

IMPACT OF THE 1994 INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT

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This paper was initially intended to assess the impact of the Cairo Conference on a group of countries designated by the United Nations Population Division as “Intermediate-Fertility Countries.” As you will see, I have taken the liberty of reformulating the question in terms more manageable for me. Thus, instead of attempting to identify and measure the “Cairo effect” on fertility trends, this paper will consider the political dynamics and the patterns of influence that gave shape and substance to Cairo. We should not, however, consider Cairo as a brief meeting that took place in Egypt in September, 1994; rather, it should be regarded as a process that began at some unidentifiable date prior to the conference when various actors began thinking and discussing how the conference could benefit their interests or, in other cases, how to prevent the conference from damaging their interests. In the conceptual scheme employed by this paper, the conference process does not end with the adjournment of the meeting but continues for years thereafter as groups and governments struggle to accommodate—or at times ignore—Cairo's Programme of Action. The impetus for much of the political, bureaucratic and diplomatic maneuvering post Cairo is the formidable challenge of influencing signatories to the document to comply with its recommendations

Population conferences are little less than a movable feast, allowing all countries to select their favorite delicacy and to reject other offerings they find unappealing or even offensive. This characterization applies to all three intergovernmental population conferences convened by the United Nations: Bucharest 1974, Mexico City 1984 and Cairo in 1994. At Bucharest, the first major population conference of the modern era, delegations from the Third World, the industrialized western nations, the Holy See and the communist bloc all found within the final set of recommendations approved by the conference a basis to claim victory for their side. Victory was also claimed on the grounds that the conference document was prevented from going as far as one group or another wanted. This has been the pattern of all three major population conferences. Bucharest, in many important respects, established a pattern that has been followed, more or less, by subsequent population conferences.

What is sometimes overlooked is that before the first intergovernmental conference on population at Bucharest, there had been two prior population conferences, in Rome in 1954 and Belgrade in 1965, that were convened jointly by the United Nations and International Union for the Scientific Study of Population. Delegates to these conferences constituted an epistemic community—a community of experts who shared certain commonalities like competence, perspective, academic training, scientific values etc. Participants to the Rome and Belgrade meetings, in contrast to subsequent United Nations conferences on population, were invited in their individual capacities as experts and not as representatives of governments or organizations. They were neither authorized nor inclined to make “commitments” on behalf of their governments; rather, their purpose was to discuss scientific ideas and more general problems relating to population as well as to encourage population research and training in the Third World.

Notwithstanding the intellectual value of these meetings of experts, they did not satisfy the needs and expectations of that group of nations that were concerned, if not alarmed, by the unprecedented rate of population growth in the developing world. The United States, which previously opposed any

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governmental effort that used American public funds to limit population growth, changed its stance in the mid 1960s and became the most vigorous advocate of population control in response to the growing sentiment that rapid population growth was a hindrance to development and the fact that contraceptive technologies were now available to limit fertility. In 1967, prompted by a voluntary contribution of several million dollars from the United States, the United Nations also showed a willingness to play a more activist role and created the United Nations Population Fund to assist countries in achieving their population goals.

With these changes, the focus of United Nations population conferences shifted from expertise to policy. In the minds of donor governments and population activists, the main purpose of population conferences became, arguably, the effort to make governments more aware of their population problems and to encourage and assist them in lowering the birthrate. Conferences became intergovernmental and participants were comprised of government officials, academics, politicians and representatives from government and civil society who were selected by their governments.

Frustrated by what they perceived as bureaucratic inefficiency and a generally poor quality of governance, donor nations turned to the private sector and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to deliver the goods and services to citizens. While donors and international agencies argue that civil society is being called upon to complement the work of government, others, including many Third World officials, see outside support of NGOs not merely as a complement to government but as the creation of an alternative government.

The general thesis I am presenting is that United Nations population conferences have gone through three stages. First, epistemic gatherings where experts were invited qua experts and were primarily, but not exclusively, accountable to their peers—fellow experts. Second, in an effort to have greater influence over national population policy, the United Nations, with the encouragement of the United States and other industrial nations, replaced the “meeting of experts” with a meeting of governments. Cairo, and the events preceding and following this most famous of all population conferences, represents the third stage in the evolution of United Nations population conferences.

The major forces in the population movement have attempted to make population conferences a diplomatic lever to alter policy and behavior in high fertility societies. To advance their goal, they have felt a need to broaden the base of policy makers at conferences, involve experts, their governments, and then nongovernmental organizations. As they have allowed the participant base to expand, the new entries showed less concern with demographic issues and population change and were consequently, were able to effect conference outcomes in a way more consistent with their interests.

While Cairo, like Bucharest and Mexico City, was an intergovernmental conference, NGOs were far more prominent, active and influential than at earlier conferences. Not only had NGOs developed a transnational advocacy network that commanded recognition, but also by the time of Cairo the major donor nations were relying on NGOs and the doors to conference participation were far more open to them. While there was no great change in the formal process in preparation for the Cairo Conference, there were changes in the early 1990s enabling large numbers of NGOs to acquire accreditation and participate extensively in the preparation of the Programme of Action. The Cairo process was influenced by the participation of a broad coalition of more than 1500 NGOs whose interests spanned development, reproductive and adolescent health, women's rights and empowerment, violence against women, female genital mutilation, the rights of indigenous people and family planning, but paid little serious attention to the determinants or consequences of population growth.

The pattern of massive NGO participation at Cairo, as well as many United Nations conferences during the 1990s, has now been recognized as a new and distinct form of transnational politics and

policymaking (Wapner, 1995; Clark, Friedman, and Hochstetler, 1998; Keck and Sikkink, 1998). In preparation for a series of conferences held in the 1990s, women's groups-by then a transnational advocacy network-saw an opportunity to assure that their special concerns regarding women's rights and health would be strongly endorsed by each of the conferences. Long before the Cairo conference itself, according to numerous members of women's rights groups, a strategy was developed by them to deliver their message to the entire series of conferences in a way that would enable them to build victory upon victory. The success of this approach was predicated on the realization by women's groups that NGOs in the 1990s were in closer contact with one another across borders and that United Nations conferences provided a more congenial atmosphere for NGOs than in the past.

As the Western population establishment sought ways to utilize the machinery of intergovernmental conferences to strengthen the commitment of member states to adopt population policies, they found the initiative passing to those countries they were trying to influence. As the locus of international policymaking shifted from the Western Imperium to a more universal, unpredictable, and sometimes chaotic assemblage of newly-created nations, the press, NGOs and other interest groups, there was a concomitant movement 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 West.

What we also may be witnessing is a paradoxical situation that at the moment various United Nations conferences, including population conferences, appear to have become an integral component of the international system, there is evidence of a counter-attack on the increasing importance of the role of conferences in policy making. Contrary to the widely circulated view, the counter attack is not explained satisfactorily as hostility to the Cairo agenda. There are those who are sympathetic to the substance of Cairo, but object to the idea that an international conference would formulate social policies for their own country; they see this as an external intrusion into national policymaking. In effect, they are objecting to external violations of the domain of the state.

The difficulties and complexities of assessing the impact of the Cairo Conference on the public policies of member governments of the United Nations is vividly illustrated-not exaggerated-by the following account based on an experience Jack Kantner and I had while conducting research in India. It was several years after Cairo, whose Programme of Action condemned the use of "targets" in family planning programs on the grounds that they led to coercion. Among the very first countries to change its policies to conform to certain provisions of the Cairo Programme of Action was India, the second most populous nation in the world. Press releases and newspaper stories throughout the world announced that India, in compliance with the Cairo recommendations, had banned the use of targets in its family planning program. Months after this ban had been announced, Dr. Kantner and I were given a copy of the newly adopted population policy for the state of Andhra Pradesh, a state in southeast India with a population of over 66 million. In reading the document, we found that it contained family planning targets of various sorts. It was clear that targets did not have the same obnoxious quality in the eyes of state officials in India as it did to delegates to the Cairo Conference. It was equally true that family planning officials defended targets as an effective tool of management.

What I have described is a situation where a United Nations population conference, in which India was represented, voted to support the adoption of a recommendation that all governments ban family planning targets. Indian NGOs, particularly women's health and women's rights NGOs, seemed to have been present and active during the entire process. The government of India responded to the Cairo declaration as well as to other domestic pressures by declaring an end to targets in family planning programs. Nevertheless, targets were included in the population policy of the state of Andhra Pradesh. This account underscores the difficulties in translating global policy into practice at the field level. Rhetorical compliance or the statements of national leaders may contribute to a change in policy;

however, the Indian federal system does not place responsibility for health and family planning in the hands of the central government in New Delhi. It remains, instead, a responsibility of the state.

The Cairo Programme of Action consisted of a number of recommendations to be acted upon by governments. Some of the recommendations are an expression of ideals and a vision of a more just and equitable world. Other recommendations specify actions that governments can readily take in compliance with the Cairo agenda. As the saying goes, the devil is in the details. Since it is virtually impossible for any government, especially those in developing nations, to implement the totality of Cairo simultaneously, what then should be the priorities and how should they be adjusted to account for different social systems, wealth, education and all the other factors that contribute to diversity. These are of course issues that national governments are forced to contend with. In the case of some countries, the task is little less than overwhelming.

As the call at Bucharest, irrespective of the formal language of the conference, was for basic changes in the world economic system, so too did Cairo sound a message that superseded almost all other provisions in the Programme of Action. Chapter IV of the Cairo Programme of Action, entitled "Gender equality, equity and empowerment of women," declares "the empowerment and autonomy of women and the improvement of their political, social and economic and health status is a highly important end in itself. In addition, it is essential for the achievement of sustainable development." These words, along with the advocacy of reproductive rights and health, registered as the central message of Cairo with most conference participants and NGOs. Lost in the shuffle and acclaim for the Cairo agenda was the concern over population size and growth, issues which demographers and other population specialists still considered to be of great importance. As the United Nations has convincingly demonstrated in its population projections, world population growth is not about to cease, notwithstanding population stabilization or decline in a minority of nations. South Asia and Africa assure the continuation of world population growth well into the present century.

It may be too much to expect conferences to prescribe population policies. If the adoption and implementation of programs endorsed by Cairo are the criteria which we use to assess the impact of Cairo, the results at this point in time are simply not clear. Numerous studies have reported on the Cairo impact-or lack thereof. On the basis of reading World Bank and other United Nations reports, the numbers tell me that female enrollment in school is increasing, life expectancy for women is going up and infant mortality is declining. These trends, all favorable and consistent with the Cairo recommendations, were also favorable since the 1950s and 60s. There is no visible change in the trend line since Cairo.

Conferences demonstrate that population and demographic issues are not uppermost in the value scheme of nations. I suspect both supporters as well as critics of Cairo have often been looking at the wrong indicators. In the minds of many, both supporters and critics, Cairo set forth a vast social program and asked the world to take heed. More important than the specific, programmatic changes that Cairo advocated is the clear and unqualified demand that women be equal partners with men in every phase of life. In other words, it was a demand for equality, a recognition of the special needs, as well as the comparative disadvantage of women at the present time.

We need not be reminded that Cairo was not a meeting of corporate executives working out a strategy and a plan to maximize profits. Cairo, along with its faults and deficiencies, was a gathering that articulated the vision and ideals of large numbers of people, both men and women. International conferences do not govern, much less bind, the behavior of states. They can, however, present ideas and recommendations to all nations in an ongoing effort to formulate a set of norms that will over time be embraced by people and governments everywhere. The creation of an international regime is a slow and cumbersome process as evidenced by the problems encountered by those attempting to control nuclear proliferation or atmospheric pollution. As for the negative impact of Cairo, I have a major reservation:

the objectives of Cairo were in no way advanced by using a population conference to fight the good fight over women's rights. The Beijing conference on women was the appropriate battleground for the struggle over gender equality, even though there are those who claim that Beijing would have been impossible without Cairo.

There is a particular irony in the demonization of family planners that pervaded the corridors of the Cairo conference and has become part of the gestalt of many women's rights groups. My own observations of family planners were that they were usually pediatricians, nurses, family health physicians and social workers. They hardly matched the profile of a single minded, population controller who was determined to prevent births in any way or by any method at hand. As a political scientist, I recognize the benefits gained by a social movement or advocacy group when it is able to forge greater unity because of a common foe. As a social scientist, however, I find it disagreeable to present a caricature of family planners—just as I find it disagreeable to characterize feminists or right-to-lifers.

I have been challenged by a very astute woman on the United Nations staff regarding my “defense” of family planners. She points out that she found them a decent lot with genuine concern for women and men for whom they were attempting to provide services. She said it was not people at this level who should be faulted, but rather the top officials of agencies who set policies and disbursed funds. I think there is something, but not everything, to what she said. The leadership of international assistance agencies started with the assumption that rapid population growth was detrimental to development and that if the population growth rate could be reduced, it would be good for economic growth. Growth would be of benefit to the nation as well as the individual. In short, they were advocates of a development approach, an approach that had received the endorsement and support of national governments, bilateral agencies and multi-lateral organizations.

Cairo set forth a new and different model, or paradigm if you prefer. The focus would shift from the society, or nation or community, and would place the individual, particularly women, at the center. Population activities would be aimed at women's reproductive health, women's rights and status, and women's empowerment. The radical aspect of this new paradigm was not women's rights or status, but the strong demand that population assistance and family planning programs should not start with a concern for society; instead, it should have as its goal the benefit of the individual. Essentially, the purpose was changed from development to welfare. It was a shift from the macro to the micro.

Whether welfare efforts will yield a greater good is problematic. We do know that donor nations have not met the financial targets set at Cairo; developing countries have not embraced Cairo thoroughly; more rhetorical obeisance than programmatic support has been given to Cairo. What we may be seeing is that development, societal concerns and a macro focus have greater support among aid-givers and the governments of developing countries than does a policy that focuses on the individual's welfare concerns and a micro approach. It may well be that we are learning that a development and family planning vessel has a greater capacity to carry reproductive health as part of its cargo than the reverse. I do not regard what I have just said as a normative prescription. It arises out of a longstanding commitment to development as well as a serious interest in United Nations conferences as instruments for social change and development.

In recent days I have heard and read numerous references to the folly of the Club of Rome and its prophets, to the alarm cries of Paul Ehrlich and the Paddock brothers. As I hear a recitation of the faults of those whose advocacy supplanted their scholarship, I am also reminded of those who, more than a quarter of a century ago, proclaimed the end of the population explosion. How many billion people have we added to the world since “the end” was proclaimed?

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