The United Nations World Population Conference in Bucharest, Romania, in August 1974, was the first international conference of governments to discuss population and development. It represented a breakthrough in a field that had, to that time, largely focused on technical aspects of population regulation—family planning programs, distribution and dissemination of contraceptive devices and methods, and research in demographic processes—and in which the major conferences had largely involved professionals in the field. The foresight and dedication of the United Nations system made possible a broadening of this approach to population issues.

The World Population Conference and related activities at Bucharest performed a major educational service in creating awareness of the salience of population change for development and political relations in all parts of the world. As hosts for this historic Conference, the Romanians did much to insure smooth proceedings and pleasant accommodations, and provided ample facilities for the wide variety of governmental and nongovernmental meetings that were held in Bucharest.

There are numerous difficulties in attempting to relate the occurrences and outcomes of a major international meeting on the sensitive issue of population. The Conference is criticized by many for not promoting a firm position on the exigencies of the world population situation. Yet, in the final analysis, the fact that there was a Conference is significant—even hopeful. Scholarly and professional disappointments aside, an accomplishment of the first magnitude was achieved at Bucharest.

This account is far more than the product of its four credited authors. Many colleagues provided helpful criticism and suggestions at several stages in the preparation of the report. The authors are particularly grateful, however, to two Council staff members for their valuable assistance: Ethel Churchill, for a penetrating editorial revision of the manuscript, and Susan Robbins for a final reading that evaluated the views and incorporated the relevant comments.
The United Nations World Population Conference, held in Bucharest, from 19–30 August 1974, was the focal point of World Population Year 1974. It was the first conference of government representatives to consider the relationship of basic demographic problems to economic and social development, as well as population policies and action programs needed to promote human welfare and development. Independent of the Conference but concurrent with it was the Population Tribune, a forum in which private individuals and representatives of nongovernmental organizations met to exchange views. Both the Conference and the Tribune placed an overwhelming focus on socioeconomic development, with population relegated to the lesser role of a contributing factor in the development process. This emphasis was reflected in the World Population Plan of Action, which was approved by 136 member states of the United Nations at the Conference, and in the variety of conferences, seminars, and discussions held throughout the period. Socioeconomic development was an underlying factor in many of the major positions advocated at Bucharest. The highlights of Bucharest are summarized on page 359.

That the 136 nation delegations were able to reach agreement on a final Plan of Action, despite their differences, was a highly significant accomplishment. Also, the Conference, the Tribune, and the wide variety of related activities succeeded in bringing the issues related to population out of the area of technical working groups and into the international political arena, where, many would argue, they rightly belong. Despite these accomplishments, the meetings left many questions unanswered. There was great emphasis on political idealism and little emphasis on the problems to come and possible solutions to them. No one disputes the need for socioeconomic development or sees family planning as a substitute for development, and yet these issues were major sources of conflict throughout the meetings. When the delegates left Bucharest, they had heard almost no discussion of successful family planning programs, nor had they considered the future roles of private, national, and international groups concerned with population. They had championed such ideals as improvements in the status of women, but had not considered how they were to be accomplished.

In these and other areas, the World Population Conference did not give clear directives to professionals active in the field of population. This may be viewed as a limitation, but it must be stressed that the Conference was a meeting of government delegations—the majority from countries that do not consider population to be a major factor in their development plans or policies; the issues covered and the resolutions reached at the Conference reflect this outlook.

BACKGROUND OF THE CONFERENCE

In April 1970, the United Nations Economic and Social Council approved the recommendation of the Population Commission that a World Population Conference of representatives of member states of the United Nations and members of specialized agencies be held under UN auspices in 1974. In December 1970 the General Assembly designated 1974 as World Population Year (WPY) and requested the Secretary-General to prepare, in consultation with interested member states, a detailed program of proposed measures and activities to be undertaken by the organizations of the United Nations system during 1974. In June 1972, the Population Commission was designated as the intergovernmental preparatory body for the World Population Conference and World Population Year, 1974.

The purposes of the World Population Year are to:

- Improve knowledge of and information about population trends;
- Sharpen awareness of population problems and their implications;
- Provide education on population, family life, and reproduction;
- Stimulate consideration of alternative policies in the population and development field; and
- Expand international cooperation in the population field and supply increased technical assistance to countries needing and desiring it.

One of the factors in the decision to have the World Population Conference was the success of the 1972 Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment. Another was the international interest in population questions, which is very strong and nearly unanimous, but arises from highly divergent and even contradictory viewpoints.

Responsibility for WPY was placed within the UNFPA, whose executive director is Rafael M. Salas. A special unit was created to take direct charge of fostering all activities except those centered on conferences sponsored by the United Nations. UNFPA financed, in large part, the United Nations' expenses for the year. The major activity during the year was the United Nations World Population Conference, under the direction of Antonio Carrillo-Flores, who was appointed Secretary-General of the Conference in 1972.

Prior to the Conference, four symposia were held, with the idea that they would contribute relevant materials to the Conference itself. The symposia were: Population and Development, Cairo, June 1973; Population and the Family, Honolulu, August 1973; Population, Natural Resources and Environment, Stockholm, September-October 1973; and Population and Human Rights, Amsterdam, January 1974. All of these were organized and managed with the assistance of the UN Population Division, directed by Leon Tabah, for the Secretary-General of the Conference.

The symposia were the principal means for synthesizing expert international scientific opinion into four of the basic documents of the Conference. These were:

- Recent Population Trends and Future Prospects
- Population Change and Economic and Social Development
- Population, Resources, and the Environment
- Population and the Family

A fifth basic document, the Draft World Population Plan of Action, was the central document at the Conference. The initial Draft Plan was prepared by the Population Division of the United Nations working under the direction of an Advisory Committee of Experts. The report of the Committee was reviewed and modified by the UN Population Commission and referred to the Committee of Experts. The final