

THE NEW INTERNATIONAL POPULATION ORDER

Summary of presentation by Dr Joe Chamie,
Director of Research, Center for Migration Studies, New York
to Foreign Affairs Canada
September 22, 2005

Summary

For most of human history, the world's population remained relatively stable, due primarily to high mortality rates. However, in the 19th-20th centuries mortality rates began dropping significantly, first in developed countries and then through much of the developing world. Chamie calls this drop in mortality rates the single greatest achievement of humankind. As a result, the world has seen dramatic changes in global demographics through the 20th century:

- World population nearly quadrupled;
- The planet experienced its highest population growth rate, largest annual population increase, shortest doubling time for total population and shortest time to add 1 billion persons (1960s were the banner years);
- Revolutionary declines in mortality rates were accompanied by fast-dropping rates of fertility;
- International migration reached unprecedented levels; and
- Urbanization spread and, along with it, came the rise of mega-cities.

Projecting current trends forward suggests that the world's population by 2050 will range from almost 11 billion to about 8 billion (high to low variants), compared to about 6 billion today. Almost all that growth will occur in what is now the developing world, with India accounting for 22 per cent of the increase and China 11 per cent. Already, India's population growth over 6 days is equal to the EU's population growth in a *year*. Pakistan will experience very significant population growth and by 2050 will have a population of 300-400 million, surpassing Indonesia as the largest Muslim country in the world.

In contrast, industrialized countries are more likely to suffer population decline given their fertility rates are often now below replacement level. Immigration in some countries may be sufficient to keep population constant; in others, this will not be the case because the levels of immigration required for this would be socially unsustainable. Japan, Germany and Russia all face declining populations – with or without immigration. The United States will continue to grow, thanks both to immigration and higher fertility rates. Canada's population will also grow through to 2050.

Population growth will also be accompanied by population aging – in the industrialized world, but in some developing countries as well. This aging stems from declining fertility rates (fewer young people) and longer life spans (more elderly people). Italy and Japan will experience significant population aging by 2050. But so too will China, and China's will occur very rapidly. Population aging will increase dependency ratios (people in workforce vs those outside

workforce) and create significant policy challenges in such areas as workforce practices (hours and years of work), retirement ages, pension arrangements and the funding and provision of social assistance.

Implications: Dr Chamie noted that rapid population growth in some developing countries should be more closely examined by policy makers in the developed world. Pakistan will face significant challenges in managing unprecedented population growth. The same will be true in Haiti, where high population growth will take place against a backdrop of intractable poverty and political instability. There are bound to be spillover effects that will need to be addressed, and Chamie felt policy makers have not been taking sufficient account of the long-term implications of demographic trends in these and other countries.

Dr Chamie also noted that industrialized countries, particularly in Europe, are facing difficult social policy choices. Aging populations will put significant strains on existing social policy frameworks and programs. Fewer people will be working to support growing numbers of the elderly. It seems inevitable that people now in the workforce will have to work longer to compensate for aging populations. This is a very unpalatable message for any government to deliver. The temptation now is to deny difficult choices must be made, to put them off or to do nothing at all. In Chamie's view, action is required now and will require a bold vision, strong and enlightened leadership and the resources required to back up difficult social policy choices.

Discussion

Demography and geopolitics. Demography has important implications for the distribution of power within the international system, as well as for geopolitical dynamics within certain regions. Population size and wealth are fundamental building blocks of national power. Some traditional powers from the 20th century are facing declining populations in this century (in both absolute and relative terms). Very populous countries in the developing world are getting wealthier. What will this mean for their respective clout in the international system and how can the growing power of "emerging powers" be accommodated? Within some regions, such as the Middle East, shifting demographic balances play an important role in ongoing political conflict.

Demography and development: Family planning and improved reproductive health are important to reducing population growth in poor countries. However, experience shows that what is really needed is broadly based social and economic development, with a particular emphasis on providing access to education for girls and allowing women to play a stronger role in government and in the economy.

Does population size matter? Canada was a prosperous country at 20 million. Why couldn't it be prosperous again with a population of similar size? The problem, as Dr Chamie pointed out, is that far more of these 20 million people would be old, far fewer would be in the workforce and social programs would be under considerable strain as a result.

Responding to demographic challenges. In Dr Chamie's view, Europe has not yet come to terms with the implications of low fertility rates (below replacement levels) and aging populations. In some countries, there is a strong reluctance to consider increased immigration as one measure to address a coming demographic crisis. Many European countries are also loath to discuss reforms to generous social programs, pension schemes and retirement practices; such reforms are considered politically unacceptable. Schemes to increase fertility rates within developed countries are unlikely to succeed; women will not forego the economic opportunities they have won over recent decades to return to a life of early and lengthier periods of childbearing. Difficult decisions are unavoidable, and Canada, like Europe, will face them in such areas as age of retirement, employment benefits and rates of taxation. In Chamie's view, the time to act is now, but the political will and foresight is lacking in many governments.

Canada as a model. Chamie felt that Canada offered a very strong model to the world of a country that has embraced immigration and that integrates new arrivals into its society. While this may be true relative to practices in other countries, it was also noted that economic performance by immigrants to Canada has been slipping and that new arrivals from countries more removed from Canada's traditional sources of immigration are experiencing greater difficulty in fitting into Canadian society. This will pose a challenge if Canada faces greater competition for immigrants in the years ahead.