

UNITED NATIONS POPULATION CONFERENCES: SHAPING THE POLICY AGENDA FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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Population conferences have evolved through three overlapping stages, each stage reflecting a different perspective on the relationship between national policy formulation and the international system. Initially, at Rome in 1954 and in Belgrade in 1965, participants were invited on the basis of their expertise and were not expected to represent their governments. By the time of the Bucharest Conference in 1974, the United Nations, in an attempt to give conferences a greater role in shaping population policy and to inspire member governments to show greater concern for their own population problems, decided that conferences would be intergovernmental gatherings and that national delegations would be selected by governments. The effect of this change was that governments gave less weight to scientific expertise and, conversely, greater weight to political and bureaucratic considerations. At the present time, although conferences remain intergovernmental gatherings, the door has been opened for nongovernmental organizations—civil society—to play a more active role in the conference process and in deliberations. As conferences have become more inclusive, their focus has veered from what has conventionally been regarded as population concerns. The changing composition of participants at UN conferences has had the effect of altering the policy agenda in the international population field and, as some have argued since Cairo, has redefined the meaning of population. Conferences in the twenty-first century likely will be compelled to confront diverse demographic problems in addition to social issues demanding the attention of the political system at every level.

Without great fanfare announcing the event, international population conferences have become an integral part of policymaking in the United Nations system. The three population conferences sponsored by the UN in Bucharest in 1974, Mexico City in 1984, and Cairo in 1994 belie the assumption that UN population conferences are routine, ritualistic, and inconsequential. What began as an effort to bring governments together to share their experiences and to develop a common orientation to population problems became in time an occasion for governments and interest groups to use population as a vehicle for putting other issues onto the political agenda, even when those issues did not fall within the traditional scope of population policy. Why such “extraneous” issues manage to disrupt or deflect population conferences from concerns that are specifically about population is a question that cannot be answered by demographic analysis or by dismissing them as accidents or political aberrations. A more reasoned view is to treat them as part of a normal pattern of politics reflecting the exercise of power and influence by international actors attempting to achieve a goal that each, individually, may desire.

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A retrospective analysis of the three population meetings reveals that whereas final conference statements and programs of action—passed by consensus—may not fully satisfy the goals of major sponsors or advocacy groups, they nevertheless serve as a springboard for important issues to gain the world’s attention. It may, furthermore, be argued that conferences have had a profound effect, albeit somewhat unpredictable, on family planning policies and programs. Governments and international organizations have shown a degree of willingness to change or modify their own priorities to accommodate the recommendations of global conferences on population; however, in some cases, the accommodation has been merely pro forma.

If past is prologue, as we are often reminded, we would be well advised to review the experiences of population conferences sponsored by the UN as a means of gaining some insight into the probable influence of such conferences in shaping family planning programs in the twenty-first century. All three conferences indicate clearly that such gatherings do not take place in isolation, but are part of a grander landscape that is host to social and political movements, ideologies, religions, and revolutions. Events taking place on the world stage have a distinct bearing on population conferences. Although it is difficult—or perhaps impossible—to articulate the precise relationship between world events and the issues likely to arise at a population conference, to search for the linkages between the two may yield valuable insight into the place of conferences, as well as population, in the larger scheme of world politics.

The Evolution of Population Conferences

In 1954 and 1965, the United Nations in collaboration with the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population (IUSSP) convened world population conferences in Rome and Belgrade, respectively. Although a public concern had been voiced already concerning rapid population growth in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), Egypt, India, and Pakistan, and although some of the ideas generated at these conferences may have influenced the views of political leaders, the ostensible purpose of the conferences was not to formulate population policies but to bring together experts from member governments of the UN to discuss scientific ideas as well as more general problems relating to population. Participants at these meetings were experts invited in their own independent capacities; they were not selected by their governments and their remarks were not intended to reflect the position of their home countries.

By 1970, sentiment was growing that rapid population growth was a hindrance to development, and, more important, contraceptive technologies were available that could enable couples to limit their fertility if they so desired. The United States, which earlier had refused to endorse population assistance, “discovered” the population explosion and soon made population control a prominent cause in its program of foreign aid. The United Nations also changed its stance on population and, prompted by a voluntary contribution of several million dollars from the United States, created the United Nations Fund for Population Activities—now called the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)—in 1967 to assist countries in achieving their population goals. With these changes, the focus of population conferences shifted from scientific inquiry to that of population policy. Consequently, population conferences, beginning with Bucharest, would no longer be dominated by

demographers and population experts; instead, these conferences would be intergovernmental and, in the minds of the major donors as well as their United Nations sponsors, their purpose would be to make governments more aware of their population problems and to encourage and assist them in dealing with them. Population conferences under the aegis of the United Nations were no longer comprised of a community of experts but were made up of government officials and, in some instances, political leaders and others from government and civil society, all selected by their governments.

In recognition that many developing country governments had been less than effective in administering development programs, and that many donors were attaching greater importance to the work of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), in the 1990s a movement arose—if not a stampede—to enlist NGOs as major players in UN conferences. Although NGOs had had a presence of sorts at Bucharest and Mexico City, by the time of the Cairo meeting, the doors to conference participation were far more open to them. Whereas no great change had occurred in the formal process of conference preparation, NGOs found it much easier to become accredited to the United Nations and to participate more fully in the preparation of the Cairo Program of Action. A touch of irony may be seen in the evolution of conferences from a community of experts at Rome and Belgrade, where neither NGO nor official government presence existed, to the Cairo Conference of 1994, where their presence was stronger, concomitant with a noticeable absence of demographically oriented population experts.

As the Western population establishment sought ways to use the machinery of intergovernmental conferences to strengthen the commitment of member states to implement population policies, they found the initiative passing to those countries they were trying to influence. In the 1950s and 1960s, rapid population growth seemed to be the concern mainly of the industrialized nations, led by the United States, along with a handful of Asian countries. Although industrial nations had their own population problems, these did not include population growth, the demographic issue of greatest concern since the 1960s. Western as well as developing nations were aware that population policy emanating from international organizations or UN conferences was essentially intended to influence domestic policy in the developing world. Consequently, the Western nations found necessary—and even desirable—the sharing of responsibility for international policymaking with a more universal assemblage of states from the developing world as well as with NGOs and other interest groups. Along with this shift in power came a change in the focus of the meetings. Not only were neo-Malthusian concerns somewhat overshadowed by the claims of poor countries for a new international economic order that would alleviate their poverty, neo-Malthusianism itself began to fall out of favor in the industrial world. In response, population advocates, including UNFPA, the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), were forced to search for new allies and partners who might help to make the deliberations of world population conferences salient to a larger public. They were compelled, in effect, to adopt an open-door policy that would draw a wider variety of interest groups into the lengthy and complex process that begins years before the convening of a UN conference and concludes some five years after it—just in time to prepare for the next decennial meeting.

Bucharest 1974: The Move to Intergovernmental Conferences

The World Population Conference held in Bucharest in 1974 took place in a political climate that had become much more favorable to governmental intervention designed to lower the rate of population growth in developing countries. This change of attitude was the product of many factors, only some of which will be touched upon here. On the demographic front, growing numbers of demographers from developing countries were emerging from foundation-sponsored training courses in the United States and from regional demographic centers established by the United Nations.¹ A great deal more reliable demographic and socioeconomic data were becoming available that documented the acceleration in population growth and made possible better analysis of demographic and socioeconomic relationships.² At the same time, moral scruples over the propriety of contraception were fading, and, in the United Nations, Soviet opposition, based on Marxist principles, was becoming less strident, influenced, as some have suggested, by India's strong support for United Nations technical assistance for population programs. Additionally, family planning programs were becoming more feasible owing to the development of effective, cheap, safe, and relatively easy-to-use contraceptives. Indeed, as the decade drew to a close, several Asian countries, including Ceylon, India, and Pakistan, had each accumulated close to 20 years of experience with population policy and family planning programs. Each year, moreover, more countries joined their ranks.³

To the surprise of all who were involved in its preparation, the Draft World Population Plan of Action met with strong opposition from developing countries when it was presented at Bucharest. The plan's basic premise—that rapid population growth was a major cause of underdevelopment rather than its consequence—was vigorously rejected by a group of “radical” developing countries led by Algeria. Moreover, this group was supported by others who believed that although rapid population growth was a significant problem in many developing countries, family planning was but one of several measures available to curb it. More than 300 amendments to the plan were put forward, and the fear arose that achieving agreement on a final plan might not be possible in the short time available.

How do we explain the failure of the UN Secretariat and the major proponents of population control, especially the United States, to anticipate the negative reaction of developing nations to the draft Plan of Action? Seemingly, the answer lies in the dominant role played by population experts and family planning advocates in the preparatory process and the partial exclusion of those parts of the UN system and the donor agencies that might have been expected to be better attuned to broader political issues. In spite of the convocation of regional meetings and gatherings of experts and consultations with UN specialized agencies and prestigious population and family planning organizations such as the International Planned Parenthood Federation, the IUSSP, and the Population Council, as well as advocacy organizations like the Population Crisis Committee (now known as Population Action International), most of these groups shared a common perspective that was highly supportive of efforts to limit population growth.

The arguments advanced by developing countries at Bucharest were couched in terms of the need to establish a new international economic order, a regime that they hoped would narrow the gap between themselves and

the rich industrialized states, especially in terms of commodity markets, terms of trade, and the economic policies of rich nations vis-à-vis the poor. The matter had been discussed at the United Nations a number of times in the decade prior to Bucharest. At the sixth special session of the General Assembly, held just a few months before Bucharest, a group of developing countries led by Algeria had managed to obtain agreement on a declaration on the establishment of a new international economic order and, with it, an associated program of action. The latter document contained an umbrella statement asserting that UN programs, including, specifically, the World Population Conference, “should be so directed” as to contribute to the effort to establish a new economic order (Finkle and Crane 1975: 93). Here, then, was a clear warning to political leaders in the West, had they been listening, that Bucharest, a meeting at which developing countries brought their own political agendas, would likely be deflected from population concerns, as defined by the industrial world.

At a deeper level, the conflict at Bucharest may be seen as a response by virtually all the developing countries to what they perceived as a threat to their national sovereignty (Finkle and Crane 1975; Taylor 1989).⁴ Newly independent states might have been expected to be sensitive to any hint, intended or otherwise, that they might be subjected to some global plan for reducing their population-growth rates. The draft plan lent itself to this interpretation, notwithstanding the careful use of such language as “countries are invited to consider. . .” and “countries may wish to consider. . .” Countries were in several instances invited to set quantitative objectives and targets, with dates by which they would be achieved, which would be used in the review and appraisal of the plan (see, for example, Draft Plan, Section C, paragraphs 15, 27[b], and 37[d]).⁵ Moreover, as Taylor (1989: 161) points out, developing country delegations would have been aware of such earlier statements as that in the report of the second session of the preparatory committee that the “World Population Conference would provide a forum in which the developing countries could exchange experience with regard to population problems . . . but that it was desirable to have European experience . . . in order to obtain a complete review . . . and to promote knowledge, policies, and action programmes.” Developing countries were also keenly aware that the United States had reduced its development aid at the same time that it was greatly increasing funding for population programs.

In the final Plan of Action agreed to at Bucharest, developing countries made two points: that development, not population control, was their overriding objective, and that they would not cede national sovereignty to a coordinated global plan designed by the rich industrialized countries of the West. That mission accomplished, they were not prepared to disavow the importance attached by many of their number to rapid population growth. In the years following Bucharest, many more states adopted population policies, made efforts to link demographic issues to developmental efforts, and, significantly, showed a willingness to assume more of the cost of their family planning programs by drawing on their national budgets. That these developments were attributable to Bucharest alone is unlikely—and impossible to prove—yet it would be foolish to deny that the conference played a role, at least as a catalyst. Significantly, ten years later, it was the developing countries and UNFPA that provided most of the impetus for the Mexico City conference, the purpose of which was to reaffirm and update the Bucharest Plan of Action.⁶

Changes in the International Policy System

In many ways, the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), held in Cairo in September 1994, was the mirror image of the World Population Conference held in Bucharest 20 years earlier. In the lead-up to Bucharest, action programs in population had no universally acknowledged “home” within the United Nations, and the Secretary General of the conference was appointed from outside the UN system. By 1990, UNFPA had emerged as a relatively strong organization within the UN, capable of attracting sufficient funds—based on voluntary contributions from governments—to support a worldwide staff and to make its presence felt in population programs throughout the developing world. Its executive director, Nafis Sadik, was appointed Secretary General of the conference and was determined to make Cairo the most significant UN meeting in the decade that commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the United Nations. Although the Bucharest draft Program of Action was comprehensively reworked by delegates to the conference, retaining its population orientation while deleting most references to family planning, at the ICPD, the draft program that was taken to Cairo had already rejected the demographic rationale for family planning and substituted the introduction of reproductive health services as a way to improve women’s health. Whereas the preparatory process for Bucharest was largely closed to nonscientific influence, the Cairo process was influenced by the participation of a broad coalition of more than 1,500 NGOs⁷ whose interests spanned development, reproductive and adolescent health, women’s rights and empowerment, violence against women, female genital mutilation, the rights of indigenous peoples, and family planning, but which paid little serious attention to the determinants or consequences of population growth.

The pattern of massive NGO participation was not unique to Cairo but was a feature of many UN conferences during the 1990s, from the 1992 Earth Summit at Rio de Janeiro to the 1993 Vienna Conference on Human Rights and the 1995 Women’s Conference in Beijing. So pervasive has this phenomenon become that students of international organization now recognize it as a new and distinct form of transnational politics and policymaking (for example, see Wapner 1995; Clark et al. 1998; Keck and Sikkink 1998).⁸ Although several commentators, including the present authors (McIntosh and Finkle 1995; Hodgson and Watkins 1997), have recognized the concentration of NGOs at Cairo as well as the role of feminist organizations in leading them, none has fully grasped the structured character of NGOs’ participation nor the depth and sophistication of their strategic planning.

The Emergence of Transnational Advocacy Networks

One reason that scholars in the population field have been slow to recognize the significance of the NGO presence at UN conferences is that, unlike formally structured, hierarchical international organizations, activist NGOs are informally structured in loose transnational networks.⁹ Such networks help to forge new links among elements of civil society, states, and international organizations. To new actors in domestic political and social struggles in Southern countries, transnational networks bring international resources of information, expertise, and funding. Moreover, “by blurring the boundaries between a state’s relations with its own nationals and the recourse both citizens and states have to the international system,” transnational networks are “helping to transform the practice of national sovereignty” (Keck and Sikkink 1998: 1–2).

Transnational advocacy networks differ from more familiar international organizations in that they are motivated by values and “principled ideas” rather than by professional norms or material considerations. They are characterized by dense exchanges of information and services, shared values, and the common discourse that evolves through intense interaction. Their purpose is not only to influence policy outcomes but also to create new issues or reframe old ones in order to change the terms of the debate. In the international arena, advocacy networks tend to form around issues that resonate, or that can be reframed to resonate, with the fundamental ideas of human dignity that are common to most cultures.¹⁰ In carrying out their activities, transnational advocacy networks also work to introduce new norms, not only of behavior but also of identity (Katzenstein 1966). With increasing experience and sophisticated leadership, networks of small, individually insignificant NGOs have proved themselves capable of “persuad[ing], pressur[ing], and gain[ing] leverage over much more powerful organizations and governments” (Keck and Sikkink 1998: 2).

Andrew M. Scott, a political scientist, observes that “the increasing complexity of the global system makes it more difficult for organized interests to achieve what they want by acting through national governments and, therefore, they may seek to get what they want via the formation of a transnational organization.” He punctuates this observation by asserting that “to be unorganized in a world of organizations is to be disarmed and vulnerable” (Scott 1982: 152–153). In a sense, Scott has described a phenomenon we have observed in the population field, a field that is comprised of experts, professionals, and interested parties ranging from environmentalists and physicians to demographers and feminists. To be more precise, the population field is not defined and driven by a single interest group nor by an alliance with concerns that can readily be addressed by a sectorally structured national government. Rather, the population field is made up of a coalition of interest groups whose goals and purposes overlap in many important respects and, as the conference in Cairo manifested, diverge at other times and in other important respects.

As decisionmaking in the international system became increasingly open, providing numerous avenues for diverse interest groups to exercise influence, NGOs among others hailed this development as “democratization.” The American political system seemed to be their model. They overlooked, however, that, unlike the American political system, the United Nations lacks a strong executive and a sense of self as a single entity with the loyalties and bonds that accompany nationhood. Moreover, intergovernmental conferences can be roughly equated with the legislative branch in American politics, because both function in a structure that imposes order—an adherence to prescribed procedures; at another level, both behave unpredictably at times. Their behavior is often a consequence of political alignments and coalitions that have formed around issues that are seemingly unrelated to the topic of the agenda before each body. The block of developing nations and the block of industrial nations are two obvious examples of the coalitions and alliances that shape voting behavior in conferences. On certain major issues, countries are highly averse to voting against the position taken by their block. Because conferences follow the rule of the General Assembly, whereby voting is conducted on the basis of one nation, one vote, small nations have disproportionate voting power. To some extent, this imbalance

is offset by the ability of strong, rich countries to influence poor, weak states. The means of influence is not merely one of persuasion in the corridors of the UN or at conferences; it involves the multiple instruments of statecraft employed by all nations in the world political arena.

A parallel pattern of influence prevails in civil society. NGOs from rich countries seek to establish linkages with NGOs in developing countries in order to advance their cause globally, and to encourage and assist the NGOs of nonindustrialized countries in attempting to influence the policies of their own governments. Affiliation with foreign NGOs also provides donor-country NGOs with the basis for a claim to “international” status, a criterion for acquiring consultative status with the United Nations.

The proliferation of domestic NGOs that are working on social and political issues in both Western and developing countries may be seen as an outgrowth of the activist political culture that emerged in the 1960s. In turn, the internationalization of activism has been fostered by the greater awareness and knowledge made possible by the growing ease—and lesser cost—of international travel and better communication, including electronic communication. In addition, the increasing density of international student exchanges, working holidays abroad, and service in such organizations as the US Peace Corps and the United Kingdom’s Voluntary Service Overseas, has generated a growing sense of solidarity among young people on both sides of the rich–poor and nondemocratic–democratic divides. These forces have combined to create a new element in international politics that aims to multiply citizens’ points of access to their governments in countries where such access has been more limited than it is in the West.

The United Nations and NGOs

Although NGO participation in UN conferences became much more visible during the 1990s, the right of participation has existed since soon after the creation of the United Nations. A General Assembly resolution of 1947 made it possible for NGOs to be granted consultative status with the Economic and Social Committee of the UN, ECOSOC.¹¹ The criteria for accreditation require that NGOs have an international structure and/or special expertise in one or more of the issue areas within ECOSOC’s purview. Some additional criteria are also applied: For example, the NGO must have nonprofit status, must forswear violence, and cannot receive governmental funding; nor can it campaign against the work of the United Nations (Willetts 1996a).

The formal rights of participation accorded to NGOs with consultative status are far-reaching and almost certainly exceed those accorded to NGOs in national legislatures. In summary, they include the right to attend ECOSOC meetings, with some restrictions, and to circulate written statements to council members. Accredited NGOs are permitted to address ECOSOC committees and, at times, the full council. Early on, they also won the right to place items on the ECOSOC agenda. Once an NGO has been granted consultative status, it may participate in the activities of any of the functional commissions or other units of ECOSOC that it considers to be relevant to its own concerns. In the 1990s, this right facilitated the ability of NGOs working in related issue areas to unite in order to take their concerns to a series of major conferences.

In the hands of politically astute NGOs, some of the informal rights that accompany their status in the UN system accord them even greater influence. For example, an NGO's association with ECOSOC legitimizes its interacting and consulting with officials of the UN Secretariat, thereby enhancing its ability to influence the views of those who draft reports, position papers, and programs of action. The security passes issued to NGOs provide access to all UN buildings, making it possible for NGO representatives to lobby delegates in the halls and cafes, to keep abreast of the political processes in meetings from which they are excluded, to receive information and, on occasion, to influence negotiations by drafting resolutions to be introduced by sympathetic diplomats. Generally speaking, NGOs that are willing to work in small, informal committees and working groups, where much of the detailed negotiation takes place but where the attendance of delegates may be small and the media presence minimal, may find that they are accorded rights that are equal to those of the diplomats who are present (Willetts 1996a).

Increasingly, for many years, the value of the expert contributions made by NGOs holding consultative status has been recognized by the United Nations. Consequently, the criteria for admission to NGO status generally have been relaxed, resulting in a sharp increase in the number of accreditations. In the opinion of one long-time observer, the broader participation of NGOs in agenda-setting conferences such as those on women, the environment, and population has accompanied a transformation in the character of these conferences from the scientific format of the earlier meetings to one in which the intergovernmental diplomatic form—one which submits language even on nonbinding resolutions to intense negotiation—has become dominant (Willetts 1996b).

The United Nations and Population

The fifth decennial UN population conference (we include here the two scientific meetings at Rome and Belgrade) might be seen as the occasion for an assessment of demographic research and trends, and a review of advances in family planning programs. In fact, a majority of the regional meetings convened before Cairo expected to identify suitable topics for inclusion in the draft Plan of Action. The Asia-Pacific regional meeting, held in Bali in August 1992, formulated a number of demographic goals for the region. The preamble (Section I) of the Bali Declaration on Population and Sustainable Development, which was produced by a ministry-level meeting that concluded the conference, urged that “all members and associate members of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) establish a set of population targets in line with sustainable development goals, and initiate and implement policies and programmes to achieve those targets” (*Population Bulletin* 1994: 22). The demographic goals and strategies adopted by the conference were intended to bring the region to replacement-level fertility “by 2010 or sooner” (*Population Bulletin* 1994: 23). The Africa regional conference also formulated quantitative demographic goals and aimed to double contraceptive prevalence by the year 2000 (*Population Bulletin* 1994: Recommendations 1 and 9, 40–41). The Arab World Conference did not specify quantitative demographic targets but clearly recognized the relevance of population stabilization to the attainment of many social goals. The report also stated that, where fertility levels are high, “efforts should be made to set appropriate fertility and family planning targets consistent with the development goals of each country” (*Population Bulletin* 1994: Recommendation [41b], 78). Finally, the Latin American and Caribbean meeting took a similar approach and called for greater international support for demographic

training and research (*Population Bulletin: Recommendations 59–64*). Despite the broad agreement among regions about the importance of demographic factors, few if any of their recommendations found their way into the Cairo Program of Action.

Notwithstanding the importance and necessity of demographic data, it is erroneous to assume that more and better demographic data will automatically strengthen governmental commitment to population policy and improve the design of policies and programs. In the past several decades, we have accumulated enough experience to know that governments tend to interpret demographic trends primarily as means to valued societal goals—national power, economic development, ethnic dominance—rather than as ends in themselves. In addition, such variables as state–society relations and the quality of governance may have more influence on a country’s policies than do demographic analysis and population trends per se. Thus, many will recall the head of the delegation from the People’s Republic of China speaking before the plenary session at Bucharest, rejecting the idea of fertility limitation and calling for more births. Soon afterwards, China’s population surpassed one billion and China implemented the most vigorous population policy of our time, reducing the birth rate with unprecedented rapidity. The impetus for this dramatic change in China’s population policy is attributable to the internal political shift from radical Maoism to what may be called Chinese pragmatism.

To suggest that demography is not the sole determinant, nor even the most compelling factor determining a country’s population policy, is not to say that it is insignificant. Yet, even in the multilateral arena, those most responsible for population policy and programs have found that limiting their attention to fertility regulation is difficult. For years, Rafael Salas, the first executive director of UNFPA, argued with his governing body over his interpretation of the agency’s mandate. Salas continually reminded his in-country representatives of the importance of state sovereignty and urged them seriously to consider requests from governments for “beyond family planning” projects. Responding favorably to many such requests, UNFPA, to the dismay of its major donors, consistently allocated roughly 50 percent of its support to projects in such fields as migration and urbanization, education in population and family welfare, basic data collection, women’s status, and aging (Salas 1976). Similarly, IPPF, both by conviction and necessity after its expanded network of affiliates was required to raise much of its own funding, broadened its focus to incorporate reproductive and maternal health and similar programs into its portfolio. Again, the “conceptual framework” for the Cairo Program of Action presented by Nafis Sadik at the second meeting of the Preparatory Committee (PrepCom II) in May 1993 included a chapter on population replete with demographic targets, as well as one in which reproductive rights and health were included with family planning (Singh 1998). After PrepCom II, when the Women’s Caucus presented an amended framework that eliminated the articulation of demographic objectives, the stage was already set for its acceptance by UNFPA, some national governments, foundations, family planning providers, and many other erstwhile members of the population establishment.

Feminist Influences on the Cairo Agenda

To attempt an explanation of the emergence of civil society as a major participant in UN conferences during the 1990s is beyond the scope of this article. No mystery exists, however, about the dominance of women’s

NGOs; their superior networking skills; the clarity of the articulation of their complex goals; their organizational capacity to work within and influence conference processes; their ability to enlist the support of governments, foundations, and UN specialized agencies; and their capacity to attract significant funding. Women's groups in such diverse fields as reproductive and sexual health; women's rights and status; discrimination; the feminization of poverty; education and employment of women; violence against women; and those dealing with many other issues affecting women and girls had been brought together during the UN Decade for Women, 1975–84. They had learned to work together, linking their causes in an all-encompassing ideology, and had gained invaluable experience in working within the UN conference structure during the three conferences that formed part of the Women's Decade.

While the emergent transnational women's network honed its organizational and political skills during the Women's Decade, the decade also nourished the intellectual and substantive roots of the women's platform. To the despair of Northern feminists who came to the opening conference in Mexico City with well-prepared positions on such topics as population and the environment, which they believed were of concern to women, Southern women were more consumed by political themes under discussion in their countries—the new international economic order and Palestine (Tinker and Jaquette 1987). Throughout the decade, the imagination of women from the developing world was captured by socialist analyses that explained the increasing poverty and marginalization of women by the impact of such factors as large-scale development projects, deteriorating terms of trade, the debt crisis, the sale of arms to developing countries, and increasing violence (Sen and Grown 1987). Many women were inspired by discussions of strategies to improve the situation of women in poor countries, including suggestions to “empower” women, increase popular participation in policymaking and implementation, and to hold governments accountable for their promises (see, for example, Sen and Grown 1987, chapter 3). These and similar ideas were elaborated in later years and informed the chapter in the ICPD document that deals with relationships between governments and NGOs (UN 1994, chapter 15).

Unlike the development agenda, the reproductive health and rights agenda that constituted the primary thrust of the Cairo conference was originally elaborated in the United States, before the Women's Decade, although it later benefited by research undertaken as part of the decade. In the United States, feminists united to challenge the right-to-life movement that sprang up after the 1973 Supreme Court decision to legalize abortion. Organizations like the National Organization of Women and the National Abortion Rights Action League joined with others like Planned Parenthood and Zero Population Growth to coordinate a prochoice campaign that, for a while, united American feminists (Hodgson and Watkins 1997). Before long, however, the more radical members of this coalition became disillusioned with its narrow approach and started to elaborate a more inclusive agenda that included not simply a woman's right to choose abortion but also her right to government-subsidized abortion, contraception, and prenatal and early childhood care. The emergence of the reproductive rights lobby was motivated not only by the imperative of keeping abortion safe and legal, but also by a growing sense that family planning programs as currently constituted were infringing on women's rights to services that did not threaten their health. Attention was drawn to the potential side effects of the high-dose contraceptive pills then in use and to the administration of hormones by injection. Some well-known feminists recommended that women revert to barrier methods (Greer 1984).

Turning their attention to the poorer countries, feminists from the United States, Latin America, and some developing countries enunciated a devastating ethical critique of family planning programs operating there. They perceived the use of monetary or material incentives for contraceptive acceptance and other forms of heavy-handed persuasion to be coercive. The increasing use of long-term or hard-to-reverse methods, such as the intrauterine device, the injectable Depo-Provera, and sterilization, which they regarded as limiting women's control of their reproductive life cycles, caused serious concern. Some feminists also took exception to the scientific method of assessing contraceptive risk by treating it as relative to the risk of pregnancy rather than as an absolute risk to women's health. Moreover, they criticized the lack of easy access for many women to family planning clinics, the long waiting times that were sometimes necessary to obtain services, the lack of privacy, and the lack of respect that service providers often showed to clients at family planning clinics. Increasingly, some feminists argued that the use of a demographic rationale for international population policy subjected women's bodies to the attainment of an abstract societal goal and was unethical (Petchesky 1984; Hartman 1987; Gordon 1990; Petchesky and Weiner 1990).

The Road Ahead

The preparatory processes and outcomes of these global meetings are shaped by international relations and events, as well as by the domestic agendas of participating states, to a far greater extent than they are by demographic trends. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the conference process is frequently engulfed in political discussion and maneuvering over issues that nobody seems to have anticipated. Of the three intergovernmental conferences, the Cairo ICPD probably ranks as the sharpest break from the past in both substance and process. The participation of a new class of actor—the transnational network of NGOs—and the change in focus, from population and family planning to reproductive health and rights, have fundamental implications for the future of the population field as well as for the conference process itself.

The incorporation of family planning services into broader programs of reproductive health can be traced clearly back to the 1974 Bucharest Conference Plan of Action, and it commanded wide support among Western family planning providers well before the rise of the transnational feminist network. Sweden, for example, has never favored categorical family planning programs and for years has provided international assistance for family planning programs only if they were integrated with health services (Wolfson 1983). In the United States, domestic family planning providers were motivated by the 1980s feminist critique of international family planning projects. They were also persuaded by the recognition that in the United States' privatized medical system, family planning programs often served as the point of entry to the health system for poor women. This understanding was later reinforced by the growing epidemic of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS, which meant that in some geographical areas, family planning clients carried serious loads of infection (Brackbill et al. 1999; Turner 1993). More recently, the effect of Cairo has been to give new impetus to integrating family planning and women's health services as a single package and to give greater attention to the rights of women. It seems reasonable to assume that family planning will continue for some time to become more integrated with reproductive health services.

The vastly expanded participation of NGOs was widely acclaimed during and after the ICPD, but a closer look suggests that it has not yet become fully institutionalized. In each of the four meetings at which the feminist network was a major player during the 1990s, efforts were made eventually to exclude or limit the extent of NGO participation. The environment, human rights and women's conferences were all characterized by what has been termed "the fourth PrepCom phenomenon" (Clark et al. 1998: 17). In each case, NGO access to the most important working group and drafting meetings was increasingly curtailed as the preparations advanced through actions taken by some or all of the Group of 77 (G-77)—a voting bloc of around 130 developing countries. At Rio de Janeiro, NGOs were completely excluded from participating in the fourth and last PrepCom, a move that put them at a disadvantage at the environmental conference itself; at the final PrepCom for the human rights conference in Vienna, a group of Asian countries succeeded in severely limiting NGO access at the meeting; and at the fourth PrepCom for Beijing, an attempt was made to exclude NGOs from many closed discussions in the lead-up to the conference. In that case, NGOs appealed to ECOSOC, which ruled that their participation at Beijing should be at the same level as for the PrepComs. A physical barrier to participation was imposed at the conference, however, by the location of the NGO Forum, an hour's drive from the conference site.

No such efforts to constrain the role of NGOs were made during the Cairo process: On the contrary, NGOs were accorded more extensive rights to participate in the meetings that most mattered than was the case at the other conferences. Five years later, at the PrepCom immediately prior to the General Assembly special session called to review progress in implementing the Cairo agenda, NGOs themselves invited a hostile reaction by demonstrating outside the main conference room against the stalling tactics that were employed by a small group of conservative G-77 members together with the Holy See. Additional G-77 members joined the fray, trying to exclude NGOs from the special session. After lengthy debate, delegates allowed a small number of NGOs to make short statements in the formal plenary sessions (*Earth Times* 1999b).

The efforts to limit NGO participation reflect the unease experienced by many G-77 members who are unaccustomed to the high-pressure lobbying tactics that have become accepted strategies of Western liberal democracies, especially that of the United States. Nevertheless, however, the arrangements for NGO participation at all the conferences, although doubtless canvassed by UN officials at various levels, were approved by government delegates, including those from the G-77 countries, in the General Assembly, ECOSOC, and the various conference preparatory committees. In the judgment of an experienced inside observer, the influence of NGOs in the Cairo process was "probably at its highest during PrepComIII, where many significant proposals made by them were incorporated in the Draft Final Document" rather than at the conference itself (Singh 1998: 134).

Paradoxically, those countries that were so anxious to protect their sovereignty at Bucharest, and also made sure that it was well protected in almost every paragraph of the Cairo Program of Action, have been liberal in granting NGO access to the core policymaking processes. The ambiguities introduced by governmental delegations toward the end of the preparatory process for several of the 1990s conferences make it impossible to predict

whether or not NGOs will be permitted to participate so fully in the future. Nevertheless, the contemporary stress on governmental transparency and openness, the recognition of the specialized technical expertise brought by many NGOs and, indeed, their increasing willingness to join with others in street protests in support of causes they approve, all suggest that in the future their participation will continue to be sought, even if their access is more carefully regulated than it was in the 1990s.

The Changing Face of “Population”

In this article, we have made two arguments: first, that during the past years, the United Nations has sought to increase support for population policies by enlisting a progressively broader range of participants in their decennial population conferences. From the scientists who helped to make a case for population policies, to the governments who were asked to implement them and the NGOs who were expected to pressure governments for greater efforts, ever-deeper levels of society have been brought into the process. As a consequence, the field has grown in scope and complexity and may be at risk of losing coherence and focus. Our second argument is that UN conferences are political events, shaped not only by substantive questions but also by occurrences and issues in the political environment or on the private agendas of governments and interest groups.

In the aftermath of Cairo, as many reports have indicated, donor commitments have consistently fallen short of what was anticipated at Cairo to be the cost of implementing both family planning and reproductive health programs (*Earth Times* 1999a; UNFPA 1999). One estimate suggests that less than half of the expected annual donor contribution of US\$5.7 billion for the year 2000, which was proposed at the ICPD, has been forthcoming (Sinding 1999). Moreover, although most observers are sympathetic to the need for broader programming in reproductive health, such programming is likely to come at the cost of family planning services, which are now required to compete with many other services for every dollar. Unless some way can be found to raise the level of funding for family planning services and commodities, the achievement of lower rates of population growth will be seriously impeded, compromising the ability of poorer countries to develop (Campbell et al. 2000).

Donor fatigue with population assistance made its appearance long before the ICPD and may, perhaps, be seen as a manifestation of broad social and philosophical changes taking place in the political economies of both donor and recipient countries. Not only did population policies face a decreasing budget in real terms, but so also did development programs in general, as well as domestic health and social policies in the donor countries. The change marked the demise of left-liberal ideologies that had motivated policymakers throughout the world since World War II and their replacement by the more conservative economic ideas espoused by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. Interventionist government programs started to fall out of favor, and the private sector was asked to play a greater role in the delivery of social services.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the end of the Cold War, which for 40 years had structured international politics, world leaders no longer perceived a need to enlist the loyalties of developing countries with lavish expenditures on developmental assistance. Instead, less money has been accompanied by more

advice—to rationalize and decentralize governments, to deal with corruption, and to introduce market capitalism. Although political leaders are attempting to assist the poorest countries in these endeavors by such means as forgiving debt and altering the terms of trade in ways intended to enhance their development, these strategies involve difficult negotiations among governments and between governments and such large organizations as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization. Predictably, progress has been slow. Although the successful introduction of these various measures would enable poorer countries to advance their economic growth and better manage their health and social services, including family planning services, significant improvement will require a continuing infusion of funds and other forms of assistance from rich nations.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the variety of population issues confronting the global community is considerably broader than those that have been the historical preserve of UNFPA, even in the expanded form of reproductive and sexual health and rights. Problems of population growth are not confined to the poorest countries, but exist, in a different way, in the industrialized nations as well. In the poorest countries, many of them in sub-Saharan Africa, fertility rates remain high; whereas, in the industrialized world, including East Asia, below-replacement fertility and population aging pose new challenges to society. Moreover, in recent years, we have become acutely aware of a range of problems that are compounded by population growth, especially rapid urbanization, higher rates of internal as well as international migration, environmental degradation, pollution, water shortages, profligate consumption of resources, carbon emissions, and global warming. Heretofore, governments have been reluctant to confront these issues, the solutions to which often call for lifestyle changes in rich countries and costly changes in development technology in poor countries. These issues are likely to appear on the agendas of future population conferences, however, placed there by NGOs, if not by national governments.

In many countries throughout the developing world, the standard of living has improved and life expectancy has increased, in some cases dramatically. In those countries where income levels have gone up the most, a marked decline has been seen in the rate of population growth. Beneficent social and economic change most certainly accounts for much of this success; however, it would be a mistake to overlook the contributions of a comprehensive set of activities associated with the provision of family planning and reproductive health services, including the collection of basic data, regular censuses, and demographic research and analysis. Whereas the need remains for bilateral and multilateral assistance for this work, especially in those parts of the world that have not yet entered or progressed far in their demographic transitions, national governments now shoulder most of the technical and financial burden of their own programs. Significantly, the funding formula approved at Cairo called for developing countries to cover two-thirds of the estimated cost of the recommended programs themselves.

By contrast, the problems that will increasingly confront us in the new century share important characteristics that differentiate them from those we have focused on in the past. They are both complex and interrelated. Many cross national borders and may call for concerted action within and sometimes across regions. Moreover,

as countries follow their own routes to development, far greater diversity will occur in the mix of problems they exhibit as well as in their political, economic, and social parameters. Increasingly, our present methods for fostering global change may come to look inadequate.

Conclusions

The changes enshrined in the ICPD final document reflect both a shift in the definition of international population policy and a marked elaboration of the issues presented for the consideration of official delegates, engineered in large measure by the contributions of NGOs (Ashford 2001). No doubt exists that the freshness of the ideas and the enthusiasm of the new participants have reenergized a field that had lost some of its former vigor. At the same time, the geopolitical, economic, and social environments within which these transformations will be played out, at the national as well as global levels, have become more diverse and will require a more differentiated approach to the formulation and implementation of population policy at all levels. The combination of all these changes will also place new demands on the UN system and may prompt a new approach to UN population conferences.

We can say with some confidence that the reproductive health agenda and a growing role for NGOs in the formulation as well as the implementation of population policy are here to stay. Both have been present to a lesser extent in previous conference documents—if not on the ground—and both elements have been widely acclaimed since Cairo. In this environment, securing adequate funding for family planning programs and commodities, in the context of reproductive health, is likely to call for special efforts from the international community. To some extent such efforts are already being made; recently, a greater willingness has been shown by donor governments and family planning NGOs to acknowledge openly that family planning must not be allowed to die of inanition simply because women's health and rights are perceived as legitimate concerns of the international community.

Throughout this article we have referred to the growing number and increasing complexity of the issues surrounding population questions. Among them we include: a broader agenda; the formal inclusion of elements of civil society in the formulation of international policy; a growing tendency for “population” issues to be linked with such broader questions as poverty, the environment, and human rights; the diversity of development levels, in addition to cultural and religious differences, among countries; the globalization of capitalism; and the need to seek funding support from a variety of new sources. These developments raise serious questions about the adequacy of international policy institutions, which were created in a simpler era, to deal with them effectively. With regard to population conferences, for example, the coming years may see a search for ways of rationalizing the conference process. One possibility might be the replacement of global meetings by smaller thematic or regional meetings. Either means would permit a clearer focus, and reduce the number of resolutions to a more manageable count. Smaller meetings might possibly be perceived as more realistic by the people principally affected, and they would cost less in terms of time and human resources as well as in dollars. Of the two approaches, the thematic approach—which has much to recommend it—is less likely to be adopted because it goes against the contemporary predilection for dealing with issues in a holistic way. A series of

regional or subregional meetings, based on some combination of economic and cultural and religious homogeneity, might be more acceptable and would enable focused attention to be given to a range of issues that policy and scientific experts and NGOs from the region identify as relevant. Of course, predicting the shape of conferences to come or anticipating the international crises and new political alignments that will form during the twenty-first century is not possible. We harbor no illusion, however, that these or other changes could be accomplished without much protracted soul-searching and some painful bureaucratic resistance.

Notes

- 1 Unless otherwise stated, references in this section to the United Nations are based on the relevant chapters in Symonds and Carder (1973).
- 2 The increase in the availability of data was stimulated in part by the two earlier United Nations population conferences held in Rome in 1954 and Belgrade in 1965. Large numbers of papers were presented that, especially in 1954, drew attention to the paucity of data available and helped to identify important gaps. The 1954 conference was, nevertheless, judged to have been “immensely useful in stimulating the interests of both scholars and governments . . . in the scientific study of population” (Notestein 1954: 248; see also, Symonds and Carder 1973: 82–86 and 145–149).
- 3 Up to and including 1965, 12 countries had adopted population policies for demographic reasons, and one country had implemented a family planning program for health reasons. Ten years later, an additional 22 countries had adopted demographic policies and 25 more had family planning programs for health or human rights reasons (Nortman 1980: Table 6).
- 4 This view was shared by at least one other detached observer. On the eve of the Bucharest conference, Alfred Sauvy, the doyen of French demographers, observed that “at Bucharest, a world population plan of action will be proposed that will take aim, whatever may be said to disguise it, at the sovereignty of nations” (Demeny 1985: 99).
- 5 A point-by-point analysis of the differences between the draft and final versions of the program of action may be found in Berelson (1975: 115–146).
- 6 The Mexico City conference is not discussed here because the political intervention that was attempted had no visible or procedural impact on the conference or on its document. Many will recall that the meeting was the subject of a last-minute and highly ideological policy statement by the Reagan administration. The administration argued that population growth was a “neutral phenomenon” with little or no effect on economic growth. The supposedly negative impacts of rapid population growth were rightly to be attributed instead to the effect of governmental interventions that impeded the operation of the free market (Finkle and Crane 1985). In a remarkable demonstration of tolerance, the group of 77 countries that constituted a voting bloc of about 130 developing countries ignored this contribution and proceeded to review and approve the Program of Action as drafted.
- 7 This figure includes NGOs accredited to the preparatory meetings and the conference itself plus those accredited solely to the parallel NGO forum (Singh 1998).
- 8 Although many scholars see the increase in NGO involvement as a sign of the emergence of a global civil society (for example, Lipschutz 1992; Wapner 1995), others argue that it is too early to announce the existence of such a society, although they acknowledge that its emergence is well under way (Clark et al. 1998).
- 9 Barbara Crane (1993) is one of the few population specialists to examine the role of these networks in the international environment of population policy.
- 10 The frequency with which NGOs active in the Cairo process referred to the coerciveness of orthodox population policies, and those who formulate and implement them, provides an excellent example of this strategy.
- 11 The Economic and Social Council is the organ that coordinates the economic and social work of the UN and its specialized agencies and institutions, known as the United Nations Family of Organizations (UN 1995).

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Acknowledgments

The authors extend their gratitude to Joseph Chamie, Barbara Crane, and Clea Finkle for their incisive comments on this manuscript. Of course, they are not responsible for errors of fact or interpretation.