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# Demography in the 21st century in Latin America\*

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## *Abstract*

In this article, an account of the Demography appearance in Latin America and of its main research lines during the 20<sup>th</sup> century is made, largely oriented to analyze the evolution of the demographical dynamics and to prepare projections to allow knowing the populations' possible future evolution, whose results were of advantage for the governments to adopt measures in order to modify the demographic behavior of the population. In a similar way, and according to the new social, economic, and demographical realities, new application fields are proposed, as well as collaborations of the theory and demographic methods with other scientific disciplines in respect to demographic transition, population's geographical concentration, employment, international migration, family, education, poverty, environment, sustainable development and computing application to demographical studies

*Key words:* demography, demographic transition, demographic research, Latin America.

## *Resumen*

*La demografía en el siglo XXI en América Latina*

En este artículo se hace un recuento del surgimiento de la Demografía en América Latina y de sus principales líneas de investigación durante el siglo XX, en gran medida orientadas a analizar la evolución de la dinámica demográfica y preparar proyecciones que permitieran conocer la posible evolución futura de las poblaciones, cuyos resultados fueron aprovechados por los gobiernos para adoptar medidas tendentes a modificar el comportamiento demográfico de la población. Así mismo y de acuerdo con las nuevas realidades sociales, económicas y demográficas, se proponen nuevos campos de aplicación y colaboración de la teoría y los métodos demográficos con otras disciplinas científicas en materia de transición demográfica, concentración geográfica de la población, empleo, migración internacional, familia, educación, pobreza, medio ambiente, desarrollo sustentable y aplicación de la informática a los estudios demográficos.

*Palabras clave:* Demografía, transición demográfica, investigación demográfica, América Latina.

## Demography in the 21st century in Latin America

Since the end of the XIX century few Latin American countries have been taking population censuses, which allowed them knowing not only the size of their populations and their distribution along the territory, but also

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knowing some of their characteristics, such as gender and age. But it is until the first half of the XX century —when the Inter American Institute of Statistics (IASI) launches its Americas' Census Program (COTA)— that a large number of countries from the region participate in such program taking population censuses in 1950 with a certain degree of uniformity in the content of the census billets.

The results from these censuses, when compared to the data available at the time, confirmed that the populations from most of the Latin American countries were growing at a very fast pace. The annual population growth rate in some cases was close to or even exceeded three percent annually; such rate would allow duplicating the number of inhabitants in a short period of time. The same situation seemed to be taking place in other under developed regions of the world.

This population growth, which was considered as explosive, raised concerns in the developed countries, and being aware that in general in Latin America there were not personnel trained in Demography, it was proposed at a General Assembly of the United Nations to adopt some resolutions, recommending that the under developed regions created centres that, besides forming human resources capable of undertaking the study of their population's behaviors, assisted technically those countries requiring research whose results provided judgment elements to evaluate such behaviors, analyzing the dynamic that determined their growth rate and the possible mortality and natality evolution.

In Latin America it was looked for the application of the resolution of the United Nations Assembly by means of the establishment of a centre as the recommended ones. This action took place in Chile in 1957. It is how in the mid XX century the application of the Demography in the region starts to develop, at the same time that it was tried to train professional personnel who could apply their knowledge on this discipline to the analysis of the demographic behavior in the different countries.

Initially, in 1958, the Latin American and the Caribbean Demography Centre (Celade), created as a result of the UN's recommendation, began to provide 10-month lectures on demographic analyses, where the main sources of demographic data and the methods used to collected them were studied. To these courses attended small groups of state functionaries as scholarship holders, mainly from census or statistic departments, and whose candidacies were proposed by their respective governments.

At the same time Celade presented its lectures on demographic analysis at its premises and at another location later established in San Jose with the

collaboration of the University of Costa Rica, it also helped assisting technically some countries willing to analyze the data from their population censuses in order to evaluate how their demographic dynamic evolved and to prepare projections that allow them knowing the possible future evolution of their population, data the State could use to take measures directed to modifying the population's demographic behavior.

The studies carried out in the 1960's and 1970's with the collaboration of Celade and the availability of professionals who had been trained in demographic analysis confirm that, with the exception of Argentina, Uruguay, Chile and Cuba, in the other countries of the region, and specially in the Central American and some South American countries, the populations grew fast due to a descending mortality and a fecundity; stabilized at relatively high levels.

Then, in some circles, mainly of the United States, raises the proposal that the low economic growth levels that in general presented in the Latin American countries were mainly due to the high demographic growth rates, which makes them destine increasing resources to meet their inhabitants' needs. This led to the proposal that our countries should adopt measures directed to decrease the demographic growth, which indeed was done. Since these measures are well known it is not necessary for us to describe them here. But it is important to mention that in a few years those countries' population growth rates decreased significantly, although it has to be highlighted that the economic growth and development rates did not increase; these practically did not varie, and in some cases they even worsen.

Before analyzing the exam of the demands proposed to the Demography in the XXI century it is necessary to highlight that Celade opted for organizing at a first stage the teaching of the demographic analysis, which implied the application of the formal Demography, whose development is supported significantly in statistic methods, considering that in the beginning, in 1958 and 1959, what the countries would demand from Celade would be estimations of the basic demographic variables: fecundity and mortality, evaluating the coverage degree of their information sources, analysis of the population's differentials and their distribution in the territory, as well as their possible future evolution, based on population's projections, this means, elements that allowed knowing and describing how the respective demographic dynamic modified the size, distribution the age and gender structure of their populations. Nonetheless, later, at different times of the second half of the XX century, in Mexico and Brazil Masters Degrees on Demography were organized (Brazil, Cedeplar, 1964; México,

Ceed,<sup>1</sup> 1964) which years later were extended to Doctorates (Brasil,<sup>2</sup> Cedeplar, 1985 and Nepo, 1985, and México, 1985) and currently there are the Masters and Doctorate in Demography dictated at the National University of Cordoba, Argentina.

In order not to unnecessarily extend the exam of the evolution presented in Latin America in the studies of Demography and in their populations in the second half of the XX century, it is important to examine what is happening in those populations in the present time. This is the situation that will determine how the application of the Demography as a science evolved in the region to support their societies and their governments in the understanding of the social, economic, health and environmental phenomena that affect their populations and are affected by their behavior.

Due to the measures adopted, in all the countries of the region the demographic growth annual rate decreased at different degrees, product mainly of the descent of the fecundity, which has led to called demographic transition, that according to its advancement degree, has modified the age structures that, in general, are characterized by a decrement of the proportion of people under 15 years of age, an increment of the young people between 15 and 19 years of age, an increment in the population in working ages of between 20 and 59 years of age, and what is provoking more concern: an important growth of the 60 and over age group.

## **Latin America and the Demography in the XX century**

### *Demographic transition and evolution of the age structures*

Currently it is of the utmost priority, to estimate how the populations in Latin America will transform the structures by age and which the relation that these will have with the evolution of conditions such as education, health and the incidence of diseases, the population's distribution pattern in the territory, the employment levels and characteristics, and the fecundity and mortality levels is.

<sup>1</sup> Which constitutes a great example of the curricula's transformation. From Centro de Economía y Demografía (CEED) (*Economy and Demography Center*) changed to be the Centro de Estudios de Demografía y Desarrollo Urbano (CEDDU) (*Demography Studies and Urban Development Center*), and currently it is the Centro de Demografía, Desarrollo Urbano y Ambiente (CEDDUA) (*Urban Development and Environment*).

<sup>2</sup> Ruiz (2005).

The study and evaluation of three age groups have attracted special attention by the direct relation they have with the social transformations. These are: adolescents and young adults, whose higher growth presents the need of adopting special measures directed to that group to meet their multiple problems.

The second group is that of the population in working ages, whose growth is, in some countries called by some professionals "demographic bonus", a totally erroneous label since in those countries, as in general in Latin America, there is a high unemployment rate, so that the growth of that group makes even more complicated the already difficult problem of the lack of use or sub-use of the potential work force. The growth of this population group, with high unemployment levels, worsens the problems of the social systems in Latin America since a great percentage of the population does not contribute to the systems' fees, complicating even more the inter-generation solidarity problem.

The growth of the population of 60 years and older, designed by the United Nations as "older adults", is the one that provokes more concern since it is a group that has a high percentage of "dependency", because they are retired from the economic activity, or because they have never worked (as the case of many women). It is obvious that this group presents important demands: maintenance by a relative or the government, if he or she does not belong to any social security system, which happens very frequently, especially among those in the most advanced ages (80 years and older). Another demand is that of medical attention, which frequently requires hospitalization for as the people gets older their health deteriorates severely.

In the study of this group it would be very useful to be able to estimating values of life expectancy for groups with different characteristics.

In the three previous cases the formal demographic analysis is not enough. Now it is indispensable to establish relations, formulating analysis and arriving to conclusions regarding how to reach the proposition of solutions to solve the problems the evolution of these age structures among the social groups present the economic and social development of the country. Let us call it a substantive demography.

### *Urban concentration of the population*

An important number of cities of Latin America develop without any order at all, with high concentrations of population in the city's periphery, where environmental problems arise; problems that sometimes affect negatively the population's

health, especially when they do not have the essential services (potable water, excretion disposal, lack of trash recollection). Similarly, there are some transportation problems and disorderly exploitation of the available natural resources.

Generally, this urban concentration takes place at the expense of the rural areas, from where the population emigrates due to the lack of agricultural lands, which are commonly owned by a few people, with the consequential pauperization of important groups of the population that are forced to emigrate to the city.

It is very important that demographers, along with professionals from other disciplines, when in search of effective solutions, address the study of the problems derived from the high urban concentration and from the excessive rural emigration, which are not only creating environmental problems, but also some problems related to the survival of the population from these areas. The studies on internal migration can be seen as oversimplified because they are generally limited to measurements without an analytical research on causes and effects, the magnitude of affected groups and their differential characteristics.

Quoting Cepal it is important to consider that "in order to analyze the relations between the population and the environment an approach that includes, besides the demographic trends, matters related to the population's production and consumption patterns has to be applied, which also pays attention to the policies and the technological breakthroughs directed to impede the ecosystem degradation"(Cepal, 1993: 69).

### *Employment and population growth problems*

Data from the census on economically active population (EAP) has allowed measuring everything related to the employment, but it is necessary to go further in the analysis of this several-angled phenomenon and which turns vulnerable in a great extent important groups of the low-educated population affected by poverty, and in general, with precarious living conditions.

This is yet another case where measuring the phenomenon is not enough. In the search for solutions to these imperative problems, Demography has to contribute to the characterization by age, gender, geographic localization and education and qualification levels of the groups affected by the scourge of unemployment, which is presented in different forms: informal employment, sub-

employment. Also the demography has to set clear the impact of unemployment on the social security systems.

### *International migration*

Apart from the analyses performed in the past on immigrant movements toward Argentina, Uruguay, Chile and Brazil, Mexico is the one that recently is studying more systematically and persistently Mexican migration toward the United States. Nowadays however, there are international migratory movements of different nature in several countries of the region, and this is not the so-called "brain drain". Currently large numbers of poorly-educated immigrants, worn-out for the unemployment and poverty in their countries are moving. It has already been mentioned by some Latin America authors that the traditional measuring tools of international migration are quite limited for the study and analysis of the movements that today have different characteristics, virtually unprecedented.

Here lies a field that presents Demography the challenge of contributing to the analysis of the impacts these new movements have in the places of origin, in the destination places, which can be qualified as transitory, and the final places. Which the main characteristics of those who move are: family structure, age and gender groups, activities in their places of origin, everything that necessarily implies improving and increasing the related data sources.

### *The family*

The analyses of the family's behavior and evolution as part of the demographic changes that have taken place in the region have not been deeply studied. The great social, economic and political transformations that occurred in many countries of the region in the second half of the XX century and the first years of the XXI century have significantly affected the family's organization, their roles and in their interaction with other social beings.

The Latin American Demography cannot continue ignoring the urgency of contributing to the study of the evolution suffered by the family and the demographic effects derived from that. A document by Susana Torrado, cited in the bibliography, is a key element for definitions in this field.



*Population, education and development*

For most of the Latin American countries, and especially those from Central America and the Caribbean, the development of the educative system and the benefit of adequate education services for the population present problems that at times seem unavoidable. Demography can and must contribute to shape some of the characteristics of this phenomenon: age and gender structure and spatial distribution, according to the category of the potential users of the educational system contrasted with what is actually registered. Aside from allowing the exact measurement of the systems coverage makes the examination of problems such as the little coverage in the different educative levels easier. This way it would contribute to evaluate one of the objectives of the Millennium development proposed by the United Nations.

An exchange among demographers and educators must contribute to the development of methodologies applicable to the measurement and the evaluation of the aspects such as: the distribution of the docents in the system and their degree of qualification, evaluation of the students' learning and some administrative aspects of the educative system, as it is the services' geographic decentralization

*Poverty and population growth*

The trend that until recently and frequently occurred in the researches on population and poverty, that of attributing the existence of poverty to the population's growth has been, fortunately saved and today it is acknowledged that the poverty is linked to the social and economic conditions that create it.

Among these conditions is the noteworthy economic inequity present in practically every country of Latin America. The region is catalogued in the international studies as one of the zones with the largest inequities in the world. This social injustice places some groups from our populations in marginal situations regarding employment (unemployment, sub-employment, informal employment), education (illiteracy, elementary school). Along with sociologists and economists, the demographer is capable and must contribute to the analysis to determine which population groups are the most affected by the inequity and poverty conditions. Only by clarifying these relations it will be possible to propose the adoption of measure policies directed to erasing those inequities.

### *Population and sustainable development*

As the aforementioned economic and social problems affecting our countries have been solved, the anathema accusing the population's growth of such struggles has been vanishing, and a better understanding of the population's growth dynamics has been reached. However, new situations present new needs for research. The attention paid now to the environment, ecologic issues, as well as the protection of the natural resources has turned the study of the population growth and the sustainable development into a very important issue. Economists and demographers now have to focus on researches that allow establishing the current relations between these two phenomena.

### *Informatics and demographic studies*

The remarkable development in the informatics field, particularly in the application of computing into the scientific research, presents the demographers the need of applying these new methods in order to extend the possibilities of research subjects whose study has not been done since they require long and complicated mathematic operations.

To sum up, these are not the only issues that will have to be met in the future in a deeper way, but it is the demographers' responsibility, trained in programs that transcend the formal Demography, the contribution for the widening of the discipline's boundaries.

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