

XXVI International Population Conference

Marrakech, Morocco

Opening Ceremony, 27 September 2009

Address by John Cleland, IUSSP President.

Monsieur Alami, distinguished representatives on the rostrum, friends and colleagues from the four corners of the globe, welcome to the historic city of Marrakech and to the first IUSSP General Conference to be held on the African continent. With over 2300 participants this will be the largest meeting that the IUSSP has ever held. At a time of huge financial constraints it is a remarkable achievement. We all owe a huge debt of gratitude to our Moroccan hosts and specifically to His majesty King Mohammed VI for his high patronage of the Conference and his thoughtful message and to the National Organising Committee headed by Monsieur Alami. We owe an equal debt to Mary Ellen Zuppan, the executive director of IUSSP and her team in Paris.

Over the next five days, an intellectual feast is laid out for us, with over 200 scientific sessions, numerous side meetings and plenaries. Naturally, the traditional core of population sciences—reproduction, health and mortality and migration—is well represented on the agenda. But we also have themes on the environment, children, gender, religion and culture, vulnerability and human rights, to name but a few. I am continually amazed at the breadth of interests of IUSSP members. And I welcome it because we have interesting and relevant perspectives on most of the issues and choices that face the world today.

The last IUSSP General Conference was held in Tours, France in 2005. Of course, the demography of the planet has not changed radically since then. But I do discern a greatly heightened awareness of two issues, both of which have implications for population scientists.

The first is heightened awareness of the interconnectedness of regions and nations. Events in one region or nation increasingly affect events in other regions and nations. This was brought home forcibly by the financial crisis in the United States and Europe, which harmed not only Americans and Europeans but also factory workers in China, farmers in Africa and those seeking a better life by working abroad.

The second change I discern since Tours is a growing realisation, perhaps more strongly felt in Europe than elsewhere, that the combination of population increase and growing affluence could be the pathway to ecological disaster. The main blame for dangerously high carbon dioxide emissions and the promotion of unsustainable consumption is rightly laid at the door of rich countries and it is these countries that have to change most quickly and radically. But the problem is rapidly becoming universal. Amidst much talk about the number of people living in desperate poverty on \$1 per day or less, it is sometimes forgotten that there has been a huge rise in the so called middle classes, those living on \$10 to \$100 per day, and that most of this increase has been in Asia and Latin America. It has been estimated that, in the past 10 years, the fraction of world population with middle class incomes and, no doubt, material aspirations to match has risen from 40% to 60%. The escape from poverty of such large numbers of families is to be applauded but caution about how that affluence is expressed is also needed.

In view of the fact that nations are increasingly connected and increasingly face common problems, such as climate change, it is paradoxical that the world is more demographically diverse than perhaps at any other point in time. National fertility ranges from 1.2 to well over 6 births per woman and life expectancy from about 40 to 80 years. Many industrialised countries have fertility

well below replacement level and face the prospect of long term decline in population size combined with population ageing. At the other extreme are many poor countries where fertility remains high and whose populations are set to double or even triple in size between now and mid-century. In between are a large group of countries—mainly in Asia, Latin America and North Africa—where fertility has declined appreciably but where population growth, particularly in the working and reproductive ages, continues.

Each of these three demographic scenarios presents opportunities and problems.

For the low fertility countries, two priorities are to make parenthood and employment more compatible, and to adopt international migration policies that benefit both sending and receiving countries. The most obvious adaptation to inevitable population ageing in low fertility settings is to increase retirement ages from today's 60 or 65 years to 70. This seems straightforward but it is politically unpopular and it raises awkward considerations of equity. For instance should a manual worker who enters the labour force at the age of 18 be treated the same as his professional counterpart who does not start paid employment until the age of 25. Perhaps eligibility for state pensions should be based on years of work rather than chronological age.

Morocco is a good example of the middle group of countries, where demographic transition is well advanced. The birth rate has fallen in past decades and is expected to fall further to replacement level. As a result, the population aged less than 15 is set to fall by about three-quarters of a million in the next 25 years. But as a legacy of high birth rates in the past, the adult population will increase by nearly 6 million over the same time period.—Thus a key priority in countries such as Morocco is to stimulate employment so that the potential 'demographic dividend' of a favourable ratio of workers to young dependents can be realised. A further priority is to match the educational system to the job market and a third priority might be to address the large fertility differences between rich and poor, educated and uneducated that serve to entrench income inequalities. Research by demographers has clearly shown that children from large families are less well nourished and less well educated than their counterparts—in other words their human capital is impaired. Prospective studies have also revealed that households with large numbers of children are more likely to fall below the poverty line and less likely to subsequently escape from poverty than other households.

The third group of countries are those where fertility levels and rates of population increase remain high. Of the 76 poorest nations (with a population size of 5 million or more), about half have population growth rates of 2% per year or more, fertility rates typically of about 5 births per woman and age structures in which 40-50% of population is under the age of 15. Most of these countries are in sub-Saharan Africa.

The links between population growth and economic development have been hotly debated for decades without any consensus. In the last 10 years, however, I detect a greater agreement among economists that high fertility and high dependency ratios do act as a serious constraint on per capita income growth. Perhaps an even greater concern is the effect of continued rapid population growth on the elimination of hunger. For decades population growth in sub-Saharan Africa has outstripped increases in food production. In the year 2000 Africa was importing \$20 billion worth of food per year, equivalent to the total of official overseas aid at that time. Continued population growth, increasing water scarcity and the uncertainties of climate change represent a huge challenge to the achievement of food security. There needs to be much greater investment in African agriculture together with more determined policies to reduce population growth.

So friends and colleagues these are but a few of the important topics that we will be discussing over the next 5 days. Population issues are central to an understanding of the world's problems and to overcoming them. I wish you all a stimulating and rewarding experience.