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EVALUATION OF TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE NEEDS
IN POPULATION ACTIVITIES IN LATIN AMERICA

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EVALUATION OF TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE NEEDS IN POPULATION ACTIVITIES IN LATIN AMERICA

1. Presentation

Technical assistance requirements in population as well as their demand vary according to the levels at which they are defined both on the part of the agencies rendering this type of assistance as well as on the part of institutions receiving it. Since the scope of technical assistance in this field has expanded considerably during the last years, any attempt to establish limits of competence for new institutional arrangements -as it would be the creation of ad hoc expert teams to render assistance services- should take into consideration the different sets of activities conceived as technical assistance in population by the parties involved.

For that reason, a precise overall picture of international technical assistance in population could probably not be defined at present. In effect, as most of the so called population matters admit multisectoral approaches, many diverse aspects of scientific and policy-making activities covered by organizations that focus their attention in different aspects of the social system, converge quite naturally. In connection with international cooperation, the field of population matters has been almost exhaustively outlined in the World Population Plan of Action. At the same time, United Nations' technical cooperation on population activities has been clearly stated in the 1978-1981 Medium Term Plan and in the 1978-1979 work programme approved by the ECOSOC (Resolution 2035); at the regional level it has been delineated in the corresponding plans of the Regional Economic Commissions.

On the basis of this general frame of reference which establishes the limits and contents of the field of population activities from the international cooperation point of view, the role to be played by the different agencies of the U.N. system should be considered. This role would naturally be related to the specific objectives of the organization to the legislative mandates received in connection with its specific functions and working plans, and lastly, to its capacity to perceive technical assistance problems and requirements in concrete situations.

During the last 25 years, different United Nations organizations have played a leading role at the world and regional levels in the advancement of knowledge about population dynamics and its determinants and consequences. In addition, these organizations had a decisive influence, at the governmental and private levels on the awareness of the demographic aspects of economic, social and environmental problems. Finally, they contributed to lay down

the major guidelines for international action and the general orientations in connection with requirements from different sectors in population matters so that countries might be able to formulate their own policies.

Although in the last instance it is the governments' prerogative to determine which are the matters and activities for which they need and desire international technical assistance, organizations rendering this assistance do have an important function in orienting the specific definition and assessment of these requirements.

On the other hand, it should be borne in mind that the work plans of these organizations are mandates emanated from the governments. Thus, the Latin American Regional Population Programme which is considered and approved by the Regional Economic Commission for Latin America (CEPAL) in its ordinary sessions, constitutes the working instrument in the field of regional population activities. Needless to say, the purpose of all activities envisaged in this Population Programme is to assist the countries of the region in different ways which range from training and elaboration of inputs to direct technical assistance to national programmes.

Mention should also be made of the fact that one of the main objectives in the setting up of UNFPA was "to build up, on an international basis, with assistance of the competent bodies of the United Nations system, the knowledge and the capacity to respond to national, regional, interregional and global needs in the population and family planning fields; to promote co-ordination and planning and programming, and to co-operate with all concerned". (Resolution 1763-LIV-operative paragraph 1). During the first years of the Fund, and virtually up to the present time, an important part of its resources has been used precisely to strengthen or expand activities in order to build up in different bodies of the United Nations this knowledge and response capacity. Accordingly, this has contributed to train human resources with a high level of theoretical and practical expertise, that is, a potential of specialized skills that should necessarily be maintained as the core of any direct assistance programme to the countries or as the basis to build up such a core.

2. Evaluation of assistance needs in population activities from the perspective of agencies rendering it.

Difficulties inherent to determining the precise boundaries of the concept "population activities" -because of its broadness and dynamic character- make it necessary to establish, for practical purposes, a relatively circumscribed array of subjects towards which international technical assistance should be oriented. From this perspective and considering the scarce human and financial resources available for such assistance, it has been suggested

that it be primarily devoted to support "the population aspects of development, defined as the causes, conditions and consequences of changes in fertility, mortality and mobility as they affect developmental prospects and the human welfare resulting therefrom".¹

In line with this concept, it might be asserted that technical assistance should have as its objective the creation of capacities, knowledge and inputs which are necessary for the understanding of the demographic aspects of development and, therefore, for the formulation of population policies integrated in economic and social planning. In other words, this means a series of activities in training, research and data and information production which find their ultimate justification in policy making and in the elaboration of plans.

This objective would have seemed too ambitious and perhaps unrealistic if formulated 15 years ago. When the Latin American Demographic Centre was established in 1957, knowledge about the population trends was embryonic in most countries of the region. Therefore the Centre's first task had to be to assess the coverage and quality of the available statistical information, in particular the 1950 censuses, to estimate the main demographic parameters and to elaborate projections on a secure basis and with modern methodology. In accordance, emphasis was placed on the development and application of methods of analysis which use insufficient information. At the same time, attention was paid to spatial and occupational population patterns in order to complete the descriptive frame of the demographic situation. Subsequently, as the need to deepen the knowledge of patterns and determinants of the demographic dynamics in the countries of the region became evident, the Centre promoted and undertook research on fertility and internal migration through comparative survey programmes. At the same time and supplementing the task of accumulating knowledge and information, training programmes were implemented on subjects such as collection, analysis and interpretation of basic demographic data and population studies, which were devoted to training technical and professional personnel from the countries of the region.

It is only since 1965-1966 that the higher bodies of the United Nations adopt an explicit position in warning on the implications of a rapid demographic growth and the need to take population aspects into account in economic and social planning. During the following years, the concept of an integrated approach to population matters within economic and social development becomes recognized and accepted, a process which culminates with the World Population Plan of Action approved by almost all countries of the world.

¹/ Priorities in Future Allocation of UNFPA Resources...
DP/186, 21 May 1976, page 11.

Just as the bodies of the international community required three decades to propose a frame and a strategy for population activities, most developing countries have to go through different stages in developing capacities, instruments and inputs which constitute pre-requisites for the higher task of formulating population policies and integrating the demographic variables into the economic and social planning process.

The data base and the capacity to interpret and evaluate development problems in relation to population trends and characteristics vary considerably from one country to another. Many countries still do not have a population data base which might be considered sufficient and reliable; the human resources available for population activities are probably insufficient even at unsophisticated levels. This is perhaps a problem of lack of modern technology, but, aside from technical problems, there are also differences with regard to degree of perception of an importance given to the magnitude, trends, composition and geographic distribution of the population in connection with the improvement of both the level and quality of human life. Some of these differences reflect real conditions in terms, for example, of the relationship between natural resources and population, while others respond rather to political positions.

It can therefore be concluded that there are several steps in the evolution of population activities programmes and that the type of technical assistance required will necessarily be related to them. These steps should not necessarily reproduce the historical sequence which can generally be observed in the countries, but a logical order should rather be established in the light of the experiences gained and the objectives pursued. Whatever the case, certain basic activities concur in every step, e.g., data collection and processing, training, research and information.

The outline of activities presented by UNFPA, summarized as follows, may serve as a basis for discussion:

- i) to stimulate and promote interest and concern for population trends;
- ii) to assist in the determination of population size, growth, structure and distribution, and of the factors affecting them;
- iii) to assist in the evaluation of population trends in relation to development and in the understanding of the causes and consequences of these trends;
- iv) to assist the countries in the formulation of population policies;
- v) to give support in the planning, implementation and evaluation of population policies.

These steps which are accomplished separately and successively in time should be interpreted as a cumulative and integrative process. In effect, unless a country had reached a certain degree of development and maturity in the knowledge about demographic trends and their interrelations with key areas of economic growth and social change, poor results should be expected from any isolated action aimed at stimulating and promoting interest and concern for population matters among political leaders and public officials at the decision making level. As an example, furthermore, the timing for giving assistance in the formulation of population policies should not be subject to excessively ambitious goals in the development of step iii), in particular in what refers to the "understanding of the causes and consequences of population trends".

Although developing countries with the support of international assistance might attain substantive progress in handling population activities with their own resources in the next decades, new demands for assistance should be expected. The opening of new areas of concern, more complex approaches for a better understanding of reality, the introduction of more sophisticated technology, among other factors, generate external assistance demands.

Information and processing of population data, activities upon which potential needs are exerting an increasing pressure at all levels, illustrate the effect of changes which are occurring in the population field and in the expectations of external assistance related to the above activities on the part of the countries. In effect, up to a few years ago, the major use of population data was for the measurement by demographers, of basic population variables at the national levels. While the need for such measurements has not changed in most countries, governments are now beginning to consider population parameters in their policy formulation, implementation and evaluation, with the consequence that new questions are being raised by a larger number and a wider variety of researchers and governmental officials. This has made the processing of the data more involved and results must be made available in a more rapid and disaggregated form.

To facilitate this more complex utilization of information and to make it possible to manipulate it flexibly and at low cost with little delay, the data from population censuses and surveys must be organized and processed in an integrated fashion. Furthermore, there is a growing recognition that the resulting studies, recommendations and other documents must be made more easily retrievable and available through documentation systems.

The information processing technology available to national institutions working in population is also changing. During the next few years, the majority of the countries will move to third generation medium-size computers and even the smaller computers will have time sharing systems and be able to use sophisticated user-oriented software.

As a consequence of their changing information needs and technology, the countries are making new types of demands for population information technical assistance from CELADE (for example, relating to population documentation systems and data banks) and for increasing amounts of assistance in areas in which CELADE had made major contributions in the past (such as in the cleaning of complex population surveys and the tabulation of demographic surveys and censuses).

3. Kinds of international technical assistance

Considering the experience gained in Latin America in this respect, three kinds of technical assistance in population activities might be distinguished:

(a) Assistance to national population programmes, with UNFPA's financial support. This kind of assistance is designed on an ad hoc basis to support programmes of population activities at the government sectoral level or at the level of institutions with governmental backing. Most of these programmes are mother and child health programmes involving family planning, while a good number of others relate to the elaboration of basic population data. Recently, there is a tendency to assist multisectoral programmes addressed at producing inputs for the formulation of development policies.

One or more executing agencies are responsible for international assistance in these programmes, including the United Nations' specialized organizations.

These projects usually last for one, two or more years and therefore technical assistance constitutes a task which extends through a relatively long period of time embracing a series of activities which are clearly stated in a plan of operation. The advisers' qualifications and the number of man-months involved, as well as the coordination of activities when two or more executing agencies participate in the project, can be estimated well in advance.

(b) Assistance at the regional and national levels, in the frame of the Population Programme of the Regional Economic Commission (CEPAL). This Programme is oriented towards the creation of capacities, knowledge and inputs which are necessary for the formulation of population policies and development planning and, in particular, towards giving direct technical assistance to the countries, with the purposes mentioned above. Many of the Programme's activities are of a continuous nature, covering working areas that most countries are not in a position to go into, either for reasons related to cost, efficiency, specialization and human resources, or simply because those activities have a regional or subregional coverage. Among the latter, mention should be made of the undertaking of studies and the preparation of technical documentation bearing on priority subjects related to Latin America's development problems and serving as a reference for governmental, regional and subregional organizations in the formulation of their policy objectives and the corresponding strategies.

The relevance of the Latin American Population Programme in the field of technical assistance at the regional and national levels, can be estimated through a brief description of its different types of activities:

- i) the training of personnel to undertake analyses, studies and research on population and on matters related to development, planning and policy formulation;
- ii) to prepare population estimates and projections at the national and subnational levels, and to evaluate the relationships between demographic trends and economic and social development, as well as the demographic effects of population programmes;
- iii) to maintain an information system on Latin American population, including basic data, bibliographies and technical documentation;
- iv) to undertake research on the following: demographic determinants and consequences of economic, social and political factors; formalization of interrelations between demographic variables and economic and social variables; formulation of models for the analysis and planning of development; theoretical and methodological frames for the design of policies and the definition of instruments, demographic goals and policy viability; and
- v) to give direct technical assistance to the countries in: demographic analysis and diagnosis studies; policy formulation and economic and social planning (in coordination with the assistance given by CEPAL and ILPES in economic and social matters); the training and transfer of technology in the processing of censuses and survey data, including the use of computers, and the design of population survey research that requires a high degree of specialization and when the country lacks adequate human resources.

(c) Ad hoc, direct and short term assistance to governmental agencies and institutions responsible for the production of population statistics, the planning of the economy (central, regional and sectoral), the training of human resources; public health, human settlements and other aspects of social development and when they exist, to organizations responsible for the formulation and implementation of population policies and programmes.

The above are occasional assistance demands on very diverse matters and needs. They are generally unrelated to an international assistance programme as the one mentioned in paragraph (a), nor are they necessarily an extension of the indirect assistance described in paragraph (b), items i) to iv).

The magnitude of the demand of this type of assistance depends on national factors primarily related to the institutional policy of governmental organizations, their perception of assistance needs and the human and financial resources available to them. The lack of specialized personnel in population matters would fully justify the demand for technicians.

Notwithstanding, this may often constitute a factor which prevents the realization of the need and importance of external assistance. The institutional policy may ignore or simply minimize the relevance of developing specific population activities beyond the needs that have been traditionally met with existing local resources.

The growing awareness of the relationships between population matters and the different spheres of both traditional governmental actions and new fields of public concern, will certainly contribute to increase technical assistance needs. It may be expected that by that time, many countries will be able to develop adequately their own resources. It may also be expected that most assistance activities required for meeting increasing demands would be structured along medium or long term operational projects. Whatever the case, an important demand for highly diversified, occasional and short term assistance is to be foreseen.

4. Feasibility and efficiency requirements for international assistance in population

The following four aspects determining the degree of feasibility and efficiency of external assistance should be considered:

- a) degree of awareness, in public and private sectors, of the importance of population matters;
- b) availability of data, specialized personnel, financial resources and institutional organization;
- c) structured programmes of activities, and
- d) support from the executing agencies to the advisory personnel.

These four aspects can be examined regarding those activities emphasized by technical assistance as they constitute the final objective on which the whole range of population activities converge, namely the formulation of policies and the planning of development.

Direct technical assistance in the context of population policies and economic and social development planning may refer both to the process of formulation-evaluation itself as well as to the production of research and information inputs which are necessary for its implementation. The training of technical personnel to undertake this task and the assistance in connection with the corresponding institutional structuring, are also included therein.

a) Each government determines its own population programme and priorities for attaining the policy goals it has established. Since its inception, UNFPA has fully recognized the sovereign rights of each nation to formulate, promote and implement its own population policy, in accordance with Resolutions 2211/XXI and 3344/XXIX of the General Assembly, adopted in 1966 and 1974, respectively. On the other hand, one of UNFPA's main objectives is to "promote awareness of the social, economic and environmental implications of national and international population problems; ... and the strategies to deal with them, in accordance with each country's plans and priorities".

Awareness is a gradual process that takes time, and as shown by recent experience as regards the evolution of the general position of the countries on the population subject, it is closely related to political ideology, to the implicit or explicit development models adopted, or to geopolitical strategies. At the same time, the influence demographic trends in connection with the type and rhythm of economic growth have on these positions, should not be neglected. From this point of view, conditions are remarkably different inside Latin America. Therefore population problems may have different contents or emphasis and hence, population policies, may adopt different meanings. In countries with low demographic density and significant international emigration -as Bolivia and Paraguay- the main concern refers to the spatial distribution of population rather than to growth aspects. In other cases -El Salvador and Haiti- the combination of high density, high fertility and low but accelerated urbanization, leads to a global concern with special emphasis on growth aspects.

Under the present state of "awareness", it appears that the governments of most countries of the region would not favour the formulation of broad coverage population programmes but rather sectoral programmes referring to non-controversial matters, such as helping in the undertaking and processing of population censuses, supporting mother and child health extension activities, or assisting in the preparation of a diagnosis on the formation and utilization of human resources. Almost all of these activities are sectoral initiatives (ministries, departments, etc.) not structured along a general governmental policy.

b) The scarcity of national resources also hinders the feasibility and efficiency of international assistance.

Although it is true that there has been evident progress in the region as regards the availability of qualified personnel, the potential qualitative and quantitative demand is growing more rapidly than effective supply. As far as availability of resources is concerned, in relatively privileged countries the government and other institutions frequently offer working and salary conditions which do not meet the technicians' expectations and, as a consequence, the latter either emigrate or are attracted to other labour markets. In relatively less favoured countries, the lack of qualified personnel is even worse. The problem of an efficient utilization of the human resources available is closely related to the institutional development of a country. The international position of governments regarding the relevance of population matters should be in harmony with actions aimed at supporting and strengthening national organizations and programmes responsible for producing statistical information, training personnel, undertaking research and, in general, carrying on activities resulting in inputs for policies and governmental plans at different levels.

A basic principle in the strategy of international assistance is the meeting of needs related to human resources and institutional organization. In effect, "the World Population Conference and the WPPA stressed the importance of making developing countries self-reliant as fully and rapidly as possible. Furthermore, the General Assembly recently endorsed the

Governing Council's decision to make the promotion of self-reliance in developing countries a basic purpose of technical cooperation and one of the guidelines for future operation of the UNDP. Therefore, UNFPA support should aim particularly at building up the capacity and ability of recipient countries to respond to their own needs".^{2/} The principle of self-reliance suggests that high priority be assigned, among other activities, to the development of human resources through training programmes and transfer of technology, as well as to the creation of institutions at the national level, in particular for the collection and analysis of population data, policy design and implementation of population programmes.^{3/}

c) Assistance in population matters which is based on national programmes appears more advantageous if compared with ad hoc short term assistance to meet sporadic demands. The latter often serve to strengthen activities which are part of the regular tasks of governmental organizations.

The following advantages may be pointed out:

i) Programmes of population activities, at the sectoral and multisectoral level (ministries, departments, autonomous organizations, etc.) imply a rational decision of explicit short and long term objectives on the part of the public sector involved, which is, therefore, committed to give institutional support on a continuous basis during a period of time sufficient to attain those objectives.

ii) A programme should include mutually strengthening and complementing activities. It usually embraces a series of stages that are part of an integrated process. Nevertheless, if isolated, they are merely instrumental activities, inputs which are not inserted in nor respond to any programmatic guideline from the public sector.

National programmes in the following areas may be thought of to illustrate this point: rural development, education in population and family planning, organization of demographic analysis units, population censuses, information and documentation systems, policy design and economic and social plans (regional and sectoral) including explicit or implicit demographic goals (inter alia, spatial redistribution, international migration, nuptiality patterns, reproductive behaviour).

iii) Coordination problems may be solved through programmes referring to both national organizations and executing agencies. This would avoid unnecessary duplications, and the personnel devoted to technical assistance could be more efficiently used.

^{2/} United Nations Fund for Population Activities, Priorities in Future Allocation of UNFPA Resources, Report by the Executive Director.

Governing Council, Twenty-second session, June 1976, Agenda item 12 (c). DP/186, May 1976, page 9.

^{3/} Ibidem.

iv) A corresponding plan of operation and a budget enable to determine well in advance and over a relatively extended period of time, the qualifications and number of working months of the necessary advisers.

d) The executing agencies will be able to give assistance efficiently to the extent that they may rely on the sufficient number of technical personnel with adequate qualifications.

For administrative and substantive reasons, it would be advisable that experts giving international assistance work, as a rule, on a permanent or semi-permanent basis, assigned to or in the staff of the executing agencies.

The appointment of qualified personnel for relatively short periods of time becomes increasingly difficult, even more so when the duty station does not coincide with the expert's country of residence. If the duration of the appointment be extended and if the expert be expected to accomplish exclusively direct technical assistance activities (except perhaps for programmes of the type referred to in paragraph c)), it is quite probable that undesired practices might appear in order to justify his appointment, such as assigning him tasks which have not been foreseen in his job description, or inducing the expert himself to promote missions to the countries, deliberately extending the duration of technical assistance.

On the other hand, experts working on a permanent or semi-permanent basis in a substantive programme (regional commissions, specialized agencies, etc.) benefit therefrom. In the first place, they participate in a regional or sectoral effort which generates the revision of ideas and approaches through the accumulation of experience, and presents ideal conditions in order to keep information, advances in technology and theoretical knowledge up to date.

Besides, most international assistance programmes and activities can be conceived of as an extension of the work which at the more general and broader conceptual and methodological level, the regional organizations and specialized agencies are developing. Advisers should therefore be in a position to apply in the countries the methods and thoughts resulting from these efforts and experiences.

Mention should also be made, as an additional advantage, of the institutional follow-up of assistance activities and a more flexible use of advisers.

5. Final comments

The World Population Plan of Action contains the principles and general orientations for an international cooperation strategy in the population field. Its broad coverage reflects the expansion that this area of knowledge and policy has undergone during the last years.

Considering the limited resources available for international assistance in population activities and, on the other hand, the objectives and functions of the different United Nations bodies, it appears indispensable to set up criteria to define the scope of action and competence of the interested international organizations.

In this sense, this document asserts that recognition and assignment of roles and responsibilities to technical assistance agencies should be mainly subject to their specific objectives, the level of professional excellence of their staff, and the existence of strong institutional relationships with the countries, established in the course of many years of work.

It would be equally important to take into account the agency's capacity to perceive the needs of the countries, as developed through its regional and sectoral contributions to factual knowledge, training of human resources and awareness of problems related to population.

Lastly, in addition to the elements of judgement mentioned above, special consideration should be given to the specific mandates of the corresponding legislative bodies.

In general, the objectives of international technical assistance may be thought of as being the building of capacities, knowledge and inputs which are necessary for the understanding of the demographic aspects of development, and the formulation of population policies and economic and social planning.

However, these objectives could not be simultaneously formulated in the majority of the developing countries and should therefore be tackled by stages. The type of assistance will depend, under each circumstance, on the state of development of human, institutional and financial resources in each country.

There are steps in the evolution of the programmes of activities, starting with the information and analysis of demographic data, followed by research on the determinants and consequences of population trends, and culminating in the formulation of population policies and programmes. These are cumulative steps, not necessarily rigid stages, accomplished separately. They are part of an integrative process under a continuous revision due to the permanent advances in theories and methods.

In discussing new institutional arrangements and alternatives in organizing international assistance, it seems advisable to keep in mind the advantages and disadvantages of the main practical ways in which it has been applied in Latin America. Points 3 and 4 of this document are an attempt to examine such matter, relating it to feasibility and efficiency requirements of the advisory services. The following general conclusions arise from this review:

- a) Importance of awareness, available resources and institutional organization of the country;
- b) Advantages of giving assistance through well structured national programmes rather than ad hoc short term missions for occasional matters, in connection with:
 - i) rationalization of objectives;
 - ii) activities as an integral process;
 - iii) coordination problems and
 - iv) existence of a plan of operation, and
- c) The privileged position of executing agencies which are able to offer administrative and substantive support at an adequate level.