Population Education, Some Comparative Perspectives: Singapore, Sri Lanka and Indonesia

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"The nature and scope of educational programmes are influenced by political and ideological orientations, and population education is not an exception to this rule. It is influenced by the views held in a particular society concerning the nature and significance of population matters in social, economic and political development and by the character and function of educational systems as such" (UNESCO 1978 [Paris]).

The objective of this study is to analyse, in comparative perspectives, the policies, issues and problems associated with the implementation of population education programmes in Sri Lanka, Singapore and Indonesia. All these countries have in common growing populations involving various ethnic and diverse religious groups. The inclusion of "population education" as one of the components of school curricula in these countries is of recent origin. Even though demographers Frank Lorimer and Fred Osborn (1943: 8) urged for the inclusion of this subject as far back as 1943, when North America was faced with a potential population decline, Asian countries have begun to give it serious consideration only after a population studies workshop was held in Bangkok in 1970. Population education gathered further momentum during the 1970s when the need for it was stressed by the World Population Conference held in Bucharest in 1974. In spite of the political rivalries and ideological differences in relating the relevance of population to socio-economic growth, the final document released at the end of the conference, World Population Plan Of Action, noted the universal importance and common need for introducing population education into the school's curricula. The document stated "educational institutions in all countries should be encouraged to expand their curricula to include a study of population dynamics and policies..." (U.N. 1975: 22). Although institutionalized innovation in the sphere of population education is now apparently intended to be a "permanent" feature in many Asian countries, it
is far from clear that current curriculum strategies are as effective as they might be in achieving the avowed published targets of national population policies and maintaining them in the long run. In certain countries the degree of formal support that is being provided for "in-school" population education programmes seems to be inadequate and in certain other countries the clearly prescriptive quality of the programme may even prove to be counter-productive in the long run.

**Nature and Scope of Population Education Policy**

In most Asian countries it is difficult to identify explicitly the stated government policy concerning population education. To overcome this problem the search for policy for us has had to extend beyond laws enacted by legislative bodies or officially published government documents from the various Ministries of Education. Accordingly, a public statement made by a person holding a senior and responsible position in a Ministry of Education or a report sent to an international organization by such a person or the objectives of "any program of more than trivial dimension, whose intent and possible consequences are clearly related to policy" (Nortman 1975) is considered in our study as a useful statement of policy. Similar to population policy, the nature and scope of population education policies in the three countries also reflect essentially political rather than educational realities of their situation. To understand the background to the assumptions underlying the present population education policies in these countries it is essential to draw heavily from the recent history of the present national population policies themselves.

A comparison of population policies of the three countries in our study reveal a close similarity between Indonesia and Sri Lanka, which is not necessarily discernible in Singapore. In both the former countries, although there has been a gradual conversion to the acceptance of progressive family planning attitudes over a number of years, especially during the past decade, government policies have often been inconsistent and at times contradictory. Sometimes such inconsistencies have been inevitably a function of political influence. As far back as 1948, the late S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, the then Sri Lankan Minister of Health, eloquently promised to give attention to "the population problem", but the government support for the Family Planning Association was officially approved only in 1954, a year after its establishment by private means. Since 1960, official attitudes have been more positive and in 1965 the government decided to engage itself actively in family planning programmes. Consequently, family planning became an integral part of the medical services provided by the Ministry of Health. Almost immediately, a major campaign was launched by the Buddhist clergy and individual politicians who supported the Sinhala Buddhist position. They declared the government programme totally inimical to the Sinhalese people and destined to undermine the ethnic composition of the country to the detriment of the majority ethnic group, the Sinhalese. This attitude was exemplified in the vehement correspondence in the press and the San newspaper noted "owing to the methods of birth control now being practised, in another hundred years time the majority community would be non-Sinhala and the Sinhala race would be reduced to the third place" (Sun, 26 August 1969; Ceylon