

Distr.
RESTRICTED

LC/DEM/R.111
Serie A, N° 262
March 1992

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

CELADE
Latin American Demographic Centre

POPULATION POLICY:
A PERSPECTIVE FROM LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

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POPULATION POLICY: A PERSPECTIVE FROM LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

Abstract

Population policies are reviewed from the point of view of their evolution in the region, and the current strategies of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) which involve the promotion of productive transformations with equity. The need to overcome unjustified ideological debates, to favor individual rights regarding demographic behaviour as a means of achieving equity, the specification of goals regarding the changes in the population size and distribution and the appropriate institutional means to achieve them, are some of the major themes discussed here.

The governmental views regarding *mortality* and health tend to converge around the objective of improving health conditions and survival, although the priorities vary according to the mortality level, the coverage of health services, and the population age composition. Most countries in the region have still a long way to go towards reducing socio-economic differentials in health risks and thus improve equity from this standpoint.

The positions regarding policies related to *fertility* vary more widely, from many governments that consider their current fertility and *population growth* rates as being too high (although most do not have explicit policies to reduce them), to a smaller number that consider that a higher population growth, or at least a larger population size would be beneficial from the point of view of development. It is suggested that government policy would be strengthened by evaluations of the economic consequences of alternative population trends, in regard to the provision of basic social services (e.g., education, health, social security) as well as on the macroeconomy, and would provide a firmer basis for the formulation of specific actions. But even when no clear diagnostic in these matters is available, some actions in the population field appear to be sufficiently justified from the standpoint of ensuring individual rights related to demographic behaviour: the right to regulate fertility according to the couples desires (which involves access to both adequate information and to specific control methods), to be protected against high mortality risks (through access to basic health care), and to move freely and establish residence where deemed convenient.

Policy attention then turns to the best means and institutional structure to ensure the exertion of these rights, and to the adaptations of other public policies needed to accommodate the demographic changes anticipated to occur as a consequence. That the answer to these latter set of questions is not unique is confirmed and illustrated by a brief description of different paths that selected countries of the region (i.e., Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica and Mexico) have adopted as a means of extending contraceptive use. The successful approaches vary in regard to the degree of direct government intervention and institutionalization of policy, the role of private agencies, the relative emphases on decentralized community-level distribution of contraceptives, on information and education, and the reliance on mass media advertising.

The country experiences with policies related to the *spatial distribution* of the population suggest that only partial successes have been obtained in lessening the population concentration trends, but policy options involving the promotion and reorientation of migration can be conceived to be compatible with the right to move and settle freely, and with governmentatl deconcentration efforts.

I. Introduction

Historically, the discussion about the criteria to design and apply population policies in Latin American and the Caribbean was marked by a strong ideological confrontation, particularly on the subject of population growth and fertility control. To some extent this was the result of the fact that scientific knowledge had been unable to establish with certainty the convenience of modifying population growth in order to assist development efforts. Although this general question is still open to debate, there have been recent advances in the evaluation of the repercussion of demographic changes on the economy and in the systematization of the information collected in the Population Policies Data Bank of the United Nations Population Division¹, which also provides data on the governmental positions regarding population problems, policies and the institutions in charge of their execution and supervision.

The emphasis in the present document will be on *equity* taking into account different social groups, as well as a ECLAC's current strategies which involve *productive transformations* based on sustained competitiveness. These general ideas together with the principles of *decentralized* action, constitute the basic framework used to establish the criteria for a population policy encompassing the fundamental demographic phenomena: mortality, fertility and spatial distribution.

In connection with mortality and morbidity, the positions of the governments of the region ratify the efforts made in the respective countries to improve health conditions. The decrease in infant and maternal mortality, the improvement in the population's nutrition and health, and a longer expectation of life at birth, are some of the accomplishments that are being achieved in the region. These improvements, however, have not been uniform in time nor among countries, and a disacceleration has been detected in many of them during the crisis of the 80's. There is still a long way to go in the matter of equity within the countries,

¹ Although this knowledge is still relatively insufficient, governments today have definite positions on central aspects of economic and social development that should serve as parameters for the criteria to be taken into account in the design and application of a population policy.

since the lower income groups show substantially higher mortality rates, more under-nutrition, more illnesses and a shorter life span. The recent changes in the epidemiological profiles associated with the improvements in health care and the aging of the population lead to a growing concern for the health of adults and the elderly, in terms of the increasing presence of chronic and degenerative illness and deaths due to accidents and violence.

However, differential population growth and spatial distribution are the aspects that receive the greatest attention from the governments of the region with respect to equity, decentralization and productive transformation. The success of policies in these areas will require, in the first place, to overcome the ideological controversy that has been an obstacle to political action in the sociodemographic area in varying degrees. Secondly, it will require proposing instruments and means of action to execute population policies that are consistent with development efforts and ensure fundamental human rights for all social groups. The presumed opposition between the requirements of the productive system and the rights and needs of individuals, which was the basis of that controversy in the matter of sociodemographic policies, seems now hardly justified. The empirical information provided by recent demographic surveys in several countries of the region, show that the mean number of children per woman is higher than that which women, on average, consider their "ideal" number. If couples were capable of accomplishing their aspirations for smaller families, this would be compatible with the position of many governments of the region, which do not desire a greater growth of their populations.

II. Orientations for policies related to population growth

Perceptions and Aspirations

In trying to establish human reproduction as a fundamental right of couples, that should be exercised freely and in an informed way, the desire of these couples regarding the number of children they want to have needs to be detected. Once this has been clarified, some orientations for policy will be proposed here to allow these aspirations to be made

effective, noting that their demographic behaviour at the individual level can often be coherent with the productive system's needs and with the perception that governments have of the benefits or problems that a given rate of population growth may bring to society as a whole.

The data from the national reports of the Demographic and Health Surveys carried out during the 80's, show that an important proportion of women's births in the countries of the region was unwanted. For example, in the cases of Bolivia and Peru, one of every three births appear as unwanted at the time of the survey. Furthermore, the lower socio-economic groups (operationalized as those with a lower educational level) and the residents in rural areas are those that in general show higher proportions of unwanted fertility. These data show that the governments have pending tasks not only with respect to ensuring the rights of all couples to have the number of children they want, but also of remedying social inequality expressed in differential possibilities by social groups to exert their demographic rights. In a longer term perspective, it should also be taken into account that desired fertility tends to decrease to the extent that progress is made in the socio-economic and cultural level of the countries, which in turn will increase the demand for family planning services.

Two conclusions can be drawn so far for the governments of the region. The first is that in order to effectively ensure that couples have their desired number of children, they should be offered: 1) information regarding fertility control and the consequences of having a given number of children; 2) access to effective contraceptive methods; and 3) a horizon that allows them to visualize that if they make adequate efforts they can aspire to improve their well-being. This should contemplate real possibilities of entering the (formal) labour market, both for men and women; as well as the improvement of the labour capacity of parents and their children by means of adequate nutrition, health and education. Naturally, the third type of actions correspond to general development efforts rather than to population policy *per se*, but it is stressed here since it conditions the success of the above mentioned actions. The second conclusion refers to the forecasts that every government has

to make regarding the population size and composition it will have in the near future, which depends sensibly on the expected changes in the number of children of the families. In many countries, the rate of population growth is decreasing and it will continue do so to the extent that governments are able to provide their citizens with the three-fold type of support mentioned above.²

The next step is to inquire how consistent is the demographic behaviour desired by individual couples with the governmental views regarding population growth. According to the reports of the Population Policies Data Bank of the U.N. Population Division, of the 31 countries of the region that answered the survey, thirteen consider their population growth to be too high, while 15 consider it acceptable. Two other countries (Bolivia and Paraguay) consider that a larger population would be beneficial for the country, but have not established policies to increase it. Uruguay is the only country clearly unsatisfied with the low population growth, and that has established its purpose to increase it.

Beyond these government declarations, it can be asked whether there are some objective factors at the macro-societal level that can be used to evaluate the convenience of reducing demographic growth and thier consistency with individual aspirations regarding the desired family size. Among the reasons presented in the past in favour of greater population volumes, mention was made of an internal market large enough to sustain the production of goods and services at an efficient scale. This appears to be less relevant today in view of the prospects for economic integration and the creation of common markets among countries of the region. An argument that is now gradually gaining more importance is the one related to the population aging, primarily a result of reduced fertility, given the burden that a high proportion of retired persons represents for the social system in general

² In turn, consequences should be foreseen regarding the lagged growth of the different age groups: what the school population will be in 5 to 10 years time, what the working age population will be in 20 to 40 years from now, etc. This is so because actions in the matter of population today will only have repercussions in several decades to come. Likewise, in the short run, the size and evolution of the groups of more advanced age is determined by the *past* demographic behaviour. Population policies are therefore a clear example of the need for anticipation, since the past demographic evolution imposes immediate requirements, while present actions have repercussions after extended periods of time.

and the provision of social security in particular. At the present time, most of the countries of the region are in a situation in which moderate reductions of fertility would yield lower global economic dependency. Nevertheless, countries with an aged population structure, as Uruguay, Cuba and Argentina, and others with relatively low fertility and mortality will share these types of concern in a near future.

Actions and Means

Given the importance assigned to fertility regulation as a right that society as a whole should help to implement, an action that the governments should carry out regardless of their position on global population growth, is to ensure that all citizens have an access to information and effective contraceptive methods in order to satisfy their aspirations regarding number of children, with special attention to the poorer groups and the rural population, since the available data show that these groups have lesser possibilities of exerting this right. Other general actions will include the formulation of policies favouring a greater equality of women with respect to men both in their labour participation and their insertion in public life in general. Mother and child health programmes whose objective is to preserve the life of mother and child, and the dissemination of basic knowledge on population processes, are along the same line of action. It is expected that these types of actions lead to a decline in fertility, but they are valid no matter the government's position regarding population growth, since it should be avoided, specially when there are alternatives, that a global demographic goal be imposed at the expense of these fundamental rights.

In the case of governments that regard a larger population as beneficial (only 3 out of the 31 answering the survey) they may decide to offer economic and social incentives to increase the desired size of the families, like the existing ones in some European countries, although until now these mechanisms have not proved to be very effective. In some cases immigration (or stimulating non- emigration) policies might be convenient, especially in countries where a proportion of their population is living abroad; this alternative has the

advantage of incorporating people mostly in the active ages. The government of Paraguay is at present engaged in a policy to recover migrants living abroad, and there are some historical experiences in the region that might serve as a basis for the execution of successful actions in other countries.

In the case of governments that consider their population growth too high (13 out of the 31 countries consulted in the region), the range of actions that can be implemented is broader. To the actions already mentioned, choice of those addressed to effectively *motivate* the couples to exert their right to decide their biological reproduction can be added. This motivation will translate to actual behaviour to the extent that social policies as a whole affect the aspirations for improvement of their socio-economic condition; if the couples do not visualize these possibilities on their social horizon, it will be very difficult that they assume the costs of planning and carrying out a life project that includes, among other things, a number of children in harmony with these prospects. Since many of these social policies should be on the agenda of any government concerned with development and equity, and recognizing that these policies will affect fertility, the question arises about the actual need to design and apply explicit population policies. The answer should be affirmative for several reasons. One such action is related to the need to know and then adequately attend to the demands for contraceptive methods to ensure the achievement of the desired family size, giving particular attention to those having less access to control methods. As a follow up to the detection of the unmet demand for birth regulation means, the governments could contemplate, among other actions, a population policy referred to the dissemination of information on the possibilities to achieve a desired family size, supported by sex education and responsible parenthood programmes. The identification of more specific target groups would contribute to a greater effectiveness of the proposed actions; teenagers might be one of these groups in view of the fact that their reproductive behaviour affects their life experience from an early age, and in many countries they are a distinct group deserving specific actions, even when global fertility levels are moderately low. More generally, the poor and rural populations constitute obvious priority groups.

Specification of Objectives and Institutional Means

If the only justification for a population policy is to ensure the right to regulate births according to the couples' desires, the objectives and goals need only be formulated at the level of satisfaction of the demand for family planning services. This demand (latent or effectively expressed) can be more or less broadly understood to include in addition to the provision of contraceptives, information and sex education, but does not involve, by itself, the establishment of specific objectives regarding the level or evolution of the demographic variables.

On the other hand, if a justification is added from the point of view of its impact on possibilities for sustainable development, then an evaluation is required of the repercussions of fertility change on these possibilities. The outcome of this process may or may not include the formulation of quantitative objectives, but the technical analysis of impacts would certainly contribute to delimit the magnitude of the effects, the constraints and the efforts required as regards to policy. Two key criteria that may be considered ³ are the impact of the variations in the demographic rates on per capita income, and the one on savings and current investment, i.e., on the possibilities of future economic growth.

Regarding the first criterion, the evaluation consists in determining whether global economic dependency and therefore the per capita income of that population would be positively or adversely affected by a given reduction in fertility, and by how much. The magnitude and the direction of the impact depends on the difference between the average age of the labour force and the average age of the population: in countries where economic production is concentrated in ages older than average, the positive effect of a fertility reduction will be greater. The second element of the global evaluation refers to the positive effect that a reduction of population growth tends to generate on savings available for productive investment; the repercussions in this connection are proportional to the rate of growth of the population and to the average productivity of the economy: the countries

³ In addition to the analysis of requirements of sectoral services (e.g., education, health social security) and the corresponding public allotments.

where a high population growth is combined with technology of low capital intensity are those which would benefit the most from a fertility reduction.⁴ A complete balance of the consequences of population policies would take into account the repercussions on public programmes covering the active range of ages; for example, policies resulting in lower fertility may be justified for a number of reasons, but have side effects such as accelerating the population aging which has negative consequences on the financing of pensions systems and publicly provided health care.

In order to carry out actions regarding the design and application of a socio-demographic policy, and particularly to ensure that both the objectives and the instruments or means to be used to accomplish them are adequate and legitimate, some type of *institutional organization* is required through which the government is made responsible for these actions and ensures their effective execution. The countries that have already adopted population policies have defined different institutional organizations. These, in general, can be classified in the following three types: 1) small technical units at a high governmental level to guarantee that the demographic aspects have been included in development planning; 2) inter-ministry councils entrusted with the development, supervision and in some cases, coordination of population policies; and 3) family planning coordination agencies which are in charge of coordinating and assigning funds to family planning programmes and sometimes of running them. An overview of the different approaches to population policy within the region is given in the annex, where the concrete experiences of selected countries are discussed.

A synthesis of general orientations for policies regarding population growth could be made as follows: given the demographic behaviour of a significant proportion of couples that have already chosen a reduced number of children, given the aspirations that are already present in a large proportion of couples to obtain adequate means to reduce their fertility, and given that new couples are expected to adopt this behaviour, there is no doubt that a

⁴ Precise measurements of this type of effect can be made using well known formulae in demo-economic models.

large proportion of couples will have a reduced family size. If this is not opposed to the requirements of economic and social development, nor to the perceptions that governments have regarding population growth, all interests point to the direction of reducing the demographic growth rate in the region.

III. Orientations for Policies on Population Spatial Distribution

Governmental Views and Individual Rights

Regarding spatial distribution, there appears to be a certain disagreement between the negative perception of the governments on the population concentration in some points of the national territories and the rights of persons to move freely and establish their residence in the places they deem convenient. In effect, with the exception of some Caribbean countries, with relatively small areas and populations, the Latin American governments consider their present population distribution as "unsatisfactory", with concentration and growth of metropolitan areas being the problems most frequently mentioned. However, it is not clear if this government position is really contradictory with the rights and aspirations of the citizens of those countries.

A right can be considered as such and be actually in force, when the exercise of this right is optative. If a citizen has to leave a place because he has neither income nor the minimum services to meet his basic needs, he is actually not exerting any right; he is simply being expelled from his place of origin. For this right to be effective, as far as spatial displacements are concerned, the person must have a real option to leave or stay in his place (or region) of origin where he finds his cultural environment, his idiosyncrasy and the closest affective links that have contributed to his socialization. If the right of citizens is conceived in this manner, a possibility opens for a coincidence between their aspirations and the governments' proposals regarding the promotion of a spatial population deconcentration and the generation of a different distribution of population in the national territories. This means that if the governments are interested in modifying the distribution of their

populations, they will have to execute effective regional development plans contemplating decentralized decision-making and productive deconcentration.

Experience and Lessons

The formulation of action plans related to the distribution of population in the territory is not new in Latin America. Over the past decades a number of measures have been promoted in an attempt to attenuate the migration of rural origin and urban destination and reduce the growth of large cities and stimulate those of an intermediate size in order to attain a fuller occupation of sparsely populated interior regions. Although these actions were not always conceived with the explicit objective of modifying the population distribution patterns, they did affect them. The granting of tax incentives or differential tariff exemptions, the utilization of special administrative regulations prohibiting or authorizing the execution of certain activities in given areas, the granting of direct and indirect subsidies, and the establishment of discriminatory prices, are among the policy instruments that, by affecting the location of investments and services provided by public and private agencies, have influenced territorial differences in employment and the satisfaction of basic needs and, for the same reason, have acted as determining factors of the population spatial displacements.

After 30 or 40 year experience in regional development, urban and rural, these actions on population distribution have had a very partial success. Changes have apparently occurred in directions considered undesirable by the governments, so that most of them still mention the growing concentration of the population as one of their main problems in the population field. Several lessons can be derived from this experience, one of them being related to the need to consider in an explicit manner, the determining factors of the demographic dynamics in the national territories. This implies that before proceeding to the formulation of the objectives to be achieved, it is necessary to identify the dimensions and intervening variables in the population distribution process.

One of the first measures to be adopted by the governments aiming at altering the distribution of their populations is to evaluate the effects that both natural growth and migration have on this population. The information available in most Latin American countries indicates, for example, that the increase of the urban population is nowadays mainly due to the contribution of its natural growth, while a smaller contribution is attributable to migration of rural origin. Something similar occurs in large cities, and in these cases even the migratory component has mainly an urban origin. Therefore, it can be inferred that if the demographic concentration is to be affected, policies such as the ones mentioned in the section on population growth should be adopted. Once this is done, the road will be open to act, in stages or in parallel, with policies having an incidence on territorial movements. Also, when the rate of natural growth decreases, the role of migration as an agent of population distribution in space will increase. A second specification will consist in determining the weight of international and internal migration as a component of the population spatial distribution. It is important to distinguish both types of mobility, since the measures to be applied in each case will be different. Thus, international migration may be subject to special laws regulating the entry of persons to the country, or to agreements signed between countries in order to establish actions in common. Internal migration is different because unless ethical principles are violated, which are normally a matter of the nations' constitutions, governments cannot close the regional frontiers (within the countries), although they can act on the places where these migratory displacements are initiated in order to affect their occurrence and direction.

Policy Options: Problems and Possibilities

Different policy options can be put into practice, and can be grouped in four sets: a) retention of the population in their places of origin; b) return of migrants from places where population concentration is considered to be excessive; c) reorientation of migrants towards destinations different to the traditional ones; and d) promotion of migration from given areas -as the high concentration ones- to other places in the national territory. The first two

are the proposals most frequently mentioned, although they entail problems that have to be solved before specifying the actual possibilities for political action. Both cases refer to places of origin, but if the conditions and potentials of these places to become points for the productive absorption of the population trying to migrate or of that trying to return are not taken into account, the prospects for success will be reduced considerably. Since many of these places of origin are rural areas, usually of little dynamism, these two proposals would involve something like a return to rural life which, given its economic, social and cultural characteristics, cannot be considered as a valid deconcentration option, but as a form of population dispersion.

Regarding measures that, directly or indirectly, have affected population retention or the deviation of migratory currents to new rural areas, there have been some actions in Latin America in the recent past. Thus, for example, mention can be made of the integrated rural development projects, which have made an attempt to retain population in certain places of origin; however, these programmes have only had a relative success. In some experiences, the introduction of technological advances, aimed at increasing productivity, have tended to generate a certain labour redundancy; in other cases, the lack of qualified human resources have promoted the substitution of local manpower by that of a different origin. Regarding the occupation of internal frontiers, whether through colonization schemes or not, and with more or less public intervention, the results show a certain ambivalence. In fact, there has been a generalized increase in the population in areas that had not been inhabited until a few decades ago, but this process has not greatly affected the disacceleration of the trends of national territories to concentrate in reduced spaces. Moreover, the frontier occupation modalities have been so varied that it is difficult to draw general conclusions; on occasions the intensity of immigration to these new areas has been high, but it has been compensated, in the short run, by equivalent intensities in emigration; in other instances, colonization, without sufficient technical and financial backing, has derived in the reproduction of truly adverse living conditions or in the substitution of small producers by big companies that are not very intensive in the use of labour force.

The generation of spaces with adequate productive, social and cultural characteristics for the incorporation of the population, is not an easy task. Favourable natural conditions regarding the basic resource potential will be required; effective intervention of different social actors will be needed; and, in addition, important resources should be made available, by way of public or private investments, in order to strengthen the advantages of these spaces as new development areas. These observations lead to the convenience of exploring the possibilities for reorienting the migratory flows and promoting migration to deliberately selected places, as a means to establish alternatives to the traditional "concentration" approaches. These measures do not preclude the use of the other two lines of action - retention and return-, which will be in force whenever the place of origin coincides with some of the new development areas to be generated as described above. If there is no coincidence, it will be necessary to promote other measures, such as the supply of systematic and timely information so that the persons expelled, or those potentially emigrating from certain places of origin move to those new socio-economic and cultural spaces and not to the traditional concentration areas, such as the metropolis. Once these new spaces have been established or are being consolidated, the governments may organize dissemination campaigns, and even the provision of some type of incentives so that residents in high demographic concentration areas may move to these new destinations open to migration.

The Viability of Policy Intervention

There are indications that policies such as those mentioned above would be facilitated by economic and social processes that have taken place in the larger cities of the region. Some data can illustrate these processes. The urban centres with one million inhabitants or more in Latin America as a whole increased from 7 in 1950 to 38 in 1990 and the population in these centres increased from 17 million to 132 million persons. The rate of growth in these large cities, however, has decelerated, so that between 1980 and 1990 their average annual rate of growth was lower than that for the urban population in general. The evolution of the same 38 cities that had reached one million inhabitants or more in

1990, shows that their growth rate decreased from 47 per thousand between 1950 and 1970 to 30 per thousand between 1980 and 1990; although these cities constitute a growing proportion of the total population, their relative incidence within the urban total has remained virtually the same, and sometimes even decreased. Given the association established between the economic and the demographic aspects within a concentrating development model, it should be expected that after a severe crisis, this model would lessen its population concentrating effect. If this is so, as it appears to be occurring, the challenge that the governments have to confront would be the search for new economic reactivation strategies that would not involve a rebirth of concentration. This type of perspective would also allow for the design of actions on the spatial distribution of population as the ones mentioned above. A concrete example of population policy with specific objectives regarding territorial distribution is provided by the National Population Council of Mexico, whose policies aim at articulating spatial mobility with natural demographic growth goals. This type of initiatives will be more feasible to the extent that they are integrated into more general policies, within the framework of decentralized decision-making, which does not mean a mere delegation of functions from the central government, but implies full ability to act at the local and regional levels with real community participation sustained by economic deconcentration.

ANNEX

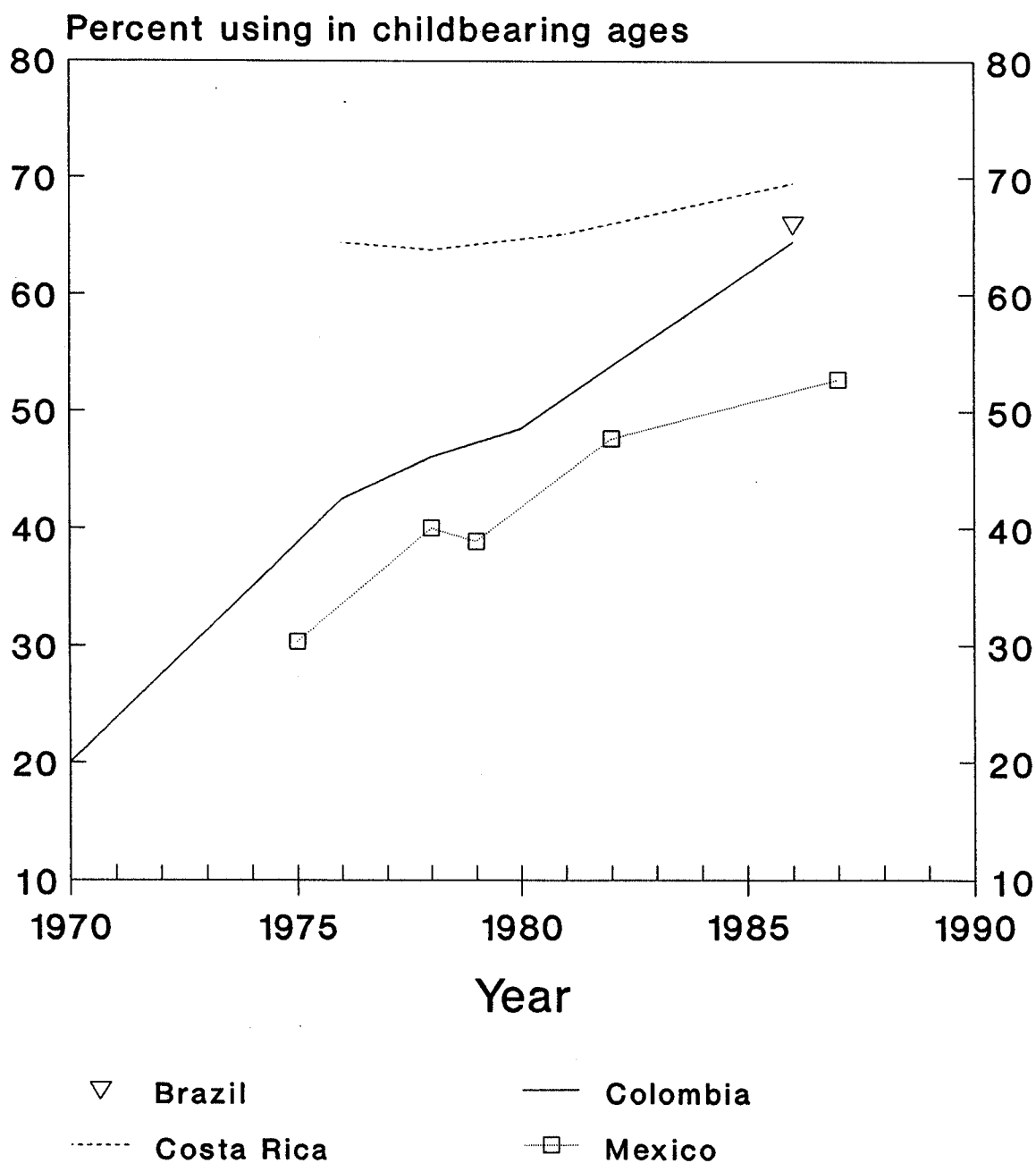
Different policy routes to fertility reduction in Latin America

The Latin American countries that show the greatest achievements with respect to the extension of fertility control have used different strategies; the cases of Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica and Mexico (see attached figure) are briefly described here. Brazil and Mexico have experienced important fertility declines in the last few decades: their present rates are about half of what they were twenty to thirty years ago. This progress has been made under very different contexts: in Mexico an explicit policy was formulated, a General Population Law was enacted in 1973, and the National Population Council (CONAPO), created shortly afterwards, has been formulating national programmes since 1976. In Brazil, on the other hand, fertility decline has occurred in the absence of a governmental family planning programme; the private and commercial sectors, in particular the "Sociedad Civil de Bem-Estar Familiar no Brasil" (BENFAM) have played a key role in this process, by providing services specially to lower income women. In both countries, sterilization and the pill are the most commonly used methods, but while in Mexico the provision of services and information is channelled through the national health care system, in Brazil media advertising is more common, and has shown to be quite effective in connection with the programmes of voluntary sterilization, currently the most common contraceptive method in the country. Recently, AIDS information campaigns in Mexico (and in other countries too) has led to a more extensive knowledge about the condom as a means of AIDS prevention and as a family planning method.

In Colombia, family planning activities began in 1966 with private institutions such as the "Asociación Pro-Bienestar de la Familia de Colombia" (PROFAMILIA), joined later on by the national public health service, although no global population policies have been formulated. This country shows one of the most remarkable changes in contraceptive use during the last two decades. This success is related to an early expansion of service coverage to rural areas and to less educated women in the urban areas, through the "community distribution" system, which is intended to meet the existing demand and stimulate its increase by means of information, education and communication. Contraceptive use is also widely extended in Costa Rica, which created a National Family Planning and Sex Education Programme in 1968 and a National Population Policy Commission in 1978. Although the Commission has not formulated a policy to modify the population growth rate, it has generated favourable conditions for its decline. The success of the Programme is attributed to the continuous improvement of its distribution system in communities and to the use of auxiliary personnel such as midwives, in order to "de-medicalize" contraceptive services. This country, unlike Brazil, Colombia and others in the region, shows a predominant use of the pill and other reversible methods over sterilization.

A vision widely shared about the impact of family planning programmes in the region is that they have acted more as *facilitators* of fertility reduction rather than as initiators of this process; even though their direct impact can be evaluated as modest, their indirect effects, acting through the dissemination of information and legitimatization of contraceptive use have been significant. Although the effectiveness of the methods currently in use can be improved, in most countries it is relatively high, thus recent diagnoses suggest that the most promising strategies for the future will be those aimed at increasing programme coverage, progressively attracting couples not using any method.

Evolution of contraceptive use* in Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica & Mexico



* Includes the pill, sterilization, intrauterine device, condom, and others.