



CAMPAIGN AGAINST THE NATIONAL POPULATION POLICY DRAFT

We have been a part of a national exercise by women's organizations and like-minded groups to run a campaign to influence the population policy which is to come into force after a debate in the Parliament. On 11th July we organized a public meeting to critique the whole population discourse and on this occasion one of the members of the expert committee dissociated with the expert committee, while agreeing principally with our critique. We present, the key elements of the population policy, and our critique to it, which was prepared with other women's organizations.

THE DRAFT NATIONAL POPULATION POLICY AND ITS CRITIQUE

The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare in July 1993 set up an Expert Group for preparing a draft National policy in pursuance of a recommendation of the Committee on Population of the National Development Council. The ten member Expert Group, chaired by M.S. Swaminathan, submitted its report in May 1994.

In the 'country statement', prepared by the Department of Health and Family Welfare. For the International Conference on Population and Development, held in Cairo in Sept. 1994, it is admitted that "there are real risks to the poor from economic reforms: adjustment hurts, be-

fore it helps. Input subsidies go before output prices rise. Labour is laid off before growth creates more employment. The long run success of the adjustment programme and of India's fuller development requires much attention to human resource development." However, the policy measures recommended by the Expert Group to deal with these concern are limited to reiterating the Minimum Needs Programme.

Although the members of the Expert Group felt that "wide ranging consultations should be held with organisations and individuals who have experience and expertise on matters relating to population and development", the entire process was shrouded in mystery. Neither the press nor concerned organisations had access to the Draft document, leave aside participating in discussions during its formulation. After the release of the Expert Group Report, women's organisations submitted a memorandum to its Chairman, highlighting its limitations and contradictions.

In its opening statements the Expert Group emphasises India's "rich cultural, religious, ethnic diversity and political pluralism" and refers to the "need for a proper gender perspective" in a population policy. It is claimed that a pro-women position has been taken. However, these positions are not reflected in the recommendations of the Group.

ity of life improvement measures, with a focus on education and population limitation methods. A State Population and Social Development Committee, composed of elected representatives of the people from different political parties, professionals, representatives of NGO's, women's groups, youth organisations and mass medias should promote the convergence of the on-going programmes and services. The State PSD Commission will also prepare a socio-demographic charter for the state as a whole, based on local charters."

These so-called "empowerment mechanisms" have the one point objective of "population containment". This intention comes through despite naming these Committees Population and Social Development Committees. No mention is made of how social development of the people is to be achieved.

(B) PROPOSED CHANGES

At the National level, the Policy has recommended several "fundamental changes", aimed at "replacing the present vertically structured family programme, with decentralised, democratic planning through Panchayats, Nagar Palikas and State Legislatures".

Proposed changes include:

(i) "Merging of MCH and FP services with the intention of promoting a holistic and comprehensive approach to health".

While the disbanding of the Family Welfare Department is a welcome move, since it is to be replaced by health planning based on local needs. A word of caution is order. Past experience has shown how such a merging would inevitably lead to further marginalisation of general health services. And an overwhelming emphasis on FP services. Moreover, far from dismantling the FP component of the Health and Family Welfare Dept. it is visualised that this role, "relating to policy, strategy, planning, monitoring, evaluation and IEC will be strengthened and enlarged under the population and Social Development Commission. It is supposed to

achieve linkages between gender equity and population goals, formulate and implement policies and strategies to achieve "convergence and synergy" among on-going programme; and ensure effective implementation, monitoring and evaluation. However its membership does not include the ministries of agriculture, industry, labour and employment, nor does the convergence of programmes refer to the programmes for employment and empowerment of poor women initiated by various ministries. It can therefore be concluded that the "convergence" refers to basically the programmes of the present Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. In the context of continuous failures of that Ministry to integrate these since the fourth Five year Plan there is reason to be extremely sceptical of the Expert Group's capacity to prevent the subservience of health services to achieving population control.

(ii) "No targets for specific contraceptive methods would be set by Central and State governments."

This appears to be a step in the right direction. Since it is well documented that the pressure to fulfil targets contributes to imposing coercive measures on people. However, the same subsection states that the "goal of achieving a national average of Total Fertility Rate (TFR) of 2.1 by the year 2010" is still to be striven for. One fails to understand how the target-oriented approach can be done away with while adhering to this overall goal.

(iii) "Incentives in cash or kind given by the Central and State governments for the accepters of contraceptive methods as well as to motivators and service provider will be discontinued. Instead, all the funds available ... will be credited to a newly created PSD Committee, for implementing the village, town, district and State level socio-demographic charters."

(iv) "The Life Insurance Corporation would be asked to draw up suitable schemes for group health insurance for workers in the organised sectors and their families."

At a time when macro economic policies are pushing more and more workers into unorganised sector, such band-aid measures do not have the ring of authenticity.

(C) RECOMMENDED MEASURES

The basic focus of the recommendations is on limiting family size arbitrarily. The new set of disincentives recommended are aimed to silence the majority of Indians.

1. The Expert Group holds up the un-democratic and unconstitutional Panchayat Raj Acts of Haryana and Rajasthan (which impose restrictions on the number of children as a qualification for contesting elections to the Panchayati Raj institutions) as models for the whole nation. Given the fact that the total fertility rate in India is estimated to be around 3.6, the Expert Group's recommendations will disable the majority of women and men from holding any public office.

ii. Having more than two children is also to be a disqualifier for getting employment in the organised sector.

"The service rules in the Central and State governments and their undertakings would be suitably modified to ensure that the small family norm is adopted by their employees... Promotion policies should be such that the adoption of small family norm is encouraged."

Such measures are nothing but incentives and disincentives (ostensibly recommended for discontinuation by the Expert Group), in another garb.

iii. Victims of child marriage i.e. all women married before the age of 18 or men before the age of 21 are to be debarred from recruitment in the organised sector. This is an extraordinary recommendation because the perpetrators of these crimes i.e. the families, the community and the government, which does nothing to enforce the law against such marriages are to be "empowered". The Expert Group has made no recommendation to improve enforcement of the law.

iv. A similar ignorance is displayed in the recommendation regarding adoption which is not permitted in the personal laws of many communities. The enabling secular Bill for adoption, alas, has been allowed to become a forgotten memory since the 70's, despite the efforts of many concerned citizens.

(D) STATUS OF WOMEN

While the disincentive suggested by the Expert Group are very definite, it would like population control programmes to acquire a positive image, hence the recommendation that they should provide choice to people and should do everything to raise the status of women to make it equal to men. It is claimed that "social empowerment mechanism" and vigorous steps to abolish vicious forms of discrimination such as dowry, female foeticide and infanticide are necessary to enable women to increase the age of their marriage and have free access to contraception. But the Expert Group is silent on the social approval that practices like female foeticide and infanticide have obtained from a substantial section of the elites and the government as they help reduce population growth. Thus the Expert group joins this section to regard women as variables to be manipulated to achieve population stabilisation. Are the promises of 'gender equality' designed to silence the women's organisations who have been consistent in opposing many aspects of existing policies?

"Every effort will be made to eliminate, before the end of the century, all discriminations against women. Steps will be taken to provide special care to the girl child and adolescent girls through higher levels of school enrolment, skill formation and income-generating capacity. This will also be conducive to raising the age at marriage and adoption of contraceptive methods based on informed choice."

For the Expert Group, thus, it appears that education and skill formation for girls is justified only because of its role in "population containment", and not as a goal of social develop-

ment, which remains at the level of empty rhetoric.

(E) RECOMMENDATION REGARDING PANCHAYATS

The Policy wants Panchayats to draw up population goals based on resource availability, but makes no reference to the redistribution of land and irrigation facilities or changing cropping patterns to conform to the needs of local residents. Can a rich farmer be asked by the local panchayat to use farm labour in preference to farm machinery? How then are the Panchayats to achieve harmony between resources, consumption and population?

(F) RECOMMENDATION REGARDING THE ROLE OF ARMY

We are particularly alarmed that the Policy recommends the "Army and paramilitary forces to promote the small family norm and population stabilisation on the analogy of the Ecological Battalions currently involved in overcoming environmental degradation."

(G) EDUCATION, RESEARCH AND MEDIA

Three decades of population education has already provided a mind set to a large section of the middle class that blames the poor for environmental degradation, poverty unemployment and shortages. It has also played a major role in destroying the ethical values of the medical profession and given rise to elite approval/sanction of gross violations of human rights in the name of population control. Despite this, the Expert Group recommends investing more resources for spreading the message around, as it is felt that "the infrastructure for implementing IEC measures, both at the Centre and the States, remains inadequate. The PSDC intends to establish Media Resource Centres at few locations, in order to encourage a decentralised approach."

"Research on biomedical and social sciences relevant to population stabilisation will be strengthened," though it has not yielded any meaningful solutions so far. In our opinion

higher investment in this field is unlikely to produce better results while resources are urgently needed for research on natural resource management and conservation.

Media messages to promote contraceptive usage are mostly no more than propaganda, reflecting literature provided by the producers and false dreams of the happy small family. The recommendation to intensify this IEC does not reflect the views of certain published writings of members of the Expert Group.

(H) INVOLVEMENT OF NON GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS (NGO's)

"A new climate of partnership between government and voluntary and non-governmental organisations will be created to encourage the extensive participation of such organisations at all stages and at all levels in national programme for population stabilisation and social development. The Expert Group envisages financial and technical assistance to NGO's for the purpose of population containment. Funds from the newly created PSD Fund will be diverted to NGO's. Thus, funds from bilateral donors, foundations and UN agencies will be routed directly to NGO's thereby giving direct access to these funding agencies to the grass roots. The State is now increasingly capitalising on the goodwill which many voluntary groups have managed to build up with people, and ensure acceptance of government programmes which would be resisted more clearly if they had come from the government programmes which would be resisted more clearly if they had come from the government itself. The voluntary sector needs to view such moves with caution, and strategies how to tackle this increasing exposure and onslaught on the people.

(I) FUNDS

"The Population and Social Development Fund (PSDF) will have the following source of revenue:

- a) Government of India funds, including the amounts presently spend on incentives.

- b) Bilateral donors.
- c) Foundations, multilateral donors and UN agencies including UNFPA (United Nations Fund for Population Activities).
- d) Corporate and Co-Operative sectors.
- e) Voluntary contribution from within the country as well as from non-resident Indians and foreign nationals".

Directing all foreign aid for population and social development to the Commission is likely to result in a monopolistic approach in which the needs of social development will become secondary to the achievement of demographic goals. Such a pooling of all external funds will also intensify donor pressures, with even greater tilt towards population control at the cost of social development, and the existing programmes for education, health and other social services will continue to be starved of resources.

(J) CONTRACEPTION AND BIOMEDICAL SERVICES

The stress on male contraception is welcome but it is difficult to agree with the recommendation to allow all contraceptives - especially those which are provider controlled - under the guise of "informed choice".

According to the Expert Group, "India has an efficient scientific set-up for testing for safety, effectiveness, reliability and acceptability of contraceptive methods before introducing them into the family welfare programme. "This faith in the scientific set up should be viewed in the light of the fact that a so called "efficient scientific set up" like the Indian Council for Medical Research, only studied NORPLANT-2 system of contraception, and based on these findings tried to introduce NORPLANT-6, which had not gone through the mandatory clinical trials, because NORPLANT-2 was not available in the market. This unethical and unscientific move was stalled only by the active intervention by women's groups in the capital.

We are surprised that the Expert Group did not undertake any cost benefit analysis of the

appropriateness of different technologies for a poor country like India.

A NORPLANT, for instance costs Rs. 2000, which is the medicine budget for an entire population under a sub-health centre. The cost of an imported injection of Depo-Provera is close to US \$ 30 or Rs 4,000 per year per woman, which the majority cannot afford. If such contraceptive are provided as a service by the health department these expensive items will compete with essential life saving drugs.

India cannot afford research on all methods of contraception just as its citizens cannot be provided with a menu card for every meal. The cafeteria approach for such sophisticated and expensive technologies is utterly inappropriate in our context, especially when recent research and action research already conducted by ICMR point to high utilisation of existing methods following improvement of quality of services. (The results of this study are still to be published.)

We must emphasis that fertility in the Indian context is dependent on the total circumstances of the lives of people as shown by demographic changes which have taken place in economies which have achieved higher levels of distribution of resources guaranteeing the right to life. This is also borne out by the relative lack of co-relation between birth rate and the couple-protection rate. Hence our conclusion that contraception is not the main key to lower fertility.

(K) GOALS

The placing of socio-demographic goals at the very end of the Expert Group's report suggests that it is an adjunct, of distinctly lower priority. We are concerned that though the goals have been expanded beyond the fertility rate to include implementation of the minimum needs programme, universalization of primary education, reduction in child marriage, maternal mortality rate and infant mortality rate etc. the Group has not proposed that these be monitored at the national level. The question of livelihood has been omitted altogether. In our opin-

ion engagement in socially useful productive work for just rewards is the key to sustainability of any social development. The principle of self-reliance rejects surviving on World Bank loans or donor charity. Besides some exploitative relationships have to end before equality and working for common social goals is possible. This is altogether absent from the Expert Group's report.

While the recommendation to include the child care within the Minimum Needs Programme is welcome, it must be emphasised

that support for minimum needs cannot cure inequality of access to resources and power.

The campaign is by no means over because this policy is yet to be approved by the Parliament. We have tried to lobby with some members asking for a minimum support to cull out coercive elements but feel that unless others join in lobbying we cannot make a headway. Therefore if you agree with our critique we will send you a draft for collecting support from elected representatives which you can use as a lobbying document.



VICTIMS SPEAK OUT AGAINST COERCIVE POPULATION CONTROL

"Small Family is a Happy Family" - the slogan is all too familiar. Government propaganda and empty promises have reached every little corner of India. At the same time that the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) was taking place in Cairo with much pomp and show, women's groups in Delhi had organised a "speakout" of victims of Family Planning abuses by the Government, on 10th Sep., 1994. The participating groups were Saheli, Jagori, Sabhla Sangh, along with the Human Rights Trust.

The objective was to expose the government population control policy, by focussing on the ground reality and women's experiences. While the government was trying to present itself in a good light in the international arena, it was necessary to bring out the true nature of its anti-people and anti-women policies.

Some of the cases presented were actual testimonies of women, while others were drawn from surveys and working with women at the basti level.

SANTOSH : Twenty three years old Santosh from Seemapuri, whose husband earns Rs. 1,500/- per month as a peon in the Home Min-



istry, has two children. With the belief that a small family would indeed contribute to happiness, she got an IUD inserted in April '92 at the local health centre. The following month, she had very heavy bleeding, and two months subsequently had no bleeding at all. Since her