

Two grave problems were facing the world in the mid-1960s: Atomic war and the population explosion. As I frequently pointed out in my Editorials in *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews* that if we did not find the solution to the dangers of an atomic war, it might well solve the population explosion. Therefore when the United Nations held a Conference on World Population, I asked to cover it for the *Daily Telegraph* and this was—by then as a matter of almost routine—approved.

Before the opening of the 12-day conference in Belgrade, a policy statement had been issued by the UN Headquarters in New York stating that “The United Nations will give in future more technical assistance to governments to implement population control methods.” Brave words indeed, as it was also laid down in the articles of the conference that “there would be no direct proposals for action nor any specific recommendations.”

The first U.N. Conference on World Population had been held in Rome in 1954, and the subject had since then become ever more urgent, so that for the second conference in Belgrade in August—September 1965, in excess of 1000 scientific and medical experts from 60 countries had assembled and presented more than 500 papers. As usual on such occasions, I could only report on one or two significant statements which were published in abstract.

Dr B.R. Sen, the distinguished Indian economist and later a Nobel Laureate, then the Director General of the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organisation, stated bluntly the only two alternatives: “Birth control or starvation”. Of course, he also mentioned in his key-note address that vastly increased investments in agricultural productivity could offer a solution but “a sustained effort to expand production may be lost in a feeling of despair.” He doubted that the financial resources required would be forthcoming.

An alternative to increased food production—better still as a concomitant to it—was birth control, family planning or population stabilisation as it was variously referred to at the conference. Oral contraceptives, one speaker reported, were then used by 3.5 million women in the U.S.A., but caused some concern among doctors. As an alternative, the Intra-Uterine Contraceptive Device, then relatively new, was recommended, as it was entirely independent of a person’s psychology and social background. Population forecasts were most alarming and a doubling of the existing world population of 3500 million by the end of the century, then in the next 35 years, was predicted. It nearly came true. [See also Titles 388 and 390]