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AFTER UNCED : THE POPULATION ISSUE REVISITED

The concern with the rapid rise in the world's population had become urgent, emotionally charged, and even confusing in the wake of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) that was held at Rio de Janeiro in June 1991. The controversy was over whether population should be included in the UNCED agenda, and whether it was a developmental or an environmental issue. Perceptions varied widely. While US policy did not view rapid population growth as a problem *per se* and considered it a 'neutral phenomenon' in relation to economic growth,¹ the United States did believe that population growth in the South² was a leading contributor to global environmental degradation and, therefore should be included in the UNCED agenda. Most of the developed countries also supported its inclusion, but viewed it as a crisis, which affected both the global environment and the South's economic growth.

1. United Nations Population Division, "The Mexico City Conference: The Debate on the Review and Appraisal of the World Population Plan of Action," New York, January 1985. For further studies on US population policy, see Godfrey Roberts, ed. *Population Policy, Contemporary Issues* (New York, NY: Praeger Publishers, 1990); Thomas W. Merrick, *U. S. Population Assistance, A Continued Priority for the 1990s?* Briefing Report (Washington, DC: Population Reference Bureau, Inc. 1990).

2. The term 'South' is used loosely in this study as a substitute for the term 'Third World' which seems to have lost its utility after the collapse of the 'Second World'. The term, as used here, also includes the NICs. The term 'North' refers to the advanced industrialised countries.

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Most developing countries, however, took the position that high population growth was primarily a developmental problem, and that environmental degradation cannot be controlled without first addressing the population-development linkages. They were willing to include it in the agenda, but also feared that the issue might be 'hijacked' by the developed world whose priority was the global environment rather than the South's economic development. There was, however, a minority who wanted to keep it out of the agenda. Pro-natalist countries like Argentina, Ecuador, Ivory Coast, Philippines and Portugal rejected its inclusion in the UNCED agenda because of their religious and human rights beliefs. There were others who feared that its inclusion in the UNCED agenda would legitimise external interference in the developing countries' domestic policies on population. There were some, like Saudi Arabia, who accepted its inclusion only grudgingly because of "culturally inappropriate" references to women. And, there were also a few, like China and India, who saw in its inclusion an useful bargaining tool against the North.³

The purpose of this paper is to explore some of the political and security thinking that shaped the debates on the population issue during the Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) Sessions and at Rio. What were the concerns dictating population politics? What was the nature of the perceptual rift between the North and the South? What were the underlying strategic considerations which informed the negotiations on population?

I

The Relevance of Demographic Concerns

The time required for the human population to double has become steadily shorter. Much of this growth is taking place in the developing countries whose current average growth rate of 2.1% is four times that of the industrialized countries. The aggregate population of the South is expected to double in the next 35 years. With every doubling of population

3. *Crosscurrents*, PrepCom 4, no. 7, 23-25 March 1992, p. 4.

there is a corresponding reduction in human space, increasing competition over planetary resources, a wider disparity in resource consumption within and between countries, a higher probability of tension and unrest, and a greater frequency in domestic and international violence.

The impact that human population has on the planet's ecosystems is mathematically given as $I = P \times A \times T$, where P stands for population size, A for affluence (which is measured by the average person's consumption of resources), and T for technologies (which disrupt the environment to provide the goods consumed).⁴ While this is a simplistic presentation of a complex socio-economic issue, for the present purposes it will suffice. An increase or decrease in P, A or T will correspondingly raise or lower the impact, although equal changes in either P, A or T with the other factors remaining constant may not have the same effects in all regions. Thus equal population growth in two different regions may have varying impact depending on the level of affluence or technology use. For example, "US consumption is so profligate that the birth of an average American baby is hundreds of times more of a disaster for Earth's life-support systems than the birth of a baby in a desperately poor nation."⁵

Although affluence and technology are the two factors primarily responsible for the speed with which the global ecosystem is being undermined, in the developing countries where both are relatively scarce their impact on the environment is minimal. But population pressure due to high growth rates is generally cited as one of a range of proximate causes of environmental degradation in the South, and since much of the primary resource base for the global economy is in the developing world, continuing increases in its population have economic and security implications for both the developing and developed countries.

Of the three, affluence and technology factors are more easily manipulated given political will. While population size and growth rates can be manipulated by economic policies, the process is very slow and

4. See Paul and Anne Ehrlich, *The Population Explosion*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), p. 58

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

long-drawn. But the 'organic' nature of the population issue which brings into play sensitive religious, ethical and moral dimensions, makes it infinitely more difficult to handle politically and socially. For the governing elites in developing countries, that are still struggling against great odds to build durable economic and political infrastructures, these are very real concerns with no easy solutions. And yet the time required to get results from effective population policies, coupled with the present magnitude of the population problem, make immediate policy intervention that much more imperative. The Chinese leadership, for example, now concedes that China's one-child family planning policy has failed to bring real gains because of the size of its population base which grew unchecked for decades.⁶ Since the benefits from any population policy can be many years away, there is a pressing need to address the population issue now.

II

The Population Issue and Resolution 44/228

When Resolution 44/228 on the 'United Nations Conference on Environment and Development' was adopted in the United Nations General Assembly in December, 1989, the text did not contain any direct reference to the population issue. The resolution established the linkages between environment and development, and identified the major issues relevant to environmentally sound and sustainable development, but population was not among the latter. And yet, population was considered a 'priority' issue by most governments, particularly those of developing countries.

It appears that a number of Catholic countries objected to the inclusion of population in the UNCED Agenda.⁷ Argentina cautioned that "we should not manipulate population growth to reduce the number of human beings ... developing countries do not want to become empty gardens to satisfy those

6. Interview with a member of the Chinese delegation to the Fourth Preparatory Committee meeting of the UNCED in New York, March 25, 1992.

7. Interview with Ambassador Tommy Koh, Chairman of the UNCED Preparatory Committee Meetings. Fourth PrepCom meeting, New York, March, 1992.

pushing the population issue", a position which was supported by Ecuador.⁸ Their apparently strong religious and cultural reservations had surfaced in October, 1989 when the Latin American and Caribbean Commission on Development and Environment (LACCDE) refused to "accept the family planning policies frequently proposed by the developed countries and which are not in tune with our reality."⁹

The position of the Holy See, which retains a fair degree of moral influence over leaderships in Catholic countries and which was an active participant in the subsequent PrepCom meetings, should also be noted:

The family size is a matter of concern for individual families only. Each family has the right to exercise its family size option according to its conscience. The family size should not be dictated by state policy or by other forms of external intervention. Families and individual adult household members also have the responsibility to factor in the impact of population growth on the environment. And it is upto them to decide the best way to exercise this right to birth as well as the obligation to preserve the planet's ecosystems.¹⁰

Nevertheless, most governments of developing countries have population policies, though their implementation remains highly skewed. Many governments have also created population ministries to give the issue official prominence, raise public awareness, and create the grounds for policy interventions. Its importance has also been recognised in regional and international assemblies.¹¹ The South Commission's report, *The Challenge to the South*, has stated that "rapid population growth rates present a formidable problem for most developing countries ... While the impact of measures to moderate population growth will be felt only in the long run,

8. Quoted from a report on 'Poverty and Population' prepared by Johannah Bernstein, Canadian Participatory Committee for UNCED, Ottawa, undated.

9. Latin American and Caribbean Commission on Development and Environment, *Our Own Agenda*, August 27, 1990, p. 85.

10. Interview with a member of the Delegation from the Holy See at the Fourth Preparatory Committee meeting in New York, March 1992.

11. Although the Beijing Ministerial Declaration on Environment and Development made no mention of population. Ministerial Conference of Developing Countries on Environment and Development, Beijing, 18-19 June, 1991, ED/ Conf. /G. 2, 18 June 1991.

they must be taken now to ensure the well-being of future generations."¹² The Harare Commonwealth Declaration of October 1991 similarly identified "effective population policies and programmes" as a key to promoting sustainable development and the alleviation of poverty.¹³ An UNCED Secretariat report to the Fourth Session of the Preparatory Committee Meeting in New York in March-April, 1992 also noted that "roughly 70 per cent of the [72 national] reports make reference to demographic pressure as causing concern of one type or another."¹⁴

Although population was not in the agenda, at the first PrepCom session in Nairobi in 1990 it was generally recognised that stabilising population growth in the South was an important and necessary goal in itself. The developing countries also wished to draw the attention of the industrialised countries to the interlinkages between poverty, consumption and population. Thus despite reservations from a group of Catholic countries of South America, Maurice Strong (Secretary General of UNCED) and Tommy Koh (Secretary General of UNCED Preparatory Committee Meetings) introduced population as a cross-sectoral issue in the PrepCom discussions.¹⁵ More intense lobbying followed, significantly from the Northern non-governmental organizations,¹⁶ to include population as an agenda topic in its own right, which finally resulted in the UNCED Secretariat document on 'Demographic Dynamics and Sustainability' becoming chapter 4 of Section I of Agenda 21.

12. The South Commission, a high level independent group chaired by Julius K. Nyerere, was set up in 1987 to examine the post war developmental experience of the countries of the South and to suggest ways to achieve sustained growth. See *The Challenge to the South: An Overview and Summary of the South Commission Report*, Geneva, 1990, p. 19.

13. *Commonwealth Currents*, December 1991/January 1992, p. 2.

14. United Nations General Assembly, A/CONF. 151/PC/98, dated 12 February 1992, (English), p. 6, para 22.

15. Interview with Ambassador Tommy Koh, New York, March 1992.

16. For example, the Inter-American Parliamentary Group on Population and Development noted that the decision by the General Assembly not to include population as one of the 'Priority issues' in the UNCED agenda was a mistake. It urged parliamentarians "to act quickly to make sure the issue of population is adequately taken into consideration in the UNCED agenda." See *Network '92* (Geneva), no. 7, June 1991, p. 7.

Another NGO, the Global Legislators Organization for a Balanced Environment (GLOBE), a project of the Congressional Institute for the Future, urged upon Maurice Strong that "one of the most critical underlying factors..... namely the burgeoning human population growth rate in the developing world" which has not been addressed must be given "its proper place on the agenda." Letter to UNCED Secretary General dated November 15, 1990.

III

Some Perceptual Dilemma

But incorporating the topic in the UNCED agenda was one thing, getting a consensus on the definition of the problem and on the appropriate strategy to handle it was quite another.

It is not at all clear whether, and if so to what degree, the current population growth rates in the South are the cause, or the effect, of the global developmental and environmental crises. The tendency in the North is to see such growth as the cause of both the developmental and environmental dilemmas in the developing world, and to see population primarily in arithmetical terms. The scenario is painted thus: if the world's population continues to grow at the 1987 rate of 1.6%, all of its land area excluding Antarctica would be packed solid with 427 trillion, 384 billion people by the year 2667. The standing room on Antarctica would last another six years.¹⁷ The argument that follows is simple: the Earth has finite capacities, and uncontrolled population expansion will eventually overwhelm its air, water and land spheres leading to the collapse of its ecosystems. Although man will not be the first species to endanger its survival through overpopulation, it will be unique in the sense that not only human existence will be at stake but the survival of the entire biosphere with millions of other species will also be threatened.

Already the prevailing view in the industrial countries is that burgeoning populations in the developing countries are responsible for the depletion and exhaustion of arable land, forests, fresh water and other resources; for wildlife extinction; and for loss of biodiversity.¹⁸ In short,

17. These figures are taken from the Preparatory Committee Working Group 3 discussions on population and poverty, cited in Johannah Bernstein, *Briefing Notes on Population* (Ottawa: Canadian Participatory Committee for UNCED, April 3, 1991), p. 1.

18. See, for instance, the testimony by Sharon L. Camp of the Population Crisis Committee, Washington, DC made before the Subcommittee on Natural Resources, Agricultural Research and Environment of the US House Committee on Science, Space and Technology of the United States Congress, on May 7, 1991. See also the letter from Congressman James H. Scheuer (NY) and his colleagues in the Congressional Institute for the Future to Maurice Strong in Geneva, dated November 15, 1990. The US sponsored *Global 2000 Report*, the *Interfutures* report of the OECD, the Worldwatch Institute's *State of the World* reports as well as those of the World Resources Institute, all speak in the same vein.

most industrial countries see rapid population growth in the South as a *crisis* that requires immediate policy intervention.

But this is not the view generally held by the South. The image of a planet with no standing room left is a mathematical fiction, since resource shortage or depletion will curb the trend of geometric growth long before it reaches that stage. Second, the primary cause of resource depletion and the resulting social instabilities and political destabilization is not rapid population growth. The position taken by the developing countries, and which is gaining support among the developed countries, is that demographic factors are a part of a complex nexus of social, economic and ecological causes and effects, and population pressure "is not the ultimate cause, the only cause, or necessarily the most important cause" of environmental degradation in the South.¹⁹

The developing countries see rapid population growth as the effect of underdevelopment, which they attribute to the global economic structure geared primarily to the needs of the developed world. It is a 'problem' arising from the conflict between the demand for social security and a skewed development process, and which can be solved only when economic growth and development are achieved. As articulated by a spokesperson of the Third World Network,

population growth is a part of the problem rather than the cause. Population is a symptom of the deeper issue of the dispossession of local people. The reason people grow in large numbers is that you have taken away all their resources and livelihoods, as well as the ability to control and conserve these resources... It is a rational choice to have large families under conditions of insecurity and it is a rational choice to have small families under conditions of security. If people have access to resources, they know how to work out the security mechanisms..... Those who falsely identify population as a cause of the environmental crisis fail to address the fact that population growth came out of the environmental crisis, and it has to be solved by creating economic security and sustainable livelihoods, not by trying to control ... certain parts of this world's population.²⁰

19. See for instance the position taken by the British Overseas Development Administration (ODA) in its paper on population and poverty prepared for the UNCED. Also, see ActionAid's paper on *Population, Poverty and Environment*, London, 1991.

20. See IPS/ UNCED Daily Press Bulletin 07/3, Geneva, August 20, 1991.

In other words, the issue of population growth is not as important as those that affect the South's economic development, and if these latter issues are addressed properly and urgently then population would cease to be an issue.

This line of argument drew its rationale from the European experience. It is worth recalling that when Europe entered the industrial age — from roughly 1750 AD onwards — its total population began to increase, because death rates had begun to decline due to improved hygiene, better food supply and better education while birth rates initially remained constant, a situation roughly analogous to that obtaining in many parts of the South today. Following on the economic developments of 150 years, in the twentieth century Europe's birth rate dropped significantly, effecting a general decline in its population growth so that some countries like Germany and Italy have zero population growth today. Among developing countries where significant economic growth has been achieved, such as in Korea, Singapore and Thailand, population growth rates have fallen substantially likewise, only faster. Therefore, developing countries contended, the real issue is how to improve the economic conditions in the South which will then automatically bring the population growth rate down.

The perceptual gap extends into the population consumption debate as well. It is generally agreed that 20% of the world's population (comprising the 'First World') consumes 80% of the world's resources; that is, the one billion in the developed countries consume four times as much as the over four billion in the developing countries. Therefore, in terms of per capita resource consumption,

the average person in the developed world is sixteen times as demanding on the planet as the average person in the rest of the world. If we think of population in terms of resource consumption, the present 'effective' population of the world is not 5 billion at all. By the standards of

Western consumption, world population is only 1.25 billion: the one billion of "us" plus the 250 million equivalent of the other four billion people, each living at one-sixteenth of our level of consumption. By the standards of the rest of the world, however, global population is already 20 billion: the four billion of "them" plus the 16 billion equivalent of "our" one billion each living at 16 times "their" consumption level. Looking at population this way... [puts] the overpopulation question in a quite different but more sensible perspective ... The obvious conclusion [is] that no matter whether we use "our" standard or "theirs", changes in "our" consumption are far more significant than changes in "their" population.²¹

Consumption is also directly related to waste generation. According to one study done by the UN population Fund, in 1987 industrial countries were producing approximately 1.6 tons of wastes per capita compared to 0.17 ton per person in the developing countries and only 0.06 ton per person in the rural areas. "This means that the biggest contribution to environmental degradation measured by waste generation comes from countries where population growth has been stable, if not declining, for some time."²² Thus, although population growth rates in industrial countries are low, per capita resource consumption is so excessive that even stable growth conditions have exaggerated environmental impact. Similarly, even if resource consumption in the North is stabilized to current levels, unchecked population growth in the South with aspirations for higher levels of consumption than now will exacerbate and speed up environmental deterioration.

It is a dilemma for both developed and developing countries. For the former, it is a choice between maintaining the present lifestyle at great risks to the planet's life support systems and a frugal existence. For the latter, in the words of former UNCTAD secretary General Gamani Corea,

21. Jean Arnold, *Overpopulation*, New Brunswick Environment and Development Working Group, Septemebr 13, 1991, pp. 1-2. A Similar argument has been presented in Digby J. McLaren, "Humankind, the Agent and Victim of Global Change in the Geosphere-Biosphere System", at the Queen's University Symposium on Planet Earth: Problems and Prospectus, June 7- 8, 1991, pp 11-12.

22. Cited in "People, Poverty and Pollution: Plotting the Links," *Panoscope*, 14, September 1991.

perhaps the essence of the idea [of sustainable development] is that the past development has put pressure on the carrying capacity of the environment and there is hardly room for newcomers. This is, for me, a deeply troubling thought. I believe it to be true that if all the world's poor were to become rich— in terms of what we have come to accept these days as riches — the planet would indeed collapse! But what is the moral of this? Not surely that the poor should remain poor in order to save the planet?²³

Clearly, there is a pressing need for a fundamental review in the way this world is organised.

IV

'Population Politics' in PrepCom Sessions

It appears that from the start discussions on the population issue focussed mainly on population pressures and unsustainable resource use in developing countries, sidestepping the key question of what triggers rapid population growth rates in the South.²⁴ The developing countries were also concerned that the population issue was getting de-linked from issues such as poverty, debt burden and technology transfer which most directly affected their economic wellbeing.

The dilemma facing the developing countries was this: how to address population issues in a global forum without loss of sovereignty over them? How to elicit Northern assistance to tackle population issues without any conditionalities being attached?

How to convince the developed world that rapid population growth is a phenomenon tied integrally to an unsustainable developmental model?

Although the developing countries did not have a G-77 position on the population issue, they were in agreement that population was a pressing issue, that they did not have the wherewithal to tackle it, and that outside assistance was crucial.²⁵ They sought to discuss it as a manifestation of

23. *South Letter*, Nos. 9 & 10, June 1991, p. 15.

24. See the interview given by Louise Lassonde, population Advisor to UNCED. IPS/ UNCED Daily Press Bulletin 07/3, Geneva, August 20, 1991.

25. Interview with Ambassador Jamshed Marker, Chairman of the Group of 77, New York, March 1992.

poverty arising from an unworkable developmental model, and hoped that the industrialised countries would be willing to discuss a new developmental paradigm. But the United States initially refused to discuss the issue of poverty, arguing that it was the result more of resource mismanagement and wrong policies by developing countries than of the international economic order.²⁶ Nor was the United States willing to accept rapid population growth in the South as a manifestation of a developmental process gone awry. The United States' position on a number of other important issues, such as global warming, consumption, and financial and technology transfers dismayed delegations from both the North and the South, causing intransigence and serious political splits in the PrepCom sessions.

The uncompromising attitude of the United States over many issues until the closing days of the fourth PrepCom session could have been the result of any combination of factors such as aid fatigue, the wariness of over-commitment, White House policy rigidity, ideological perceptions, and misguided unilateralism. But the aggressive attitude of the developing countries may have a great deal to do with the way both the UNCED agenda was framed and the issues of the day were presented.

Nature of the Agenda: The UNCED was seen by the South as the second such global endeavour which, while it professed to be a conference both on environment and development, was once again heavily slanted towards environmental issues, with developmental issue being treated almost as an afterthought. The Chairman of the Group of 77, which represents 128 developing countries, observed that "the development effort has been sidelined in documents that the [UNCED] Secretariat has prepared. Even the title 'Earth Charter' has an ecological slant. It doesn't reflect the title of the conference."²⁷ Also disturbing to the South was that the environmental focus was primarily on the South's ecological resources, and very little was said about the role of market forces in their destruction.

26. Interview with Chief Bisi Ogunleye, Head of the Nigerian delegation to the Fourth PrepCom Session in New York, March 1992.

27. *Crosscurrents*, PrepCom 3, No 4, August 19-20, 1991, p. 12.

Discussions on what the South considered to be the fundamental issues, namely the North's growth model and consumption patterns, were thwarted, leading to the charge that "the North is unwilling to address the real issues underlying the present environmental crisis and is anxious to manipulate the UNCED agenda to serve its own interests."²⁸ With development being pushed to the second place behind environment, UNCED observers warned that

there needs to be a clearer, more consistent analysis of debt, structural adjustment, basic needs, poverty, income equity, technology, investment (including the role of transnational corporations) and trade. The North . . . cannot possibly expect its pious statements about supporting sustainable development to be taken seriously when the main instrument for organising international trade does not even mention environment in its articles, has a committee on environment which has never met and whose rulings increasingly penalise national actions in favour of sound environmental management.²⁹

Other observers warned of the need to initiate changes in the international economic institutions as the only proper response to the systemic causes of environmental and economic decay in the South, and of the need to avoid sectoral discussions because "the approach allows responsibilities to be avoided and realities to be blurred, obscuring, for example, the extent of the linkage between debt and deforestation."³⁰ The larger issue, however, was characterised as that of the '80-20 ratio', that is, how to rectify the disorder of 80% of the world's resources being consumed by only 20% of the world's population.

A number of specific issues worried the developing countries. On environment, they feared that sovereign rights over their forest resources will be diluted; under the pretext of protecting biodiversity the genetic resources of the South may be declared a common heritage, thereby leaving them vulnerable to predatory access and patenting; the blame for environmental restrictions will be primarily borne by the South; and, the

28. *Crosscurrents*, No. 1, August 12-13, 1991, p. 1.

29. *Crosscurrents*, PrepCom 3, No. 8, August 28-29, 1991, p. 12.

30. *Ibid.*

role of market forces in the exploitation of the resources of the South will be kept off the agenda, as well as the issue of overuse and abuse of North's own natural resources.³¹ On development, they feared that the direct links between the North's economic policies and the South's environmental decay will be downplayed; that the North will absolve itself of important responsibilities regarding the costs of development of the South; that economic policies on commodity pricing, trade, investment and resource flow will not be discussed on the grounds that UNCED is not the right forum for them; and that no new environmentally-benign developmental paradigm will emerge. The South also feared that unless some sort of balance was restored between environmental and developmental issues in the UNCED agenda, the final declaration of the conference was likely to be no more than a re-wording of the central role free markets should play (despite the World Bank's admission that the free market alone is incapable of tackling environmental problems).

Not a 'Global Commons' Issue: One of two opposite trends in the world in recent times appears to be towards assimilation. Politically, the trend is to universalize liberal values and democratic structures of government. Economically, the tendency is towards the creation of a single world market system where the survival of different economies will depend of their ability to compete. Socially, the trend has been to create a global culture which will subsume the world's cultural diversities. The logical extension of these tendencies in the field of environment seems to be the notion of 'global commons', which seeks to remove all restrictions to access and use of the planet's resources.³²

The moves by G-7 countries for various global conventions were seen as veiled attempts to declare particular resources of the developing world as

31. *Crosscurrents*, Prep- Com 3, No. 3, August 16-18, 1991, p. 4.

32. But this can go to absurd limits as well, as illustrated by one post-Gulf war proposal to declare the oil reserves of the Gulf as part of the global commons.. This was proposed by a speaker at a *Seminar on Environmental Stress, Conflict and National Security*, sponsored by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in cooperation with the Coolidge Centre for Environmental Leadership and in affiliation with the Department of Disarmament Affairs, held at the United Nations, Conference Room 5, New York, on April 24, 1991.

global commons, which sensitized developing countries to some wide ranging implications. There was a fear in some circles that in view of the projected energy use of the burgeoning populations in the South and its impact on global warming, there might be a move to portray population as a global commons issue, in order to bring it within the decision making ambit of the G-7, and link it to international policies which might be incompatible with the domestic political realities in the South. Such a move would not only narrow down the range of policy options for the governments of developing countries, it could also allow conditionalities to be attached in the areas of aid, trade and technology transfer. Thus, for many developing countries it is strategically unacceptable that the North should dictate on a policy as important and nationally sensitive as the population policy. There was also resentment that many of the proposals pursued by the developed countries were at the expense of the interests of the developing countries. For instance, the readiness of the G-7 to frame a convention on tropical forests (which directly affects the economies of some major Southern countries, like Brazil and Malaysia), without at the same time willing to set binding targets for time-tabled national action on controlling global warming, led a Malaysian delegate to complain that "issues of global commons such as Antarctica are not being considered, but forests which are within national jurisdictions are."³³ The proposed convention on biodiversity has evoked similar resentment, because the assumption of supranational rights put the developing countries once again in a disadvantageous position, leaving them simply as global stewards in relation to their natural resources.³⁴

The North's Political Attitude: But in addition to these concerns, there was a certain wariness born of the experiences from the 1972-1992 interregnum, whose possible effects on the political dispositions of many of the delegations from the developing countries cannot be

33. Comment by Malaysia's Ambassador Ismail Razali at a meeting of Working Group III of the Third Preparatory Conference in Geneva in August 1991.

34. *Crosscurrents*, August 21-22, 1991, p. 1.

discounted. The concern that their own overriding need for development and the alleviation of poverty might be swept aside by the developed countries' preoccupation with environmental degradation was a carryover from the first environmental summit, the *United Nations Conference on the Human Environment* (UNCHE), in 1972, convened to address the North's concerns with industrial pollution. Like today, the agenda of the two political hemispheres were similarly divergent then, leaving little room for consensus on environmental solutions. This divergence first came to light at the preparatory meeting of international experts at Founex (Switzerland) in 1971, where the industrial countries observed that development was the *cause* of their environmental problems, while the developing countries argued that while that may be the case in the North, development was the cure for the South's environmental problems.

At the UNCHE the following year, the Afro-Asian bloc was particularly critical of the North's global control and use of resources, and its alleged callousness towards South's miseries. Speaking for the South, Mrs. Indira Gandhi asserted:

The profit motive, individual or collective, seems to overshadow all else. This is the basic cause of the ecological crisis. This affluence was achieved by the Western world at the price of domination of other countries We do not wish to impoverish the environment further, and yet we cannot for a moment forget the grim poverty of large numbers of people. Are not poverty and need the greatest polluters? . . . The environment cannot be improved in conditions of poverty. Nor can poverty be evicted without the use of science and technology.³⁵

The political message was that there should be a redefinition of economic growth and a re-ordering of priorities so that an acceptable standard of life can be attained in the South, before the South can make an effective contribution to improve the environment. This message, however, was lost in the Conference's final document, *The Stockholm Declaration on the Human Environment*, which was heavily biased with environmental

35. Quoted in Darryl D'Monte, *Temples or Tombs?* (New Delhi: Centre for Science and Environment, 1985), pp. 9-10.

concerns. Of the 26 principles of the Declaration, only Principle 9 referred to the need for "accelerated development through the transfer of substantial quantities of financial and technological assistance as a supplement to the domestic effort of the developing countries." Thus developmental issues went largely unheeded.

These concerns were aired again in a declaration of another group of experts who met in Cocoyoc (Mexico) in 1974 at the initiative of Barbara Ward:

The problem today is not one primarily of absolute physical shortage but of economic and social maldistribution and usage... The task of statesmanship is to guide the nations towards a new system more capable of meeting the 'inner limits' of basic human needs for all the world's people and of doing so without violating the 'outer limits' of the planet's resources and environment ... Human beings have basic needs... Any process of growth that does not lead to their fulfilment— or, even worse disrupts them ... is a travesty of the idea of development.³⁶

One of the first reactions from the North was the study *Limits to Growth* by the Club of Rome, which argued that unless technology changed its present course, the planet was in danger of being depleted of its resources. The study advocated a voluntary reduction in consumption levels (particularly of fossil fuels) and a zero-growth economic policy.³⁷ This was attacked by the pro-technology groups who felt that technology could not only solve environmental and other problems, but was also the key to promoting and sustaining higher growth levels worldwide.

From the South's perspective, however, the study failed to point out the significant disparity in the consumption of resources between the North and the South, as well as that in the levels of economic growth between them. The study's advocacy of a no-growth economic policy, which failed to distinguish between the industrialised North and the under-industrialised South, was viewed by the more militant sections of public opinion in the South as a design to permanently preserve the South as the North's industrial hinterland.

36. *Ibid.* p. 10.

37. Donella H. Meadows, et. al., *The Limits to Growth* (Washington: Potomac Associated, 1972).

It was not until the oil price hike by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in 1973, that a review of global trade and other economic matters was placed on the international political agenda. The New International Economic Order (NIEO), born in the midst of this unexpected energy crisis, appeared to recognise the interdependence and the need for mutually beneficial interaction between the North and the South in the area of global economic growth.³⁸ But, once the energy crisis was over, crucial support for the NIEO steadily declined, until it was finally buried at the Cancun summit in October, 1981. The 1980s saw the withering away of the economic gains of the earlier decades. Africa, Latin America and much of Asia registered lower living standards at the end of the 1980s than those at the beginning of the decade. And, eleven countries were added to the list of Least Developed Countries, none removed.

The second major response was the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987. *Our Common Future* and the follow-up report, *Bridging the Gap: An Agenda for Action*, both of which were received well in the North, drew critical remarks from important opinion groups in the South. In the words of the Southern Networks for Development (SONED), an international umbrella organization of Southern NGOs in Africa, Asia and Latin America, these reports

represent a non-critical reaffirmation of Northern patterns of thought, life-style and strategies of development which are the root causes of underdevelopment and the crisis of impoverishment in the South. The Northern nations want their economies to continue growing at whatever cost. They sacrifice human development on the altar of economic growth. They do not address the root causes of the environment and development crisis squarely.³⁹

38. The action program for the establishment of the NIEO adopted by the Sixth Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly in 1974 called for, *inter alia*: protection of natural resources, fair prices for raw materials, access to Northern markets, financial assistance for development, reform of the international monetary system, regulation of the activities of transnational corporations, strengthening of the scientific and technological capacities of the South, industrialization of the south, and greater participation in international decision-making. See, *Official Records of the General Assembly Sixth Special Session, Plenary Meetings* (New York: United Nations, 1976).

39. Southern Networks for Development, *SONED on UNCED*, Geneva, August 1991, p. ii.

More recently, the G-7 summits have failed to address the developmental concerns of the South. Nor have these concerns made any impact at the Uruguay Round, while the role of GATT on the South's economic development has been left out of all the UNCED discussions held so far. From the developing countries' perspective, therefore, there is little initiative on the part of the industrialised countries to amend the unfavourable trends in the global economy.⁴⁰

The developing countries' insignificant political role in the international economic decision making structures has on the whole prevented them from making any significant contribution to processes that shape their future, as well as made them wary of the political motives behind enterprises initiated by the North. But with the onset of the UNCED process, they became aware that unlike the feuds of the previous decades, they now had a bargaining hand. The population issue presented itself as an important card in their negotiations with the countries of the North, as the latter prepared for UNCED as the means to its own separate agenda which included little more than lip service to the South's concerns. According to one observer, as a foretaste of what was to be expected at Rio and beyond, at the PrepCom sessions "so determined were they to assign blame [on the industrialized nations for the global environmental woes] and thereby fix financial responsibility for the needed changes, that even nations with strong population control policies denied the need for such policies in Geneva and New York."⁴¹ When the United States moved to delete all 16 paragraphs of the section on global consumption patterns in Agenda 21

40. These include depressed world commodity markets which have significantly reduced the South's export earnings, which are primarily from commodities; formidable barriers to South's exports to the Northern markets, "including discriminatory protectionism in violation of internationally accepted principles" refusal of the creditors to bear an equitable share of the debt burden of the 1980s, thereby undermining the prospects of growth in the South in the 1990s; unusually high interest rates internationally, which have greatly added to the cost of debt service for the countries of the South; and the reversal of net resource flow since 1984, with net transfer from the South to the North amounting to US 30 billion in 1989 alone. The South Commission, *The Challenge to the South: An overview and Summary of the South Commission Report*, (Geneva, 1990) p. 2.

41. Jessica Mathews, "Politically Correct Environmentalists", *Washington Post*, April 12, 1992, p. 11.

because they were "very low priority",⁴² the developing countries moved to delete all references to the population issue in retaliation. The references to consumption were restored only after "the language of the document [was] sufficiently tamed and tempered to make it acceptable to all."⁴³ And the negotiated language on population-family planning issues was reinstated after a strong public statement by the Women's Caucus refusing to be "pawns in the negotiating process", direct meetings with G-77 delegates, and a plenary session of NGOs and delegates where women speakers vented their concerns.⁴⁴

V

Some Strategic Considerations

There were also certain strategic considerations with regard to demographic issues that may have influenced negotiations at the PrepCom Sessions and in Rio. For developing countries, there was social dimension which critically impinged on population policies, and which later came into wider recognition. Most governments in developing countries viewed population as a socially explosive issue, because pursuing successful population policies in some cases required a re-examination of, if not changes in, societal beliefs and norms. For example, polygamy is widespread in Africa, and it is particularly difficult for a polygamous society to apportion childbirth to multiple wives in the same household. A two-child family is unrealizable in a household of one man with four wives, which is not uncommon in many parts of Africa. Family planning under such circumstances is only partially successful. But the fundamental assumptions regarding family structures and functions are unlikely to change on their own unless the proposed changes bring substantial visible benefits.

42. *Crosscurrents*, PrepCom 4, No. 5, 16-18 March 1992, p. 8.

43. Interview with Nitin Desai, Deputy Secretary General of UNCED, New York, March 1992.

44. Bella Abzug, "Morally Correct Environmentalists", *Washington Post*, April 21, 1992 p. 12.

Where the number of male children in a single family is a measure of that family's social prestige, economic strength and political clout, as in many Afro-Asian societies, family planning faces gender bias. As long as the male child is perceived as a strategic plus, population policy will remain inadequate. Also, there are some societies in which high population growth rates need not translate into a problem of overpopulation, as in Kenya.⁴⁵

The political implications of a population policy can also be quite serious. In India, which in 1951 became the first developing country to introduce national population planning, forcible sterilization in the early seventies after other methods of population control had failed, had significantly raised domestic political violence, which precipitated emergency rule in 1975 and the removal of Indira Gandhi from power in 1977. Similar types of severe strategies have been pursued (Thailand) or are being pursued in many of the developing countries. But when the basic needs particularly of low-income societies remain unmet, aggressive government interventions in the area of family planning run the risk of aggravating social and political tensions within a society. So far, the road to development has been highly disruptive, and despite immense sacrifices by the people poverty stalks them more than ever before, and children become their last hope for security. Thus in many developing countries, a big family continues to be both an insurance policy and a retirement plan. In such circumstances, government or donor country dispensation on family planning and on family size would be like the straw that breaks the camel's back.

The task of fashioning and successfully implementing a set of population control measures also requires resources which may be unavailable or may have no long term guarantee of accessibility. If these resources come from abroad, they usually have conditionalities attached which reduce the recipient's policy options. Every government then has to make a rational calculation regarding potential diminution of power and its

45. Interview with Dr. James Otieno, a member of the Kenyan delegation to the Fourth Preparatory Committee Session in New York, March 1992.

effect on regime survivability. Thus, trying to control or reduce population is a task so daunting that most governments and political parties in developing countries would rather not tackle it beyond the usual pious pronouncements for fear of jeopardising their political fortunes. These, therefore, are the types of policy considerations which make governments of developing countries very reluctant to acquiesce in any legally binding international covenant that would commit them to achieving certain population targets.

Finally, mention must also be made of the impact of some Southern NGOs in strategic thinking. A number of them have taken the position that *the* critical issue facing UNCED is poverty; that the population issue arises from the poverty issue; and the latter "hinges on sharing the power to determine how the world's resources are used."⁴⁶ Thus, short of an equitable settlement of "the question of power and who wields it", there will be no resolution of the global environmental deterioration. What impact such arguments have had on Southern negotiating strategies is difficult to assess, but their resonance in Southern thinking cannot be ignored.

For the developed countries, there are equally serious issues to ponder. The industrialised countries, particularly the United States, whose economies and lifestyles depend on the present global order being maintained, cannot remain unconcerned about the demographic dimension of international relations. Global population increases and movements are therefore policy relevant.

According to the United Nations' estimates of population growth, which have again been revised upwards, 95% of this growth in the foreseeable future will be in developing countries. The largest numerical increases will be in southern Asia, the largest relative increases will be in Africa and over 100 million people will be added to the population of Latin America and the Caribbean by the year 2000, while growth rates in North America and Europe will remain below 1%.⁴⁷ By 2010, the South will have more than 80% of the world's total population.

⁴⁶ For a full discussion of the issue, see IPS/UNCED, *Daily Press Bulletin* No. 08/1, August 21, 1991.

⁴⁷ United Nations Population Fund, *The State of World Population, 1991*, p. 3.

This may have certain consequences for the industrialised countries. A decline in the material standard of living cannot be ruled out. As a Trilateral Commission report has noted, the industrialised nations of the North

draw upon the ecological capital of all other nations to provide food for their populations, energy and materials for their economies, and even land, air, and water to assimilate their by-products. This ecological capital, which may be found thousands of miles from the regions in which it is used, forms the "shadow ecology" of an economy. The oceans, the atmosphere (climate), and other "commons" also form part of this shadow ecology. In essence, the ecological shadow of a country is the environmental resources it draws from other countries and the global commons. If a nation without much geographical resilience had to do without its shadow ecology, even for a short period, its people and economy would suffocate.⁴⁸

With material demands in developing countries increasing in tandem with population growth, access to this shadow ecology will be jeopardised; thus the threat to the availability of critical raw materials and to export markets could either force painful economic adjustments at home, or, more likely, trigger pressures for a military solution of the problem.⁴⁹

Already over a billion people live in absolute poverty in the South, and another half a billion are unemployed. If economic growth is unable to keep pace with population growth in the South, poverty, whether due to collapse of ecosystems or inadequate institutional and policy responses, will trigger internal population relocation which may in the longer run cause a reorganization of power, undermining security links with the North. It may also result in cross-border spillage with destabilising effects on the neighbour's domestic order and on regional stability. It may also make the affluent North, particularly the United States and Canada, a target for migration, in which case consumption levels will go up and where "every

48. Jim MacNeill *et al.*, *Beyond Interdependence*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 58-59.

49. Japan's pursuit of the 'greater co-prosperity sphere' in Southeast Asia which had led to war with the latter nations is an example. Post-war Japanese economic boom has also been largely financed by the ecological capital of Southeast Asia. The same, of course, can be said of other industrialised countries as well. The latest example, of course, is the US-led war against Iraq because of the fear of losing access to the oil resources of the Gulf region.

immigrant admitted must be compensated for by a birth foregone".⁵⁰ The pace of migration is likely to increase, forcing costly adjustments in the institutional and financial capacities of the recipient State. 'Illegal' migration may increase, requiring additional resources to prevent it. Immigration policies will come under pressure for revision, as has recently happened in France, Germany and Canada. It is noteworthy that migration from Turkey and the Maghreb is already "giving rise to deep-rooted European fears of Islamic invasion", and the United States is worried that Hispanic advances might "end [its] monolithic linguistic integrity."⁵¹ Domestic ethnic pressure to favour one migrating group over another, post-migration competition along ethnic lines, exposure to diseases are among other possible worries. Even if immigration policies in industrialised countries are tightened, the moral pressure for burden sharing would presumably be considerable. Financially, the latter could translate into demands for 'Marshall plans' for deprived regions.

As populations increase in developing countries and remain under-employed, the propensity of their military establishments to capitalise on unused manpower to increase force sizes, as well as the likelihood of such a development increasing the frequency of manpower-intensive regional conflicts cannot be ruled out.⁵² Also, "differential population growth among various regions of the world is likely to produce substantial shifts in the distribution of power and influence" possibly requiring re-assessment of Northern security policies.⁵³ on the other hand, due to declining growth rate in the industrial countries, their ability to preserve or promote their security interests abroad or respond to collective security needs worldwide is likely to be strained. The general aging of the population in the industrial countries

50. Paul Ehrlich & Anne Ehrlich, *op. cit* (4), p. 63.

51. See John Torode, "Immigration Policies in the Developed World in the Face of Migration Pressures: Causes and Responses", *Ditchley Conference Report No. D91/16*, December 1991, p. 1.

52. Gregory D. Foster *et al.*, "Global Demographic Trends to the Year 2010: Implications for U.S. Security" *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 12, No. 2, Spring 1989, p. 6.

53. Arthur H. Westing ed., *Global Resources and International Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 173.

also "implies a reduction in productivity and the possibility of economic stagnation."⁵⁴

One other major strategic consideration is the fear that population increases in the South "with its undemocratic nature" will systemically erode not only western "values and precepts" but will also lead to a "systematically diminished role and status for today's industrial democracies" thereby creating "a world more unreceptive, and ultimately more threatening, to the interests of the United States and its allies."⁵⁵ This concern over the influence of non-western culture, religion and values as well as the fear of breakdown in the present international order and the loss of control over global events, to the extent they are a part of the American (Republican, middle class, white⁵⁶) psyche, calls for serious attention from the elites and policy makers in developing countries.

VI

Policy Relevant Issues

At least three reasons appear to be the cause of high population growth in the developing countries: lack of social security, lack of education and a low profile of women in society. These issues require urgent scrutiny if demographic problems are to be satisfactorily resolved.

The primary responsibility lies at the national level. First, the domestic causes of poverty must be rooted out. These may range from a failure to fully understand societal dynamics which cause, sustain or exacerbate poverty; mediocre leadership with no long term perspective, unconcerned about or unable to assess the link between poverty and diminution of national cohesion and strength; inability to muster financial and administrative resources due to political considerations affected by the balance of domestic power; subservience of national interests to special interests (such as maintaining an unnecessarily large military establishment); to a poor scaling of society's priorities.

54. *Ibid.*

55. Nicholas Eberstadt, "Population Change and National Security" *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 70, No. 3, Summer 1991, pp. 115-131.

56. Arthur Westing, *op. cit.* (53), p. 163

Second, the attitude of developing countries towards women and their role in society is a major obstacle. High governmental priority in promoting female education and employment in modern activities would considerably reduce voluntary fertility, besides bringing other major benefits such as expanding the domestic economy, enlarging the national tax base and reducing domestic violence. Among long term benefits could be the rejection of institutions such as polygamy and *pardah*, and the remolding of societal values and priorities as qualified women enter positions of power and affect strategic thinking.

Third, education must return to the forefront of national activities, so that rural communities who form the majority of the South's populations can acquire the skills to supplement their traditional knowledge base and take responsibilities for the socio-economic health of their communities and the environmental health of their regions.

Fourth, where absent, legislations and governmental directives to promote appropriate population policies must be passed, implemented and monitored. A mix of incentives and disincentives, as well as careful family planning policies sensitive to the needs of each community and to ecological sustainability may be more successful in bringing the fertility rate down than before.

The responsibilities of the developed countries with regard to the population-environment question cannot be avoided either. First, the question of equity is paramount in the minds of southern leaders, which raises ethical issues the industrialised countries must heed. For the South, it is an ethical issue when 20% of the world's population consume 80% of the world's resources, while over 1 billion people in the South live below the poverty line; when this same 20% produce 80% of the world's wastes that are primarily responsible for polluting this planet, and yet are unwilling to change their lifestyle; when they emit 75% of the world's carbon dioxide exhausts which have perceptibly changed the world's climate, but insist that tropical forests remain untouched so that they can continue to be carbon sinks; and when they insist on their "GATT-given right to get every bar of

chocolate, every cup of coffee and drop of oil at the meanest possible prices out of labourers in the South", while at the same time insisting "on maintaining an international political and economic regime that is founded on the misery" of the other 80%.⁵⁷

Second, this inequitous arrangement which is likely to undermine the long term interests of the industrialised countries require structural or systemic adjustments, such that gross imbalances in economic growth and development can be corrected.

Third, given global economic imbalance, it is a relevant question to ask whether further economic growth in industrial countries is necessary. If economic growth (which implies quantitative increment) in the rich countries" is a disease, not the cure",⁵⁸ then development (which implies qualitative change) may be a better goal to pursue. For the developing countries, both are in short supply.

Fourth, the industrial countries might be more sensitive to bilateral and multilateral policies which preserve and perpetuate over oppressive governmental and administrative structures in the developing countries, which contribute in one form or another to human suffering and to a breakdown in international order and peace. They might also actively seek to strengthen those institutions which hold the greatest promise of human welfare.

VII

Conclusion

In Rio, the UNCED has failed to give effective consideration to environmental and developmental concerns. No new developmental paradigm emerged, nor national strategies which incorporate workable population measures. The developed countries failed to offer policies to ameliorate the South's developmental concern. The developmental dilemma - colorfully expressed by a Southern commentator:

57. For a flavour of the North-South confrontation during the Third UNCED Preparatory Committee Session in Geneva in August 1991, see IPS/UNCED, *Daily press Bulletin*, 08/1, dated August 21, 1991.

58. Paul Ehrlich, *op. cit* (4), p. 162.

The North has achieved economic strength artificially. By disregarding the effects of growth on the environment, it has used the equivalent of steroids to put on industrial muscle. Now, that dependency is threatening their very existence. Theirs is, therefore, a rehabilitation problem. They face the daunting task of returning from a dangerous addiction. And, as we all know, bad habits are hard to break. The South is in a completely different situation. Ours is a muscular deficiency. We need to put on some muscle but we must choose whether we want it the easy way or the hard way. The easy way would be to set environmental concerns aside and focus on development a la United States or Europe⁵⁹

continues. The need for bold strategic decisions, preferably through a North-South consensus, is needed now more than ever before.

59. Ricardo Bayon, "The Blame? Who cares?" *Network '92*, No. 3, December 1990, pp. 2-3.