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Working Group on Fertility Levels
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Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 18-22 December 1972

THE WORLD FERTILITY SURVEY :

AN INTERNATIONAL PROGRAM OF FERTILITY RESEARCH

THE WORLD FERTILITY SURVEY: AN INTERNATIONAL PROGRAM OF FERTILITY RESEARCH^{1/}

recommending to the Commission on Population and Development of the United Nations General Assembly the establishment of a permanent body to coordinate and promote research on fertility levels and differentials in Africa and the prospects for the future.

INTRODUCTION

The World Fertility Survey (WFS) is a five-year international research program, initiated in mid-1972, whose purpose is to assess the current state of human fertility throughout the world principally through promoting and supporting nationally representative, internationally comparable sample surveys of fertility behavior in as many countries of the world as possible. Keyed to begin field operations during the World Population Year, 1974, the WFS will be carried out by the International Statistical Institute (ISI), in collaboration with the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population and the United Nations.

BACKGROUND

The International Statistical Institute. The ISI is a professional society "devoted to the development and improvement of statistical methods and their application throughout the world." In promoting this goal ISI members have gained worldwide recognition in statistical fields and represent more than 80 countries and international organizations. At present there are 518 ordinary and honorary members. In addition, the directors of 91 national and of 15 international statistical agencies are ex officio members of ISI. Ten international societies, including the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population, and nineteen national statistical associations are affiliated to ISI.

The administrative body of the ISI is its Bureau. Currently, the president is Dr. P.J. Bjerve, Director General of Statistics for Norway. The Director of the ISI Permanent Office is Dr. E. Lunenberg. Present composition of the Bureau includes ISI members from Mexico, Australia, France, USSR, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom.

Origins and Development of the WFS Concept. Despite its long history of work in international statistics and its affiliation with other learned societies such as IUSSP, ISI had not itself been involved in the field of demography during recent decades. However, in the past several years, ISI had established a committee to consider re-organization. One

^{1/} Adopted from a paper prepared by J. Timothy Sprehe, Office of Population, U.S. Agency for International Development. Presented to the ECA Working Group on Fertility Levels and Differentials in Africa and the Prospects for the Future, Addis Ababa, 18-22 December, 1972.

recommenda-
tion of the committee was to the effect that ISI should seek to become actively involved in statistical programs of major social relevance including the area of population statistics.

Out of discussions held in mid 1971 grew gradually, with the involvement of many individuals and organizations, a concept for a large-scale concerted scientific effort directed at accurate measurement of human fertility throughout the world. In addition, ISI had received a request from the United Nations to put forward a scientific program in conjunction with the World Population Year, 1974. As the concept of a World Fertility Survey was developed and elaborated over the latter months of 1971 and the first half of 1972, ISI responded to the UN to the effect that ISI would undertake primary organizational responsibility for conducting the WFS. IUSSP was invited to join in collaboration with ISI and accepted the invitation.

In the United States, lengthy discussions were held with the U.S. Agency for International Development, the U.S. Bureau of the Census, Population Council, Ford Foundation, the American Statistical Association, and the United Nations. Within the UN information and advice was sought from the UN Population Division and Statistical Office, the UN Fund for Population Activities, UNESCO, WHO, the regional economic commissions and regional demographic centers. Efforts were made to begin coordination between the proposed WFS and the European Working Group on Social Demography, the African Census Program, and related activities in ECAFE and CELADE.

In the Spring, 1972, ISI received a grant from the UN Fund for Population Activities. The purpose of the grant was to enable ISI to hold two meetings of experts from around the world in order to examine, in some depth the feasibility and desirability of the WFS and to comment upon the nature and scope of the program.

Pursuant to the UNFPA grant, ISI convened in July two Ad Hoc Technical Advisory Meetings. The First Meeting offered technical guidance on the feasibility and technical requirements for the WFS, making recommendations particularly as to the need for the WFS, its objectives and general nature, subject matter content, functioning, and the relationship between the WFS and other activities. The Second Meeting, one week later, took as its point of departure the proceedings and recommendations of the First Meeting and dealt in more detail with the technical requirements for carrying out those recommendations. The Second Meeting considered local executing agencies, the national project director, national coordinating committees, survey methodology and field work, methods of interview, selection and training of interviewers, supervision of field work, sampling, quality control, evaluation, classification and codes, tabulation programs,

selection and training of data processing personnel, analysis, reports and publications, and types of assistance to be proffered to countries, including financial assistance^{1/}. Representation at these meetings was broad based: Africans or those with specialized expertise in African population attending the meetings included: Gyory Acsadi (Nigeria), K.T. de Graft-Johnson (Ghana), J.C. Caldwell (Australia), Pierre Cantrelle (France), L.A.W. Harding (Sierra Leone), S.S. Heyer (Kenya), J.C. Rumford (Liberia).

THE NATURE AND SCOPE OF THE WFS

The basic focus of the WFS program is on assisting a large number of interested countries, particularly those which are less developed, to carry out nationally representative, internationally comparable, scientifically designed and conducted sample surveys regarding human fertility. The WFS is thus a major international research effort and is envisaged as an essential component of the continuing, comprehensive international program to improve demographic data collection and analysis. It is an international activity particularly appropriate for the period around the UN World Population Year of 1974.

1. Objectives. The basic aim of the WFS is to provide scientific information which will permit each participating country to describe and interpret its fertility. Within the broad area of fertility research, the individual country surveys undertaken as part of the WFS will strive to identify meaningful differentials or patterns of fertility as well as fertility regulation, and to help in the clarification of factors affecting fertility. Improved data on these topics will clearly facilitate national efforts in economic, social, and health planning for development.

In addition to providing data for individual countries, a further value of the WFS program will be its international nature and hence the opportunity it provides for the international comparability of data. There is considerable scientific interest in the availability of comparative data on fertility for populations which differ widely with respect to their socio economic character.

2. Nature of the Survey. The WFS will above all strive for national survey results of high quality. This will be achieved through the work of national staffs and the assistance of a WFS Central Staff, combined with adequate time devoted to planning, the testing of instrumentation and procedures, training of survey personnel and careful phasing of survey activities. In any participating country, it is hoped that the WFS will stand as a model of scientific excellence and as a standard against which subsequent surveys may be compared.

^{1/} Copies of the reports of the two meetings are available in limited numbers from the ISI Permanent Office, 2 Oostduinlaan, The Hague, Netherlands.

At the national level, the WFS will be, in general, a single-round survey of households so selected as to provide a probability sample, preferably one capable of providing national estimates. Ideally it will be an independent survey and will employ appropriate quality control and evaluative techniques to provide some measure of data reliability.

From the standpoint of comparability, each national survey within the WFS program is expected to adopt a common set of core items, although there will be enough flexibility to allow for the adaptation of items to local conditions. In addition to the core questions there will be various possibilities for expansion of the inquiry into related areas of particular national interest.

3. Participating Countries. Another important purpose of the WFS program is to increase national capacities for fertility and other demographic survey research, particularly in developing countries. The WFS will attempt to give special consideration to those countries which have been unable to carry out a fertility survey in the past.

All countries will be informed of the WFS program and their degree of scientific interest ascertained. For each participating country, the WFS will endeavor to establish relations with the agencies or organizations most appropriate for carrying out a high quality survey. Such relations will necessarily be determined on a case-by-case basis, and extensive staff work will be required for exploring countries' interests and capabilities.

While participation of as many countries as possible is a program goal, this objective can be realized only by a carefully phased program because of the existing situation in countries with respect to trained personnel, interest in the need for fertility research, and the nature of survey technical problems. An attempt will be made to include in the earlier participating countries some with well established statistical systems and some without such systems, and to include countries from different regions of the world. Because of the wide variety of existing situations in countries, no single survey model can be considered suitable for all countries. In every case there will be need for adaptations of the survey to local conditions.

CONTENTS AND METHODS OF THE SURVEY

The survey sample used in each country will provide data on households, with designated women as the primary units of analysis. With adequate sample sizes and well controlled field operations, the WFS could be the basis for approximate estimates of national fertility rates of various kinds. This observation is made while recognizing that such estimates will not have the range of checks on error possible, for example, in the Population Growth Estimate (PGE) surveys, and that a single-round survey may be unable

to provide as precise estimates of fertility levels as some other approaches. PCEs and the kind of survey envisaged in the WFS are not considered substitutes for one another and ISI recognizes that both are important.

1. The Universe and the Sample. The individual country surveys in the WFS will ideally employ a national probability sample to obtain data on households and on women of childbearing ages. Insofar as sample size permits, the national sample can be stratified to represent major sub-groups or regions. Samples of a strictly local nature or those not employing probability principles of selection at each stage are not considered acceptable.

2. Types and Sources of Information. Three major levels of information may be identified as relevant to the WFS program. First is the community level, where items to be collected are as yet unspecified by ISI. Second is the household level where two kinds of information are to be collected: information on the age, sex, marital status and relationships for all members of the household, and information on lifetime and current fertility for every female in the household above the minimum reproductive age, along with the mortality of her children. Third is the individual respondents selected for detailed interview.

3. Contents of the Detailed Interview. As regards respondents selected for detailed interview, there has as yet been developed only illustrative, not definitive, information to be collected. Final determination will be left to the WFS Central Staff and the particular countries involved. However, the following topics have been endorsed in principle as both desirable and feasible for major core questionnaire items.

A. Dependent variables: measure of fertility

- (a) Age of respondent and husband
- (b) Birth history, including survival status of all children
- (c) Pregnancy history, if feasible, and primarily as a check on birth history
- (d) Marital history

B. Independent variables: factors affecting fertility

- (a) Factors immediately determining fertility levels, such as fertility regulation practices, breast feeding, amenorrhea and subfecundity indications
- (b) Attitudes about family size, including desire for more children, desired family size, and desire for most recent child
- (c) Social and economic factors affecting fertility, including educational attainment and literacy, classification of residence, farm background, current and past economic activity of wife, occupation and employment status of husband, family structure, and other cultural characteristics.

It should be realized that the above listing is only in the nature of an ideal minimum set of variables for measuring fertility. Several, perhaps many, sets of supplementary items will be developed for augmenting the core questionnaire and made available to countries on a more optional basis. Certainly this is an area open to discussion and suggestion.

4. Quality Control and Evaluation. Quality control procedures and an evaluation program will be planned and budgeted as an integral part of surveys conducted within the WFS framework. The reports of the two Ad Hoc Technical Advisory Meetings contain detailed recommendations regarding quality control, covering all major operational phases of surveys and regarding the need for a re-interview and/or record matching program for evaluation.

5. Processing, Tabulation, Analysis and Reports. Processing and tabulation will be carried out in the participating countries, insofar as possible, in order to maximize the benefits of surveys to the countries. The WFS Central Staff will play a key role in developing prototype manuals for the editing, coding, and tabulation of survey information, development of classifications and codes, provision of electronic data processing assistance, and assistance in training personnel.

Several kinds of analyses and reports will be developed at both the national and international levels. From the substantive side, individual country survey reports will be targeted at meeting the needs of government planners and policy makers, as well as those of experts in the fields of demographic and fertility research. This will require nontechnical summaries of findings as well as specialized technical papers. As regards methodology, analysis and reporting will endeavor to stress full and frank discussion of survey procedures and data limitations, an essential aspect for both proper assessment of substantive results and guidance in planning future surveys. The WFS will have a publications program, ranging from brochures and a newsletter to technical monographs.

CONVERGENCES WITH RELATED ACTIVITIES

The WFS as a co-ordinated effort cannot operate in a vacuum, but must take into account past, ongoing, and planned related research and data collection activities. An inventory of fertility surveys prepared by the U.S. Census Bureau for the First Ad Hoc Technical Advisory Meeting noted, among other things, that at the least, 115 surveys of national or nearly national coverage will have been conducted in the period 1968-1974. The background paper prepared for this meeting by the ECA, Indicators of Current and Future Methodological Trends in Africa, lists 73 distinct programs for collecting fertility data spanning the period 1965-1975. Many of these efforts are of the same general form as that suggested for the WFS.

It does seem clear that a great many countries are engaged in the business of taking fertility surveys. While at first blush it may appear that the WFS is an ambitious undertaking aimed at starting up a large number of new surveys, a second look indicates that much of the WFS effort may in fact be devoted to a movement for coordinating and standardizing existing and planned surveys. Even here, the WFS will find that much work is already going on in coordinated multi-national fertility surveys.

1. The African Census Program. During the period 1972-1975, a period roughly co-extensive with the WFS about 21 African states will make a count of their populations under the African Census Program. For 14 of the states, it will be the first complete census in their history. For most of the participating countries, the census will be a basic head count with minimum subject coverage (name, age, sex, place of birth, residence status) supplemented by a sample survey which will provide information on components of population change as well as other data which may be useful in studying the interrelationships between population growth and economic and social development. The supplemental sample survey includes fertility as one major topic of data collection.

ISI has previously consulted with the ECA concerning the WFS. In these discussions, the importance of the African Census Programme to this region was clearly recognized and it was agreed in principle that the WFS ought not be developed as an entirely separate entity when conflict or excessive duplication of effort with the African Census Programme might result. ISI, therefore, hopes to work closely with the ECA in the development of the WFS in the African region; through close consultation through the Regional Coordinating Committee of the WFS and perhaps in assisting in the fertility aspects of the African Census Programme and through this instrumentality to include Africa in the WFS.

In summary, the WFS appears to have arrived upon the demographic scene at a time when intensive fertility survey work is underway throughout the world, and at a time when major efforts at comparative study have already been going on for several years at the regional level. Without these immediate forerunners, a world survey would no doubt be impossible to conceive. With them the WFS can to some extent be seen, not as a major international program created de novo, but as a natural extension of, and a capitalization upon, trends now in existence for several years.

ORGANIZATION OF THE WFS

International Level. Overall organizational responsibility for planning and carrying out the WFS rests with ISI, working in collaboration with IUSSP and the United Nations. ISI has set up a separate project organization whose major components are as follows.

A. Permanent Advisory Committees.

1. The Program Steering Committee is entrusted with overall substantive guidance and review of programs of the WFS. The membership of the committee includes a chairman and four individual expert members appointed by ISI in consultation with the IUSSP and the UN, and representatives of IUSSP, the UN Population Division, the UN Statistical Office, the UN Fund for Population Activities, and the U.S. Agency for International Development.

2. The Regional Coordinating Committee will develop plans for coordination of the WFS country activities by means of regional organizations, to the extent feasible, and will review their implementation. The membership of this committee includes the WFS Project Director as chairman, and representatives from ECA, ECE, ECAFE, ECLA, UNESOB, CELADE, and the Population Council, with other persons invited to attend as appropriate.

3. The Technical Advisory Committee will advise on all technical aspects of the program. Its membership consists of approximately 15 experts, appointed by the ISI in consultation with IUSSP and the UN, from the fields of demography, survey design, data processing, statistics and other related areas.

B. WFS Central Staff. The primary operational arm of the WFS will be the WFS Central Staff. This will consist of internationally recognized technical experts who will oversee the general design of the WFS, ensure uniformity and comparability among individual country surveys, and make continuously available expert technical consultation for individual countries. The WFS Central Staff consists of :

1. The Project Director, Dr. Maurice G. Kendall. Dr. Kendall has now established a Professional Centre for the WFS in London where he and the Professional Staff will be responsible for planning and directing all phases of the WFS.

2. The Professional Staff, in addition to the Project Director, will consist of five or more fulltime experts in sampling, questionnaire construction, survey research techniques, electronic data processing, and fertility research. In addition to this core staff, some eight to twelve consultants will be made readily available for individual assignments on a fairly long-term basis and a much larger roster of short-term consultants provided as the program develops.

3. The Administrative Staff will recruit personnel for the WFS, arrange conferences and seminars, have charge of the WFS publication programs, arrange basic agreements with participating countries, administer a grant program for subsidizing country surveys, and in general, perform as a service agency to the professional staff. The Administrative Staff will be located at the Permanent Office of ISI in The Hague, Netherlands.

National Level. The WFS Central Staff plans to adopt a flexible approach in dealing with potential participating countries, taking account of resources and capabilities in the countries. For each participating country appropriate local agencies or organizations will be approached and the one designated as local executing agency will be asked to appoint a National Director who will have overall responsibility for the country's survey.

Country cooperation and acceptance of responsibility for carrying out a high quality survey is an essential keystone for the success of the WFS program. When a country agrees to participate in the WFS, the WFS Central Staff will request that it concur in a basic agreement, to be negotiated with the Central Staff, concerning its survey. At this time, the country, if it is a developing country, will be asked to submit a schedule detailing whatever technical and financial assistance may be required for carrying out the survey. Depending on the needs of individual developing countries, the WFS program anticipates being able to offer technical and/or financial assistance for any phase of the survey, from beginning to end.

Training. Particularly for those countries with little experience in fertility and survey research, the training of personnel at all levels will be crucial for the success of the WFS. The provision of such training is one of the major tasks for the WFS Central Staff. In this respect an important function of the WFS Central Staff will be to prepare model training manuals.

Other Types of Assistance. Particularly for developing countries, the WFS will provide several forms of assistance where local resources or capabilities are lacking or unavailable. Short term consultants in various fields of expertise such as sampling or data processing will be provided. Long term expert assistance in the form of consultants who would reside in the participating country can also be made available.

Inasmuch as the WFS will give special consideration to developing countries which have been unable to carry out fertility surveys in the past, it is expected that the WFS will also be able to provide extensive financial assistance to developing countries which lack such resources.

The experts assembled at the Ad Hoc Technical Advisory Meetings strongly recommended that the WFS be prepared to subsidize field costs in developing countries, particularly interviewing, and that the provision of such assistance be made a part of the overall WFS program. The ISI proposals to funding agencies have reflected concurrence with this recommendation.

Timetable.

Project Implementation Phase. Beginning in July, 1974, ISI anticipates that countries will begin field work for their surveys. During the three-year period from mid-1974 to mid-1977 it is hoped that all participating countries would at least complete field work during this time. By late 1977, ISI expects to have its first global reports, although tabulation, analysis and reporting of later surveys will no doubt extend beyond this period.

CONCLUSION

In important respects, the WFS can be thought of as an international scientific research program whose aims are closely congruent with those of the UN World Population Year, an event to which the WFS is conjoined. The activities to be promoted within the framework of the World Population Year are the collection of basic population data, research, training, and information activities; the WFS falls within each of these areas. One can do no better in describing the ultimate objectives of the WFS than to borrow the language of the Year: the WFS will seek

...to increase awareness and understanding of current and prospective population trends and their implications upon economic growth and social progress; to further the application of population data on all pertinent aspects of development planning such as planning for better education, improved health facilities, housing, employment, and economic growth; to encourage discussion of alternative solutions to population problems; to provide research and training activities on population; and where appropriate, to support the formulation and implementation of national policies and programs relating to population.*

*Statement by the Executive Director of the United Nations Fund for Population Activities, Mr. Rafael Salas, before the UN Population Commission at its Special Session, August 10, 1972.