

Population, Environment, and Development

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Some years ago, the UNFPA presented me with a population clock. It is programmed to show how the world population increases as time ticks by. Throughout the profound changes since seen by the world, that clock has been on my desk. As the Cold War ended, as the war was fought in the Gulf, as Nelson Mandela was released from prison, as many of my own grandchildren were born, and even as we joined in the hope for peace for the Israeli and the Palestinian people during the signing ceremony on the South Lawn of the White House on September 13, the clock has ticked on, marching relentlessly toward the 6 billion mark. Every second, baby boys and baby girls, deserving of love and care, future and opportunity, are born into this world of diversity and inequality. But behind the silent display of the population clock, there is a time bomb ticking.

Ninety percent of the world's population increase is taking place in developing countries, many of which are unable to feed their present population. We may soon be facing new famine on a scale dwarfing even Malthus' most pessimistic predictions. We may see masses moving which will make previous historic migrations look like a Sunday picnic. Countries and regions risk destabilization and war as peoples compete for land and water resources. The brutal facts of science tell us how, already today,

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the natural resources on which people depend to feed them and to provide them with a livelihood, are being severely depleted. Rain forests are vanishing; top soil is eroding; the world's oceans have already reached the limit of their protein yield; and global warming seems likely to accelerate erosion and dry up large parts of the world. In more developed countries, the fortunate children of new generations may delay their confrontation with the imminent environmental crisis, but today's newborns will be facing the ultimate collapse of vital resource bases unless we change our course. They will also face new security threats if the impoverished majority start to migrate.

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Unless we accept that the population explosion is the most serious, predictable and intractable crisis facing us, we shall not be able to avoid it. Our very successes may cause our failure. Increased life expectancy, immunization programs, and the eradication of disease were what produced the population explosion in the first place.

THE PRIORITY TASK

In dealing with the issue of population growth, the shared but unequal responsibility of states must be recognized. Population is not about numbers alone; it is about the relationship between people and resources, it is about how wealth and opportunity are distributed; and it is about how we can provide hope for the future.

At present, the vast majority of the world's population, which is poor, makes only minimal claims on our natural resources, while the more voracious North consumes in a few decades what it has taken the planet billions of years to accumulate. This widening gap between the fortunate few and the powerless impoverished majority is a destabilizing trend. It is both dangerous and morally unacceptable.

To cope with the challenges facing us, three priority tasks must be addressed. First, the industrialized countries must change

their production and consumption patterns, in order to use less natural resources and cause less pollution. Second, development in the poorer countries must be controlled to eliminate poverty, meet basic human needs and protect the environment. Third, population growth must be slowed so that sustainable development can be achieved.

THE INDUSTRIALIZED COUNTRIES

In the quest to achieve a sustainable balance between the number of people and the amount of natural resources that can be consumed, both the people in industrialized countries and the rich in the South have a special obligation to reduce their negative ecological impact. Even though most people in industrialized countries feel far from being rich—striving to pay mortgages, worrying about their jobs and the security of their pensions—they are nonetheless consuming at a rate which cannot be shared by everybody. The average person in North America consumes almost 20 times as much as a person in India or China, and 60 to 70 times more than a person in Bangladesh. It is plainly impossible for the world as a whole to sustain a Western level of consumption for all.

But are we in the North willing to reduce our consumption significantly? Faced with such a direct question, it seems un-

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likely. Consumption has become lifestyle. It seems so easy to want more. Nevertheless, through targeted research and development and the concerted efforts of governments, business, science and technology, we may obtain the same benefits with much lower use of finite resources. In addition, we must introduce economic measures which will decrease taxes on the "good" things, such as work and investment, and raise taxes on the "bad" things, such as pollution and depletion of natural resources. More active use of market forces in the North could support environmental improvements by inspiring companies and households to act innovatively and efficiently, reducing environmen-

tal impact and enhancing rather than diminishing quality of life. This requires extensive adjustments which are not easy, particularly in times of economic recession and unemployment. There is, however, no choice. A shift must take place as soon as possible to cleaner technologies, energy efficiency, and resource conservation. But if individual governments are to make the necessary decisions, they will require assurance that their national efforts are part of a global partnership. Thus, everyone must do their share, and all decision makers should be made accountable for their actions.

I am pleased that consumption patterns feature on the agenda of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable development. Changing consumption patterns is far from easy, but we should begin by recognizing that lowering consumption of natural resources does not mean lowering the standard of living. There are enormous economic advantages to be gained from reducing consumption of scarce resources, but there is little reason to reduce consumption of resources that are renewable and abundant.

THE DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

Poverty, overpopulation, and underdevelopment are all interlinked. The biggest population increases are happening in the poorest countries, which are least equipped to meet the needs of new arrivals and to invest in the future. The increasing numbers of people in poor countries are, in fact, eating away at the earth itself, creating permanent damage to the environment. They do so for survival and cannot afford the luxury of planning for a tomorrow that may never be. An impoverished environment in turn leads to an even greater poverty, and a vicious circle is created. Any nation's main asset should be its population, but when that population grows too fast: it becomes a liability instead. A rapidly expanding population effectively strangles most efforts to provide adequate education, nutrition, health care and shelter. The earning capacity of the labor force suffers, and the problems are compounded if job opportunities fail to keep pace with the number of job seekers. As wages go down and

poverty is exacerbated.

Developing countries face the challenge of alleviating poverty and increasing welfare, while not exceeding the environment's carrying capacity. The international community must support such efforts, and economic conditions for developing countries must be improved through debt relief, better market access and larger, more predictable financial transfers. Aid fatigue, however, has aggravated the plight of the poor as a mockery is made of the agreed target of 0.7 percent of GNP for development aid. At the Rio conference, we all, in the end, supported the legitimate demand that new and additional resources be transferred to developing countries to address global environment problems. But so far, contributions have been small-scale. The Scandinavian countries are struggling to maintain their high level of assistance. It is unhelpful that so few countries are challenging our position at the top of most, if not all, per capita contributions for global equitable purposes.

REASONS FOR OPTIMISM

Although the global problems seem daunting, I believe the situation will change when the realities of the new global political map become more widely recognized. Retraining people from thinking in traditional East-West terms and training them to acknowledge new global risks may take longer than we first thought, but there are reasons for optimism.

For one thing, do we remember that the first U.S. Cold War president identified population as a major challenge to security in his initial policy statement? Population, environment, and development are now key items on the agenda. The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) has given us both the impetus and the instrument to promote sustainable development, and active follow-up is taking place in many areas. The Rio decisions on population, however, were weak, especially due to the unhelpful efforts of some states, even those with no natural population growth. Such efforts to prevent the international community from making constructive decisions played to fundamental religious tones as well as to cultural fundamentalism.

On the more positive side, we note that although African governments were reluctant to take up this issue only a decade

ago, many of them are now moving forward: adopting policies and implementing programs. This is good news as we prepare for the International Conference on Population and Development in 1994, where issues concerning sustainable development, environment, and population will be dealt with in a holistic manner. Furthermore, the Women's Conference in 1995 will provide further opportunity to continue our relentless pursuit of these issues. There is hope in the growing awareness of population, developmental, and environmental issues and in people's willingness to act. While many poor countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, experienced the 1980s as a "lost decade" for development, others, mainly in East Asia, have managed to cope with their population growth and improve their citizen's quality of life.

On a global level, there has been a drop in fertility and birth rates. A generation ago, each fertile mother had an average of five children during her lifetime: now, that number is three, and in developing countries the drop has been steeper.

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Twenty seven countries enjoyed a decline in their birth rate of 25 percent or more over the last twenty years. Government backed population programs and activities have also increased markedly, especially in Africa. According to the United Nations Population Fund the prevalence of contraceptives in developing countries has risen to an estimated level of 50 percent, in 1990, from only 9 percent a generation ago. In addition, it is assumed that 300 million women worldwide would, given the option, use family planning but lack access to services.

This knowledge revolution among women has resulted in the birth of a market for services, which will make a difference.

Sometimes religion is a major obstacle. This happens when family planning is made into a moral issue. But morality cannot only be a question of controlling sexuality and protecting unborn life. Mortality becomes hypocrisy if it means accepting mothers'

suffering or dying in connection with unwanted pregnancies, illegal abortions, and unwanted children living in misery. Traditional religious and cultural obstacles can be overcome by economic and social development, with the focus on enhancement of human resources. For example Buddhist Thailand, Muslim Indonesia, and Catholic Italy demonstrate that relatively sharp reductions in fertility can be achieved in an amazingly short time.

THE AREAS FOR ACTION

Countries that succeeded relatively well in limiting their population growth seem to have several characteristics in common. Many have deliberately tried to combine economic growth with the equitable distribution of income. They have given priority to the development of human resources and have focused on health and education, especially on improving the status of women, including employment and child care needs. Above all, they have given strong support to information about family planning and to decentralized family planning services closely linked to local communities. Three key factors should be emphasized: the development of human resources, the enablement of women, and the extension of family planning. When efforts in all these areas are combined, they reinforce each other and enhance the overall effect.

DEVELOPING HUMAN RESOURCES

Human development is both an aim and a means of achieving progress. We have come to realize more and more that investing in human resources in developing countries is essential to economic growth, which in turn is necessary to maintain social welfare.

Development efforts during recent years have made clear that improvements in health services, water supplies, sanitary conditions, family planning and, not least, education, contribute towards improved quality of life and social equality, and create the necessary conditions for sustainable development. Unfortunately, the economic crisis in many developing countries has led to a reduction in revenues and a deterioration in social conditions. It is therefore essential to achieve economic growth and invest in the development of human resources, especially in

primary health care and basic education. The United Nations Development Program has suggested that 20 percent of government expenditure in developing countries should be allowed to help the poor meet their needs for food, water, sanitation, basic health care, family planning, and education. At the same time, industrialized countries are being requested to allocate 20 percent of their developing aid to meet these priority needs. These proposals are minimum requirements, and other donors in addition to Norway should be in a position to reach the proposed target of 20 percent of their development aid for this purpose.

EMPOWERING WOMEN

Women are at a disadvantage compared to men in all countries. But the problems of women in developing countries, where they are particularly overburdened, are by far the most urgent and pressing. Since the International Women's Year in 1975, there has been progress in some areas, particularly regarding the formal status of women. But this has not been matched by progress with regard to the actual situation of women. Women are still being patronized and discriminated against in terms of access to education, productive assets, credit, income, services, decision-making, work, and remuneration. For too many women in too many countries, real development during recent years has only been an illusion.

At the same time, experience shows that investing in women is one of the most cost effective ways of promoting development. As mothers, as producers or suppliers of food, fuel, and shelter, as traders, as manufacturers, as political, and as community leaders, women are at the center of the process of change. Strengthening their position and expanding their opportunities will lead not only to greater equality, but to more efficient economic growth—a fact that the World Bank has been stressing. Thus, the enhancement of the role of the women will lead to increased economic growth, reduced poverty, better child, family welfare, and lower birth rates.

Women's education is the single most important path to a contribution of higher productivity, lower infant mortality, and lower fertility. The economic returns for investment in female education are generally comparable to those of men, but the social returns, in terms of health and fertility, far exceed what we

gain from men's education. In addition to education, we must also safeguard the health of women by promoting safe motherhood and avoiding maternal deaths. These capital investment in human resources lay the foundation for the long term progress.

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In order to help women and thereby contribute to other development objectives, it is vital to enable women to raise their own productivity and income. Women often play a crucial role in food production and subsistence agriculture. But they generally lack not only education, but also rights, appropriate technology, and access to credit. Thus, they cannot invest in improved production, nor can they rationalize their household chores. The result is poverty and depletion of the natural resource base. Enhancing women's economic role is therefore an important development strategy.

EXTENDING FAMILY PLANNING

If population growth is to be reduced, access to family planning services is crucial. Couples must have the right to freely choose the number and spacing of their children. I wish to underline the principle of free choice because couples should not be subject to any coercion, directly or indirectly. Information must be provided not only on family planning, but also on the health risks for children of women not practicing family planning. A variety of methods must be made available, and the cost must be low. By this I mean not only financial cost, but also the cost in terms of time, transport, and social embarrassment. Family planning and related health programs must be made to work together, and multiple channels must be set up for distributing family planning information and services.

There is no better insurance policy for developed and developing countries than funding population and family planning programs. Of course, much of the contribution must come from developing countries themselves. But industrialized countries also have a responsibility. Deplorably, Norway has been alone

among developed countries in meeting internationally agreed targets for both family planning aid and overall development assistance. We give 12 U.S. dollars for every Norwegian citizen toward family planning programs, which makes us the fourth largest donor country in absolute terms after the United States, Germany, and Japan.

Important as it is to focus on women in our developmental efforts, I would nevertheless like to focus on the importance of men, especially in relation to family planning. In many developing countries, increased poverty, unemployment, and social problems have reduced the role of men to providers and to heads of households. Paradoxically, what follows is increased alcohol consumption, migration to look for work, and an increased number of sexual contacts. All these factors tend to elevate the number of child births and the transmission of contagious diseases. If men do not take responsibility for their sexual habits, fertility, and health, and if they reject their responsibility as fathers, it will be impossible to cope not only with population growth, but also with sexually transmitted diseases, including AIDS.

The 1990s will decide whether the choices for our children will narrow yet further or open up. We know more about population, environment, and development than ever before. We have the basis for action. People must now be mobilized in every country and in every walk of life, especially among political leaders and the mass media. George Bernard Shaw said, "The worst sin toward our fellow creatures is not to hate them but to be indifferent to them." Let us fight the indifference which has prevailed in the past and move towards that equilibrium between people, consumption, and the carrying capacity of our earth which we call sustainable development. Let us listen to the voice of unborn generations and make the earth the hospitable place that any and every human being deserves. ■