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INTRODUCTION

St. Vincent and the Grenadines like many of its Caribbean
neighbours is subject to a range of peculiar characteristics which
necessitate the delicate balancing of the population and development
variables in order to ensure the survival of this small island
developing state.

Specific reference is made to:

the small size and open dependent economy; the susceptibility to
external changes;

The effects of migration on the island's demographic structure
and its significance for sustainable development; and

The single export crop (bananas) on which this agricultural based economy is dependent and the indiscernible future which this crop faces on the international market.

Together, though not exclusively, these characteristics create a high degree of vulnerability in the St. Vincent and the Grenadines' economy; a situation clearly illuminated by the 5.5% economic growth averaged during the five (5) year period 1987 - 1991, followed immediately by the current decline which this state has been experiencing over the past three (3) years (1992 - 1994).

St. Vincent and the Grenadines' increasing Per Capita Income resulting from the 87 - 91 growth period, catapulted this island state into a middle income developing country, a status which potentially bars access to concessional funds from lending agencies. However the effects of the banana shock which the country has encountered over the past two (2) years have impacted negatively on the living standards of the population.

Critical Population Issues

Despite the achievements over the past decade with a declining birth rate contributing to a 1980 - 1991 intercensal average growth rate of 0.8% per annum, the population is still structurally young. The under 15 dependent group accounts for 37.2% (39,626) of the total population with a dependency ratio of 77:100. The states' responsibility to this group requires the provision of school places, health care service and recreational facilities. It is well understood that investment in these areas is critical for sustainability, but because per capita cost of investment is high in these very areas and resources are limited,

progress is moderate.

The most significant group in the population is the 15 - 44's, accounting for 45.6% (48,580) of the total. The demands of this group are for jobs and housing. Applying the international definition of employment to this developing state, the 1991 Census report indicates an unemployment rate of 19.8% (8,238 from a total labour force of 41,682) with those in the 15 - 29 age range being most severely affected.

No developing state can be complacent about this level of unemployment among its young people because of the numerous social ills associated with this.

The 45 - 65 group accounts for 10.7% (11,360) of the total population and here the demand for health care begins to increase after having been kept relatively low between 15 - 44 years.

The 6.5% (6,916) in the 65+ group may appear insignificant when compared with some of the other islands but their demand for geriatric care is now beginning to make itself felt.

It is Government's responsibility to provide the needs of each group and it is the limitation on the resources for providing these needs with which Planners, Policymakers and Government must grapple. Moreover the availability and accessibility of these services to the population are integral parts of any country's development.

Other indicators reveal very interesting characteristics, and suggest further critical areas of concern. The current fertility rate is 2.8 and expected to remain more or less at this level into the year 2000; the crude birth rate of 24/1000 is also anticipated to hold, with

the possibility of a marginal decrease by 2000. The infant fertility rate, showing a sustained, downward trend over the last ten (10) years is now 17/1000 and expected to fall to about 12/1000 by 2000. Life expectancy has increased to 69.7 and 72.2 years respectively for males and females. With the restrictions imposed traditional receiving countries, migration opportunities are far below what they were in the 1960's and 1970's.

With this combination of reduced migration opportunities, increased life expectancy and a lowered infant mortality rate together with the number of women of child bearing age in the population (20.5% [21,8%]) it is projected that the population would be 114,569 by 2000, growing at an annual average rate of 0.75% per annum.

population Density and Distribution By virtue of the island's topography, all major settlements are located along the island's coast line with some 25% (26,625) of the population being concentrated in the southern cone - where it is relatively easier to provide and access jobs, education, health care and other amenities. The population growth over the last twenty (20) years however, has brought some pressure to bear on these settlements and has encouraged urban drift, creating several squatter settlements without benefit of the basic infrastructural support.

In an effort to stem the rural urban drift and to reduce the incidence of these unplanned settlements, Government has implemented a land reform programme designed to improve the economic situation in the rural areas, expanded rural health and education facilities and invested heavily in the transport sector offering workers the option of commuting to the workplace instead of migrating to the urban area.

Unemployment and Women

As earlier mentioned, St. Vincent and the Grenadines' unemployment rate from the 1991 Census was 19.8% (8,238). Since then, as has occurred in the other Windward Islands, the contribution of bananas to domestic exports and the GDP has declined from and.....to and respectively. Additionally, there has been a decline in the previously small but growing manufacturing sector

Even with the absence of empirical data, this combination would suggest a decrease in the island's economically active population in a situation where the capacity to readily absorb displaced labour is limited. Added to this, the cohorts of school leavers who annually enter the labour market and the scenario is disquieting.

Women are more affected by unemployment than men and among the unemployed, there are more women with secondary and post-secondary education 14% (1,133) than men 11% (925). 39.3% (10,617) of all household heads in St. Vincent and the Grenadines are women and the Census data show that of these, 46.2% (4,902) were economically active in 1991 while more than half, 53.8% (5,715) were unemployed.

The events occurring over the past two (2) years and are even now continuing, must surely impact on these female household heads - as well as other groups in the population but women were brought into focus here because they are the most vulnerable and significant group in St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

Access to employment is an important determinant in the quality of life.

Housing and the Environment

Over the last ten(10) years, St. Vincent and the Grenadines has experienced a tremendous rise in the demand for housing and in the wake of a 33.08% increase in housing units from 20,290 in 1980 to 27,002 in 1991, has sustained some environmental damage.

Tree cover has been lost as forested areas have been and continue to be cleared to meet the demand for housing. These unplanned settlements create problems of erosion and affect the potable water supply as pollutants are introduced into the water system. Pressure is also brought to bear on the existing social services as efforts must be made to meet the needs of these settlements.

As the population continues to grow and man encroaches on environmentally-sensitive areas, it can be expected that the island's delicately balanced eco-system will be disrupted.

Health

The results of the 1991 Census show significant gains in maternal and infant mortality, life expectancy, child immunisation and nutrition, an indication of the general health improvement of the population. Notwithstanding this, the lifestyle diseases (particularly hypertension and diabetes) continue to be of concern, while the incidence of HIV/AIDS and drug abuse pose the major health hazards.

The presence of HIV in the St. Vincent and the Grenadines' population cannot be downplayed especially when taken together with the

age structure of the population and the early sexual activity manifested in the average 24% births to teenagers annually. The effect of HIV/AIDS on the work force and the pressure on the health care system cannot be underestimated.

Education

Education appears to be the point of departure for all discussion of population issues in St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

While access to primary school education is almost universal, there is a severe short-fall in places at the secondary level with 46% (6,949) of the children of secondary school age being enrolled in secondary school, where girls outnumber boys almost 2 to 1.

However, because the system is academically oriented, many aspiring entrants to the job market find themselves without the skills needed to secure employment and girls are more affected than boys. This mismatch of formal education with the demands of the economy is further aggravated by a weak non-formal base creating conditions for many of the social problems we see today.

Conclusion

As we enter the 20th century, cognizant of the need to retard population growth, we are also fully aware that this Conference is not simply about the issue of numbers only. Like the other small Caribbean countries, our resources are limited and we require special attention, support and assistance in effectively managing our population and development issues.

Our experience has shown that our success in achieving high levels of economic growth and development, accompanied by increased educational opportunities for women and other low income groups, together with the availability, accessibility and acceptability of Family Planning methods have been the pillars of our declining population growth rate from 1.17% in the 1970's to the current 0.77% the lowest recorded since 1931.

Our realisation of an acceptable rate of population growth compatible with sustainability is dependent on our national effort as well as the co-operation and assistance which we can obtain from the international community.

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