

## **The Cairo Conference: Implications for Population Activities**

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### *Abstract*

The 1994 Cairo conference achieved greater consensus than the previous conferences in 1974 and 1984. This is partly due to the focus on individual level considerations and on women's interests in particular. While applauding these outcomes, the paper also raises some concerns related to ways of giving priority to population questions in development.

### *Résumé*

La conférence du Caire en 1994 a réussi un plus grand consensus que les conférences de 1974 et 1984. Ceci est dû en partie à la plus grande concentration sur les considérations au niveau des individus et sur l'intérêt des femmes en particulier. Tout en supportant ces orientations, nous soulevons certaines questions concernant la façon de donner priorité aux questions de population dans le développement.

*Key Words:* population, development, conference, environment, women

The Cairo conference achieved more consensus than had occurred on previous occasions, but continued research and discussions are necessary regarding the difficult issues of population and development. In part, the greater consensus was achieved by recognizing many interrelationships, but this also presents problems of loading many things on the population agenda without establishing priorities. The emphasis on the empowerment of women was also key to establishing consensus, but here again one can raise questions regarding priorities. Without establishing population goals, the conference sought to promote a population trajectory below the medium variant in United Nations projections. Much is needed in order to achieve these objectives.

These reflections are divided into four parts: (1) importance of the population issue at the world level, (2) individual and collective interests in population questions, (3) population issues and the empowerment of women, and (4) alternative scenarios of future world population growth.

*Importance of the Population Issue at the World Level*

One could argue that it has taken a long time for the world community to face the issue of population. While there remains controversy over the importance of the issue, Cairo has achieved more consensus than previous conferences.

At the 1974 conference in Bucharest, the draft document was oriented to having countries agree to reduce fertility and to promote contraception as a means of achieving these objectives. However, at the conference, many countries of the Third World did not agree with this priority. They argued that population questions were very much secondary to the broader issues of development, and it was even proposed that "development is the best contraceptive". While there was agreement to try to integrate population questions in development planning, there was also a strong feeling that development must come first. Many felt that population questions were a first world agenda, an attempt on the part of the countries of the North to reduce the size of the countries of the South.

At the 1984 conference in Mexico, there was much more agreement on the part of Third World countries that both development and family planning were important to their future. This time it was the United States that argued that "population is a neutral factor", that is, it plays a minor role in economic development. This corresponded to a Reganonomics view that there should be less government, that population policy was an imposition, that we should let the marketplace work things out.

At the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio, there was again much difficulty in facing these issues. Third World countries wanted the rich developed countries to take more of the blame for the environmental problems. On the other hand, the rich countries wanted Third World countries to face issues of population growth. In a simple way, we could say that Rio recognized the problems of environment but faced only half of them. It faced styles of consumption in the North (making specific proposals on things like energy usage) but not population growth in the South (hardly even mentioning questions like family planning). In that sense, Cairo has completed some of the agenda that was too sensitive to be faced in Rio.

There is certainly still controversy of various kinds, including controversy on how to define the issues and on how much priority to give to population questions. In effect, research is not conclusive on this kind of bottom line. There are estimates suggesting that the world could feed some 20 or 30 billion people, that is five times the current number. Other estimates suggest that the planet could not sustain twice the size of the current middle class at their levels of consumption. Roughly speaking the world has a middle class of one billion people, people who put much stress on the environment given their life style and their numbers. But

there are problems with either the 20-30 billion people that the world could feed, or the two billion at middle class levels of consumption. For the former, we could ask if that is the goal, to feed as many people as the world can hold. Two billion people with levels of consumption of the middle class also seems inappropriate, surely this abusive consumption needs to be reduced.

Consequently, research cannot give us a bottom line on this kind of question. While research can be useful, and there needs to be more research on population, consumption and sustainable development, policy makers cannot expect research to answer the question.

Nonetheless, the policy makers from around the world gathered at Cairo reached considerable consensus that population is an important issue, that slower growth of the world population would be better, and that it would be best if we were on a trajectory of growth that would result in stabilization of the world population sooner rather than later. People have reached this conclusion in a variety of ways: some have noted environmental problems and are concerned with things like carbon dioxide concentration or loss of species, many Third World governments have noted the difficulty of keeping up with services for an expanding population, especially health and education services, others have noted the tremendous growth of mega cities and their problems, and some have noted all the unemployed and underemployed youth who are demanding a place in the world. By whatever means, given policy makers have reached the kind of view expressed in the Cairo document Paragraph 1.2:

Around the world many of the basic resources on which future generations will depend for their survival and well-being are being depleted and environmental degradation is intensifying, driven by unsustainable patterns of production and consumption, unprecedented growth in population, widespread and persistent poverty, and social and economic inequality. Ecological problems, such as global climate change, largely driven by unsustainable patterns of production and consumption, are adding to the threats to the well-being of future generations. There is emerging global consensus on the need to increased international cooperation in regard to population in the context of sustainable development ...

That is my first point; I have a sense that there is greater consensus on the importance of the population issue. Of course, there remains disagreement, in part because these are questions on which we cannot expect a hard scientific answer.

*Population Questions: Individual and Collective Interests*

The above paragraph already makes the case that there are many interrelated considerations. In preparing for the Cairo conference, many persons and agencies were involved. In part, this is because many people want to be part of the action that a big conference brings. Of course, these people often have other agendas and they are trying to bring that agenda forward in this kind of international arena. It is useful to quote in this regard the position paper by the Ecumenical Monitoring Group of the Canadian Council of Churches (1994):

In the preparatory discussions for Cairo between officials of the Canadian government and non-government organizations—including women's groups—the issue of population growth has been left off the list of issues to be addressed in Cairo.

Part of the reason that population growth was being left off the agenda by certain groups who were having an input into the conference preparations, was that population has a "bad name" in certain quarters. For many, "population" means "population control". This can mean constraints on individuals. That is, it can mean justifying state imposed constraints in a core area of our lives relating to reproduction.

One could argue that the conference handled this well by focusing on ways of enhancing individual well-being rather than by justifying state imposed constraints. That is, the conference did not want to set any demographic targets. Instead, sexual and reproductive health, including family planning, were to be seen as means of enhancing individual well-being.

While this focus on individual well-being moved the conference away from the problems of "population control", one could argue that there are also disadvantages associated with this approach. That is, there is a strong dependence on individuals making the right choices for the common good. In particular, the wording is that:

All couples and individuals have the basic right to decide freely and responsibly the number and spacing of their children and to have the information, education and means to do so (Principle 8).

Clearly, these are good concepts. Just as people can be responsible toward the environment by recycling, they can be responsible parents. In making decisions on numbers of children, we should be responsible toward our existing children, toward the future, toward the community, country and world. That is, the conference pushes in the direction of people taking control over this aspect of

their lives: (1) it is legitimate and good to control one's reproduction, and (2) small families are better. That is, the conference promotes values and norms wherein small families are seen as "good" and "appropriate". Of course, depending on the circumstances, responsible parenthood can also mean an encouragement for people to take responsibility for the regeneration of the population into the next generation, and for societies to find ways to support this regeneration.

However, another thing is implied by the focus on individual well-being, as contrasted with the common good. In particular, there are many other things that would enhance individual well-being. Citing Demeny (1994: 20-21):

If one justifies family planning programmes as serving exclusively the private needs of their clients, this places such programmes in direct competition with a wide range of potential services that could also provide welfare-enhancing goods to persons in need. ... The range of potential competing claims for scarce public resources is, of course, wide. This is well illustrated by the [Cairo] Programme's exhortation that 'high priority should be given to ... meeting the needs ... of all underserved members of society. But who are the 'underserved'? The [Document] provides a specific enough answer: 'children, adolescents, women, the aged, the disabled, indigenous peoples, rural populations, urban populations, migrants, refugees, displaced persons and slum-dwellers'. The development policy puzzle adumbrated by such a list is evident. If these are the underserved, who should be their servers? And what would constitute a fair list of the unmet needs of the underserved besides their unmet needs for reproductive services? And who decides what is the proper order of priority among these needs, assuming, reasonably enough, that all needs cannot be satisfied? It is not clear that reproductive services would necessarily rank very high in such a competition.

These comments recall the earlier observation, that everyone and everyone's concerns want to be part of the action. In the circumstance, it is important for groups who are concerned with population and development to push for placing services involving family planning and reproductive health high on the agenda. To put this in historical context, it is useful to quote from the letter which the United Church of Canada wrote to the Minister of Foreign Affairs regarding the conference (McKay, 1994):

In the early 1930s church leaders linked the rights of low-income Canadians to both income security and access to the birth control that wealthier Canadians could secure in order to make responsible choices

about the size of their families and their capacity to provide a secure economic foundation for healthy family life.

If the potential to have smaller families, along with income security, was seen as enhancing the welfare of low-income Canadians in the 1930s, can we not make the same argument with regard to the importance of reproductive health services, along with development that focuses on "basic needs" especially in health and education, to the welfare of the disadvantaged around the world. These core goals of the Cairo conference are best summarized in Paragraph 1.18:

sustainable economic growth in the context of sustainable development; education, especially for girls; gender equity and equality; infant, child and maternal mortality reduction; and the provision of universal access to reproductive health services, including family planning and sexual health.

There are clearly many demands on the aid agenda. Let us push for aid in the area of basic needs and reproductive health. On the later, the important networks are in place, including the United Nations Fund for Population Activities and its branches around the world. There is much knowledge about how to provide reproductive health services. Let us make sure that this is properly funded and administered, that it works for the benefit of the disadvantaged, that the unmet need for family planning services be satisfied.

Given that the Canadian government has not committed itself with regard to a given level of international assistance in this area, it is important to keep up the pressure. The Government Statement that followed the Foreign Policy Review is certainly encouraging (Canada, 1995). Population questions are here raised both as matters of international security (in the context of population, environment and international migration) and in terms of individual security (family planning is included as a basic need that helps ensure basic personal security). While this is encouraging, it is also important to note that CIDA has had limited involvement in the "population and development" sector. The weak involvement in Africa is particularly glaring. This priority needs to be enhanced, along with CIDA's organizational potential in this area. CIDA could also better involve the Canadian university and NGO sectors in its population and development assistance.

#### *Population Issues and the Empowerment of Women*

Another thing that was key to the conference, is the central role placed on the empowerment of women. Chapter 4 is entitled "Gender equality, equity and empowerment of women". These concepts pervade the whole document, and are

best summarized in Principle 4:

Advancing gender equality and equity and the empowerment of women, and the elimination of all kinds of violence against women, and ensuring women's ability to control their own fertility, are cornerstones of population and development-related programmes. ... The full and equal participation of women in civil, cultural, political, and social life, at the national, regional and international levels, and the eradication of all forms of discrimination on grounds of sex, are priority objectives of the international community.

The focus on empowerment of women helped to unite persons across the North/South divide. The Women's Caucus played a strong role in this kind of bridging. This push obviously corresponds to seeing things in terms of enhancing individual well-being, and the welfare of women in particular.

This is clearly related to the focus that Nafis Sadik, the Executive Director of UNFPA, had tried to give to the conference from the beginning. That is, she wanted the conference to focus on maternal mortality (Sadik, 1993). She has spoken forcefully about the unacceptable differences in maternal mortality around the world. This is a good problem on which to focus because there are good data indicating the depth of the problem. In particular, the lifetime risk of dying from pregnancy or childbirth-related causes is one in 20 in developing countries, compared to one in 10,000 in some developed countries (Paragraph 8.19). Besides, we have the know-how and technical capacity to address the problem, it is a matter of political will.

Maternal mortality is clearly related to gender questions. No men die of maternal mortality, though of course many male children and husbands are affected by the premature death of their mothers and spouses.

As an aside, the focus on maternal mortality also forced the conference to face issues of abortion. Unsafe abortions are clearly part of maternal mortality. In looking at fertility, one can decide that abortion is too sensitive an issue, the disagreements are fundamental and consensus is not possible. It would have been possible to discuss fertility and family planning without discussing abortion, if only as a way of avoiding contentious topics. But when discussing maternal mortality, unsafe abortions cannot be ignored.

Consequently, the focus on empowerment of women helped the conference to avoid certain pitfalls like the North/South divide, and forced the conference to consider certain difficult issues like unsafe abortions. However, it can also be argued that there are some possible disadvantages to this focus.

By speaking of equity as a "cornerstone of population and development related programs", is there not the potential to put so much importance on equity that it has become a *sine qua non*. We are almost saying that population activities, and for that matter development, will not occur unless there is first the empowerment of women.

In a sense, this presents a strong parallel with the difficulties at the 1974 conference with issues of development. While the Bucharest conference said that family planning will not work unless there is development first, the Cairo conference seems to be saying that family planning will not work unless there is gender equity first.

Once again, we could see this as various interests wanting to be included. Knowing that there is funding for population activities, many interests want part of the action. In 1974, the "bribe", we could almost say, was that family planning programs would not be accepted unless there was first a new world economic order that would be conducive to development. In 1994, the "bribe" was that family planning programs would not be accepted unless women were first empowered.

Of course, development and women's empowerment are very important goals in and of themselves, and I am not at all questioning the legitimacy of these goals. I am asking if it is useful to place such high importance on these in the context of a conference on population and development.

After all, many family planning programs have worked with minimal development, just as many family planning programs have worked with minimal empowerment of women. It is also useful to see things the other way around. Instead of just saying that empowerment is the cornerstone of population programs, we should also remember that family planning programs will help to empower women, just as family planning programs support development. Karan Singh, who had first said that "development is the best contraceptive", now also says that "contraception is the best development".

This focus on empowerment of women as a cornerstone of population policy has been called the "new consensus". In her review of *Population Policies Reconsidered: Health, Empowerment and Rights*, McIntosh (1994: 655) suggests that the book under review has set up an "overly sharp distinction between "population controllers"—seemingly the entire establishment of population policy makers, demographers, and family planning professionals—and "feminists". McNicoll (1994: 656-659) makes similar points in reviewing *Beyond the Numbers: A Reader on Population, Consumption, and the Environment*. He suggests that this new consensus involves most notably a lessened worry about



population numbers and growth. According to the new consensus:

any objective expressed in terms of fertility outcome [is] deemed inherently coercive ... even 'successful' programs [are] often faulted for being disdainful of women and for delivering a low quality of service—resulting from a singleminded attention to numbers of 'acceptors' as a measure of performance. ... Only if gender biases are rooted out, it is argued, will women be able to escape poverty and choose to have fewer children. However commendable the sentiment, the case is weak".

McNicoll notes in particular that successful programmes in East Asia have reduced fertility in societies that remain notably patriarchal. For instance, in Indonesia, outreach workers involve women as volunteers who plan, implement and evaluate the programme's activities, but all under the direction of male village chiefs who provide the overall management. That is, in this program women could be seen as exploited as volunteers, rather than empowered, and yet the outreach program works.

To be blunt, might we say that the population agenda has been captured by the empowerment agenda, for whom population is a secondary factor?

Clearly, "empowerment" to use the words of Cairo, and "development" to use the words of Bucharest, are important objectives in and of themselves, and again I am not at all questioning these objectives. The question is the extent to which population programs need to use these as "cornerstones". Let us not have blinders in these regards. In particular, let us notice that reproductive health services including family planning are important goals in and of themselves. These services help to empower women, and to support development; they can be liberating for individuals and they can enhance the welfare of societies.

I would therefore conclude this section by noting that women's groups have played a positive role in the Cairo conference. There is no doubt that childbearing, and certainly maternal mortality, are more a women's issue than a men's issue. Certainly, it is women who bear the most direct costs of excessive births, and it is women who have been most constrained (by husbands, by families, by communities) to have more births than they desire. Thus, in that sense, the women's movement has come on side, finding ways to re-invigorate population activities, helping us to avoid circumstances where family planning is oppressive to women, finding ways to promote the view that deliberate control of childbearing is within women's interest, and finding the best set of services that would help achieve these objectives. But at the same time, let us not throw out all the pre- "new consensus" family planning: there is much talent there that needs to be used, much good research and administrative abilities. Former family

planning activities need to be re-invigorated as reproductive health rather than being set aside by the "new consensus".

*Alternative scenarios of future world population growth*

While the Cairo conference did not set any demographic targets, for the reasons indicated above, it did note that world population is growing too fast, and that we would be better off if we took a course more in line with the low alternative among the United Nations population projections. Paragraph 1.4 reads in part:

Implementation of the goals and objectives contained in the present 20-year Programme of Action, which address many of the fundamental population, health, education and development challenges facing the entire human community, would result in world population growth during this period and beyond at levels below the United Nations medium projection.

It is useful to consider the validity of these assumptions. Caldwell (1994) has emphasized that the fertility transition involves moving from six to two births per woman, as an average. As seen in Table 1, in the early 1960s the average births per women for the Third World as a whole was close to six, it is now under four, and according to the low projection it would be basically two in some thirty years. Caldwell (1994: 13-14) notes that 40 percent of the people of the world now live in countries that have below replacement fertility, and we could expect that in the next thirty years that will involve most of the world:

The global fertility transition is well under way and should promise us a stationary or slowly growing population of perhaps 11 billion people a century from now. ... We have witnessed in the present century enormous strides towards not only a global economy but also a global society. Urbanization and universal schooling systems have come into being at lower levels of real income than was the case in the West. Certainly, moderate or low mortality has been achieved at an earlier stage of economic development. In the global economy it was inevitable that many Third World parents would begin to find children an economic burden. In the global society it was inevitable that ideas and ideologies, as well as national family planning programmes and international conferences on population and development, would come into being. These manifestations are not extraneous to social change but an inevitable part of it, although not yet comfortably accommodated within demographic transition theory.

Caldwell also suggested in response to a question that it would be possible to see the world population declining within the next century. When the media the next day implied from his comment that we do not need a Cairo conference, he spoke further on this in his address to the Plenary as President of the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population. In particular, he emphasized the importance and difficulty of making the efforts necessary to promote the possibility that, in some hundred years from now, the world population would no longer be growing.

The importance of these efforts is also evident in comparing the three alternative United Nations Projections for the year 2050. These are 11.9, 9.8 and 7.9 billion respectively (see Table 1). The high scenario of double the current population in the next half century is also based on plausible assumptions. Many efforts are needed to arrive at outcomes between 8 and 10 billion people by the year 2050.

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Table 1. World Fertility, Mortality and Population, 1960-2100

	Total World	Less Dev'd Regions	More Dev'd Regions
Total Fertility Rate (average births per woman)			
1960-5	4.98	6.09	2.69
1990-5	3.26	3.64	1.91
2020-5 h	2.74	2.85	2.16
m	2.36	2.44	1.90
l	1.96	2.03	1.57
Life Expectancy (average expected years of life from birth)			
1960-5	52.4	47.4	69.8
1990-5	64.7	62.4	74.6
2020-5	72.5	71.2	78.6
Total population (in millions)			
1960	3021	2111	911
1990	5285	4141	1143
2025 h	8979	7647	1332
2025 m	8294	7056	1238
2025 l	7603	6448	1155
2050 h	11912	10457	1456
m	9833	8626	1208
l	7918	6937	981
2100 h	14000		
m	10500		
l	8000		

Note: h: high assumptions; m: medium assumptions; l: low assumptions

More developed regions: North America, Japan, Europe, Australia, New Zealand

Less developed regions: Africa, Latin America, Asia (excluding Japan), Melanesia, Micronesia, Polynesia

Source: United Nations, 1993 and 1994b

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