This is a population conference, and therefore we must talk about population and not about reforming the world!” That sentiment was expressed repeatedly in one form or another at Bucharest last August during the United Nations World Population Conference. It was a cry of anger, an expression of dismay, an admission of defeat. It was also, unfortunately, an acknowledgment that many people failed to recognize the very changed character of discussions and decisions about “population.”

The U.N. Conference was the result of over two years of careful planning. As the first political meeting to address the issue of population at the international level, the Conference had generated considerable attention in governmental, nongovernmental, and academic circles. More than four thousand persons came to Bucharest as members of official delegations, as observers, as delegates to the non-governmental Population Tribune held simultaneously with the Conference, and as journalists. All came to talk about “population.” It was soon evident that the term was not univocal; that people meant very different things when they used the term.

Central to the proceedings in Bucharest, and therefore a focus for the debate over the meaning of “population,” was the proposed World Population Plan of Action (WPPA) to meet the challenge of birth rates, morbidity and mortality rates, immigration patterns, urbanization, etc. At the close of the two-week Conference a plan was adopted by consensus of the 136 nations present, with only the Holy See subsequently withdrawing its approval. Much of the story of what occurred at Bucharest—and of why discussions about “population” necessarily lead to discussions about “reform of the world”—can be told in tracing what happened with the World Population Plan of Action.

During the debates in Bucharest it became increasingly clear that a fundamental shift was taking place, in both theoretical and practical terms, on major issues considered in the draft WPPA. This shift was taking place because of consistent and well-orchestrated efforts of a large number of developing countries. And it was occurring despite the best counterefforts of the United States and a few nations allied with it.

The shift was substantive, not simply rhetorical. The document initially submitted in draft form to the Conference by the United Nations Secretariat—the product of many laborious months of writing by the U.N. Population Commission, contributions from various demographic experts, and review by numerous regional meetings—was changed in at least two very significant ways. First, the bloc of developing countries insisted that the population variables (particularly growth rates) and the programs relating

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ecological destruction. On the other hand, "Malthusian" or neo-Malthusian became a proponent of the Malthusian position. As a matter of fact, "Malthusian" or "neo-Malthusian" became absorbed by population increases. Hence population growth rates is through socioeconomic and political changes which provide most people with more of a share in society, some reason to look forward to the future, and therefore some reason to plan both the society and their families. Accordingly, the transformation of society comes first, and the reduction and stabilization of population growth follows.

The Malthusian argument, on the other hand, sees population growth as the major cause of such problems as famine, disease, resource depletion, and ecological destruction. On this basis socioeconomic changes are too slow to bring the necessary demographic changes, and improvements are simply absorbed by population increases. Hence population control—i.e., birth control—must come first and development can then follow.

Although the specters of Marx and Malthus walked the halls of the meetings in Bucharest, it became a matter of debate who fell in behind either of these ghostly leaders. No one, though, admitted to being a proponent of the Malthusian position. As a matter of fact, "Malthusian" or "neo-Malthusian" became scornful epithets to be hurled back and forth, and readily denied, in moments of heated debate. Marxians there were, at least in rhetorical terms. China, for example, argued that the great problems of poverty in the world existed not because of overpopulation but because of "imperialism, colonialism, and hegemonism," the aggression practiced by the exploiting superpowers. And in its speech before the Conference's plenary session, Cuba said that it, unlike most Latin American countries, has seen a steady drop in its birth rate as a result of improved living standards and educational advances that followed the revolution.

In between a one-sided Marxism or Malthusian approach to population is found an approach which has recently been recognized as, empirically, the most effective. This approach gained ascendancy in Bucharest. It views the population/development issue not so much in terms of "either/or" as "both/and." Planned population stabilization can occur only when (1) family planning facilities are available, and (2) when people are motivated to have smaller families. Such motivation, however, occurs only in the context of socioeconomic development. Recent studies have shown that when strong family planning programs are combined with wide-ranging progress in development (such as has taken place in South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong), birth rates decline more markedly than they do in countries which have population programs but only very minimal development (for example, Colombia, Pakistan, and India) or in countries which have slightly better development but less available family planning (such as Chile and the Philippines). Development programs and population programs must go hand in hand.

"Development" here does not only mean raising the gross national product of a nation. It means that along with GNP increase must come better distribution, greater emphasis on the agricultural sector, labor intensive manufacturing to meet problems of unemployment, and an improvement of the social infrastructures such as schools, housing, medical care (especially maternal and child health care), etc. The roles and status of women are also critical. Improvements in all of these elements of development have a demonstrable impact upon the population growth rate.

The imperative need to integrate population policy and development policy was forcefully stated by many at the Bucharest Conference. For example, Dr. Karan Singh, Minister of Health and Family Planning for India and head of the Indian delegation, in commenting on the twenty-year experience of India's efforts to reduce fertility, said that while better clinical approaches to family planning services are necessary, "we are quite clear that fertility levels can be effectively lowered only if family planning..."
becomes an integral part of a broader strategy to deal with the problems of poverty and underdevelopment." So important is this integration, Singh emphasized, that "it has truly been said that the best contraceptive is development."

This view regarding the close relation of population and development had indeed been mentioned in the original draft of the WPPA, which spoke of the need to attend to the "socio-economic determinants of desired family size." What had not been included—but what became a key point in the debate over the shift of the Plan—was any account of how the necessary socioeconomic development was to be promoted. Patterns of development in developing countries which desire to lower their fertility levels are, of course, integrally tied to global patterns of political and economic relationships.

The need to acknowledge the structures of international order was emphasized not only by Singh and other speakers from developing countries, but also by John D. Rockefeller, 3d. In a widely noted speech at the Population Tribune, Rockefeller called for a "deep and probing reappraisal of all that has been done in the population field," and said that integration of population and development would mean planning which took a more active account of the interdependence of nations.

These relationships of interdependence have been given increasing attention in recent years, most particularly in the Sixth Special Session of the United Nations which met in New York last April. The result of this Special Assembly, a Declaration on the New International Economic Order and a Programme of Action, has become for the developing nations a major document to be considered in every discussion of development. The thrust of the New International Economic Order is basically a call for "new rules of the game." The "old rules" are simply not fair for the majorities of the countries of the world, in terms of trade, monetary relations, investment patterns, control of resources, etc. Reference to the New International Economic Order was constant in Bucharest.

The socioeconomic emphasis which dominated in the population discussions was inserted in many different parts of the Plan, most notably in the opening chapter and in the chapter which contained recommendations for action. Chapter One called the New International Economic Order "the most recent overall framework for international cooperation." Moreover, the Plan states that "the basis for an effective solution of population problems is, above all, socio-economic transformation. A population policy may have a certain success if it constitutes an integral part of socio-economic development. . . ." Then, in Chapter Three, in a section newly written during the debates, the Plan recognizes that "economic and social development is a central factor in the solution of population problems" and emphasizes that implementation of the New International Economic Order should "lead to a reduction in the widening gap in levels of living between developed and developing countries and would be conducive to a reduction in population growth rates, particularly in countries where such rates are high."

The United States, which along with several other industrialized nations had objected to the New International Economic Order during the Sixth Special Session, now found itself voting against any mention of it in Bucharest. Thus the U.S. delegation, headed by H.E.W. Secretary Caspar Weinberger, was alone in voting against the wording in Chapter One, and was allied only with Turkey and the Republic of Korea in voting against the entire section added in Chapter Three.

A second, related, shift which took place in the draft of the World Population Plan of Action was the significant modification of the two paragraphs which dealt with "targets." The explicit attention in the WPPA draft to quantitative goals, the spelling out of dates and numbers, stirred considerable debate and reaction. Again, this was something which might have been expected. The United States, a key influence in the formulation of the draft WPPA, was strongly supportive of targets as an important part of population policy.

The first major target noted in the draft called upon all countries to "make available, to all persons who so desire, if possible by the end of the second United Nations Development decade, but not later than by 1985, the necessary information and education about family planning and the means to practice family planning effectively and in accordance with their cultural values." In his address to the plenary session of the Conference, Secretary Weinberger had stated that "this recommendation is the foundation of the Plan."

The second target urged: "Countries which have a very high birth rate may consider taking action compatible with the principles and objectives of this Plan to reduce these rates by about 5 to 10 per 1,000 (before 1985." The U.S. delegation had in fact urged more exacting targets for both developed and developing nations, and had tied its urging to the critical world food situation.

Vocal reaction against the setting of quantitative targets came from a number of Third World countries, including Argentina, Brazil, Tanzania, India, Kenya, Senegal, and Cuba. The Soviet Union, China, and the Holy See also objected—each for its own particular reasons. It is important to try to sort out the reasons for these objections, in order to under-
stand the shift which the rejection of targets implied. Objections to the 1985 goal providing information and means seemed to be twofold: (1) It appeared to be a violation of national sovereignty, a threat of outside pressure; and (2) it was seen as implying an expenditure of money and effort on this one aspect of the population problem which was disproportionate to the emphasis given to other aspects (for example, maternal and child health care, status of women).

The references to specific goals for reduction of numbers by 1985 was objected to as being (1) unrealistic, given the possible responses which could be made to situations existing in many parts of the world; (2) too sweepingly uniform for all nations, especially in widely disparate situations; and (3) threatening to national sovereignty. There might also have been in the back of the minds of many from the developing countries the memory of the fate which had befallen targets previously set for the responsibilities of rich nations toward poor nations. For example, the preferential trade and tariff targets set by UNCTAD agreements have hardly been approached by most of the nations—least of all by the United States—which now were pushing for population targets.

The outcome of the debates over the targets was two compromise paragraphs. The new wording of the paragraph on provision of means simply invited nations to “Encourage appropriate education concerning responsible parenthood and make available to persons who so desire advice and means to achieve it.” Several Asian nations, including Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia—but notably not including India—worked to win approval for a paragraph about reduction goals which said that “. . . countries which consider their birth rates detrimental to their national purposes are invited to consider setting quantitative goals and implementing policies that may lead to the attainment of such goals by 1985. Nothing herein should interfere with the sovereignty of any government to adopt or not adopt such quantitative goals.” In the votes relating to these paragraphs, the United States had each time voted to keep stronger language about targets.

What is the significance of this shift away from quantitative goals in the finished product of the World Population Plan of Action? The shift should not be dramatized. There probably was a degree of spite in the reaction of many of the opponents in the developing countries who sensed the importance—indeed, an unduly exaggerated importance—which the United States delegation placed on the target paragraphs. On the other hand, the shift was significantly related to the other major change noted earlier, the emphasis on the socioeconomic framework. Within such a framework, an emphasis only on quantitative targets for demographic variables seems misplaced. The developing countries could very well ask why the developed countries had not pushed for targets relating to the implementation of those elements of the New International Economic Order which would have particular bearing on the “socio-economic determinants of desired family size,” or why the industrialized nations had not been willing to discuss targets for stabilization of rates of resource consumption, which have a definite bearing upon the ecological and distributive aspects of world development.

Moreover, in their reaction to target-setting, many of the developing nations showed an understandable concern for national sovereignty. Though global efforts to meet global problems will necessarily mean less place for nationalism in the future, the emphasis on sovereignty expressed by new, small, and poor nations is considerably different from that expressed by the older and richer Great Powers. This difference of status—in a sense, a “double standard”—must be recognized in a world in transition.

Is the World Population Plan of Action better or worse for what happened in Bucharest? Some critics have said that the increased emphasis given socioeconomic realities has weakened the WPPA as an instrument to meet the population challenges facing us in the immediate future. An alternative view is that the Plan is substantially strengthened precisely because of this shift. Population discussions must now take into account not only demographic variables and the response of family planning, but also the global context within which these facts and programs function. A repeated exhortation to “stick to the point” in talking about population (“This is a population conference, and we must talk about population and not about reforming the world!”) is usually an invitation to ignore this global context. Those who made this exhortation, who extended this invitation, were defeated in Bucharest.

Explicit attention to the relationship of development to population means taking seriously the New International Economic Order. And concern for the political character of population programs means less fixation with quantitative targets. By reflecting this shift in emphasis, the World Population Plan of Action which emerged from Bucharest offers real hope for effectively meeting the population challenge.