back

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A recent UNFPA report on world population is full of errors, strongly biased and deceptive. The time has come to close down the agency and start again.

IN the context of a very bleak future, a recent report¹ by the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA) talks of "the impending food crisis in many developing countries", concluding that "developing countries as a whole have suffered a serious decline in food self-sufficiency. Their cereal imports in 1969–71 were only 20 million tonnes. By 1983–85 they had risen to 69 million tonnes and are projected to a total 112 million tonnes by the end of the century." Yet the statistical tables in the same report show that in only three of the developing countries (those with a *per capita* income below US\$3,000) is there a decrease in *per capita* food production of 5% or more in 1986–88, relative to 1979–81.

These countries (Botswana, Nicaragua and Guyana) represent 0.14% of the world population. On the other hand, if one looks at food production in the 91 more-populated developing countries, containing 3,963.7 million people (97% of the developing countries' population), weighted *per capita* food production rose in the same period (1986–88 versus 1979–81) by 27.2%. By any standard, this is an excellent achievement, certainly no "food crisis". This is also in line with the long trend in world food production², as well as with the food glut of industrialized countries. Future prospects, such as the modernization of Soviet agriculture and the increasing application of biotechnology to agriculture, also look promising.

Education

According to UNFPA, "the low income countries, excluding India and China, have seen growth in primary school enrolments fall from an average annual rate of 5.6 per cent in 1975–1980 to 2.7 per cent in 1980–1987. According to UNESCO estimates, in 1985 approximately 105 million children 6–11 years old were not in school, and of those over 70 per cent were in the least developed nations. If current trends continue, by the year 2000, the number of out of school children will almost double to

approximately 200 million". But UNESCO's own figures³ show that primary-school gross enrolment ratios have increased in developing countries from 75.9 in 1960 to 99.8 in 1990. Regarding the rate of *increase* in enrolment, in 1975–60 it was 3.2%, and in 1980–88 1.7%. This decrease in rate is of course what happens when enrolment approaches saturation (a ratio of 100), as is seen in developed countries, where the 'increase' in 1975–80 was –0.2%, and in 1980–88, 0.2%. In developing countries, the rate of increase has been even higher in the second and third (higher) education levels (5.24 and 7.63% mean annual rate, respectively, comparing 1988 to 1975).

UNFPA's report states: "The cost of providing education and health care from infancy to adulthood for a child in a developing country is much lower than in an industrialized country, but is still significant: about \$7,000 in India. By that measure, averting 106 million births since 1979, as India's official calculations show, represents a saving of \$742 billion. The uncounted costs — to the environment, to development prospects generally — are much higher". This looks like a promising procedure for increasing wealth in developing countries. But the figures are incorrect. According to UNESCO³, the annual expense in education per student in India was US\$55.7 in 1987 (latest available figure), whereas in health care, according to United Nations⁴ (also in 1987) the combined government and private expenditure was of \$8.65 *per capita*. Using the crude approach of multiplying the cost of health expense by 20 years, and that of education by 14, one reaches a figure of only \$952.80 for the combined expense. The proper way to obtain this figure is to calculate the net present value, which gives about \$232 for education and \$86 for health (using an interest rate of 10% a year), or \$318 combined.

The assumption made by UNFPA for saying that "averting" a child's birth represents a saving of \$7000 only in education and health care, not to mention the improvement in development prospects, is that the child will be economically unproductive during his life. This can hardly be expected in a country whose gross domestic product has increased⁴ at an annual rate of 5.2% in 1980–88, and its population at 2.1%

annually^{1,3}. Using conservative estimates, each Indian male inhabitant makes a net economic contribution of about \$700 during his lifetime. Thus, by averting those births, instead of saving the sum calculated by UNFPA, India will suffer a net loss of \$74.2 billion.

Population densities

Perhaps the most fundamental demographic fact is population density, without which population growth rates (PGRs) are virtually meaningless. UNFPA's report wholly ignores the density factor, while stressing growth rates. This, in my opinion, leads to a distorted impression of developing countries as overcrowded and suffering from a population 'explosion'. Actually, the population density (inhabitants per km² of agricultural land) is: Africa, 80 (PGR 3%); Latin America, 58.2 (1.9%); Asia, 422.9 (1.8%); Europe, 213 (0.2%); North America, 55 (0.7%); Oceania, 15 (1.4%); Soviet Union, 69 (0.7%). This shows that virtually all the world's 'South' has a low density, indicating that there is no common population pattern for developing countries.

The world has other demographic problems, which UNFPA largely ignores. A common belief, at least outside Britain, is that life there is highly civilized, even graceful. The public image of China is quite different. But the population density of China, if also measured per km² of agricultural land, is 273, while that of the United Kingdom is 315. Mean densities, measured in relation to land surface, are China 115, and United Kingdom 234. This certainly indicates no more grounds for imposing the cruel policy of one child per family in China than in Britain. Such a policy, because of the preference for males, may lead in very short time to a demographic catastrophe.

The facts presented here demonstrate, in my opinion, that UNFPA's report is strongly biased and deceptive, as well as technically incompetent and substandard. As population issues in many senses are of great importance, and UNFPA seems incapable of analysing them, I suggest that the agency should be shut down and the responsibility for the task reassigned elsewhere. □

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1. UNFPA *State of World Population 1991* (UNFPA, New York, 1991).

2. World Bank *World Development Report 1990* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1990).

3. UNESCO *Statistical Yearbook 1990* (UNESCO, Paris, 1990).

4. United Nations *National Accounts Statistics: Main Aggregates and Detailed Tables 1988 Part 1* (United Nations, New York, 1990).