

Conflicts Over World Population: Cairo and Beyond

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Population and prosperity will remain important issues, and will require increasing attention, for decades to come. The United Nations International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) held September 5-12, 1994, in Cairo, Egypt, aimed to build an international consensus about these issues, and succeeded in part. In this presentation, I shall sketch the context of the Cairo conference; describe some of its main achievements; and suggest critical conflicts that remain to be resolved.

The Context of Cairo

Compared to history before World War II, the context of Cairo—in fact, the entire human situation—is unprecedented in four respects:

- first, the size and speed of growth of the human population;

- second, the human impact on the physical, chemical and biological environment, and human vulnerability to changes in the environment;
- third, the enormous wealth of some parts of the world and the resulting disparities between the rich and the poor; and
- fourth, the cultural implosion that brings diverse traditions into contact, and sometimes into conflict.

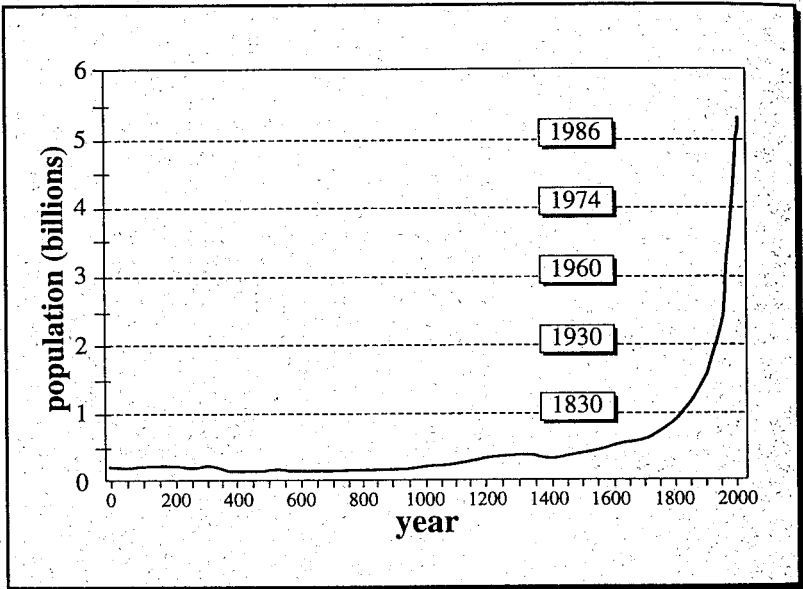


Figure 1. World population from the end of the last Ice Age

Population Growth: The Big Speed-up

Some 12,000 years ago, after the last Ice Age, the human population of the Earth first exceeded five million people. By A.D. 1650, the population grew to about 500 million, or half a billion. This 100-fold increase represented a doubling about once every

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1,650 years, on the average.

Since A.D. 1650, population growth accelerated tremendously. The human population increased from roughly half a billion to roughly 5.5 billion today—three and a half doublings in three and a half cen-

turies, or one doubling per century. Since World War II, the population has doubled in about forty years, a forty-fold acceleration over the average population growth rate prior to 1650. Never before the second half of the twentieth century had any person lived through a doubling of global population in a single lifetime—and now some have lived through a tripling of human numbers.

The populations of some domestic animals have grown even faster than human numbers. In 1990 to 1992, people had 4.3 billion large domestic animals, from sheep to camels. The number of chickens, 17 billion, more than doubled over the prior decade. In 1992, domestic animals were fed 37 percent of all grain consumed. Some of these domestic animals have major environmental impacts. They produce methane and liquid and solid wastes, overgraze fragile grasslands, and prevent forest regeneration.

The human species lacks any prior experience with such rapid growth and large numbers of its own or of its domestic species.

Environmental Impact: Rising Vulnerability

Humankind is now a large actor on the small stage of this planet. In the minds of many, people are besieged by an unprecedented litany of environmental problems, including loss of topsoil, desertification, deforestation, dropping water tables, toxic poison-

ing of drinking water, oceanic pollution, shrinking wetlands, overgrazing, loss of wilderness areas and species, shortage of firewood, siltation in rivers and estuaries, encroachment of human habitat on arable land, erosion of the ozone layer, global warming, nuclear wastes, and acid rain. Vulnerability to a rise in sea levels rises with the tide of urbanization, as the number of people who live in coastal cities rapidly approaches one billion.

Like the sudden giants in H.G. Wells' novel, *Food of the Gods*, humans have become a geological force. For example, in 1991, human use of inanimate energy was 93 billion megawatt-hours per year, up nearly 100-fold from inanimate energy use in 1860. The current level of inanimate energy use is nearly four times the total solar energy available to the Earth for human food production. Again, all human-made water reservoirs and dams today have a useful capacity of 3,000 to 5,000 cubic kilometers, roughly twice the stock of water in all the world's rivers.

Environmental vulnerability affects human health. With

In 1990, of the 4 billion people, or 77 percent of world population, who lived in developing countries:

- 1.5 billion people lacked access to health services
- 1.7 billion people (1 in 3 people on earth) were infected with tuberculosis
- 1.3 billion people lacked access to safe water
- 2.3 billion people had no toilet
- 1 billion adults (600 million of them women) were illiterate.
- Females received on average half the higher education of males
- Nearly 1 billion people chronically went hungry

increasing frequency, people make contact with the viruses and other pathogens of previously remote forests, and new diseases are emerging.

Rich and Poor: Growing Economic Disparities

In the aggregate production of material wealth, the half-century since World War II has been a golden era of technological and economic wonders. For example, in constant prices, with the price in 1990 set

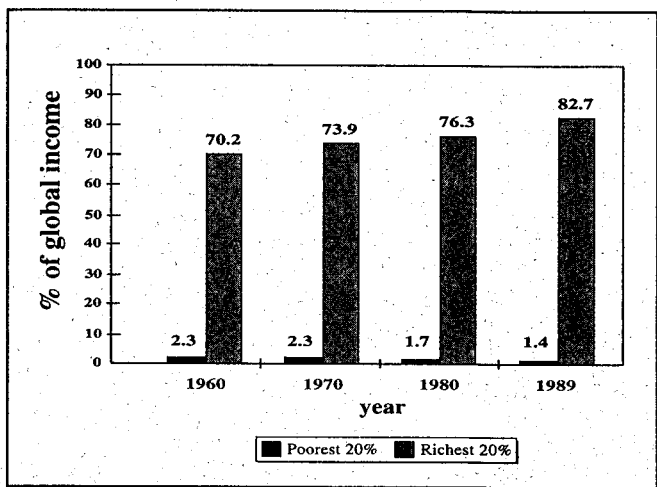


Figure 2. Shares of world income received by the 20 percent of people in the richest nations and 20 percent of people in the poorest nations, 1960-1989. Source: United Nations Development Programme, 1992.

equal to 100, the price of petroleum fell from 113 in 1975 to 76 in 1992. The price of a basket of 33 nonfuel commodities fell from 159 in 1975 to 86 in 1992. Total food commodity prices fell from 196 in 1975 to 85 in 1992.

But a rising average income has been very unequally distributed. In constant 1989 U.S. dollars, the absolute gap between the wealthiest fifth and the poorest fifth of the human population rose from \$1,864 in 1960 to \$15,149 in 1989.

In 1992, the 830 million people in the world's richest countries enjoyed an average annual income of \$22,000—a truly astounding achievement. The almost 2.6 billion people in the middle-income countries received only \$1,600. The more than 2 billion people in the poorest countries lived on an average annual income of \$400, or a dollar a day. The 15 percent of the population in the world's richest countries enjoyed 79 percent of all the world's income.

Dollars are not the full measure of human well-being. In 1990-95, while Europeans enjoyed a life expectancy above seventy-five years, Africans still had a life expectancy of fifty-three years—below the world average twenty years earlier.

While food prices have dropped by half, the bottom billion are so poor that they cannot exercise effective demand in world commodity markets; they are economically invisible.

Cultures in Collision

The cultural implosion of recent decades, while difficult to quantify, is the change that is potentially most explosive. Migrations within countries and between countries, business travel, tourism, radio, television, telephone, fax, the Internet, recordings, printed media—all have shrunk the world stage. Terrorism and religious fundamentalism reach across former cultural boundaries to threaten people everywhere—from the poorest regions of poor countries to the towers of Wall Street.

ICPD

In spite of terrorists' death threats and last-second political skirmishing, some 15,000 people from 183 countries gathered in Cairo in September 1994 with the announced aim of building a consensus among the world's nations on population and develop-

ment over the next twenty years. The Cairo meeting followed intergovernmental conferences on population held in Mexico City in 1984 and in Bucharest in 1974.

The political history of these three conferences roughly approximates the square-dance step known as "swing your partner." In this step, you and your partner, pulling against each other, exchange positions, then come back to your original positions.

To simplify greatly, the United States and some other wealthy countries went to Bucharest in 1974 to promote family planning, with the intent of lowering population growth rates and thereby making it easier for poor countries to develop economically. But the developing countries rallied to the slogan, "Development is the best contraceptive." They wanted the rich countries to transfer the capital assets and technology they required for economic development. Slower population growth would follow, they argued.

Ten years later, the positions were reversed. The U.S. delegation argued that if the developing countries would let free markets flower, their economies would develop and eventually their fertility would fall. However, with ten years' more experience of rapid population growth, the developing countries urgently desired support for family planning programs. The U.S. stopped its support of the U.N. Fund for Population Activities to protest what it charged were coerced abortions in China.

In the decade since 1984, nearly all countries have recognized very rapid population growth (faster than 2 percent a year) as a problem. But scholars still debate how best to slow population growth. The promoters of family planning programs argue that "Contraceptives are the best contraceptive." Others emphasize the economic, educational, health, and cultural factors (like the status of women and improved child survival) that make parents want to bear fewer children. Because there was no consensus among schol-

ars about the most effective means of lowering fertility before the meeting, one could hardly have expected the ICPD to take a single clear direction. And it did not.

The Programme of Action produced by the Cairo conference was a mix of dream and sermon, of wish and prayer. There was something for everybody. By one count, the Programme contained more than a thousand recommendations. Of these, only a handful dealt with the desirability and means of reducing fertility and slowing population growth. The rest urged governments to improve almost every aspect of human well-being, but specified no priorities.

While abortion, adolescent sexuality, homosexuality, and extra-marital sexual relations absorbed attention and generated a tremendous amount of rhetoric, the three main accomplishments of the ICPD are simple and important.

Family planning and contraception were placed firmly in the mainstream. Access to family planning was recognized as an individual right and a governmental obligation.

Women took center stage. The right of women to limit their own fertility was affirmed. Their health, jobs, credit, education, property rights, and reproductive autonomy emerged as primary concerns.

The U.S. resumed leadership in promoting slower population growth to enhance human well-being. President Clinton requested \$585 million for population activities in fiscal 1995. Both houses of Congress approved \$10 million more than the president asked for. The U.S. will become the largest single donor for population activities.

Issues for the future

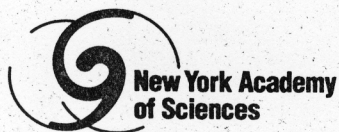
Very few analysts think that the next 350 years will see a further

eleven-fold increase in human population like the last 350 years. The long-term demographic future of our species will not resemble its long-term past. An end to long-term average population growth is inevitable, very probably within the 21st century. The big questions are: just how soon, by what means, and at whose expense? Implicit in these simple questions are eight thorny issues that remain to be resolved:

1. Who will pay for family planning and other population activities? How will the bill be distributed between developing countries (who now pay 80 percent) and richer countries?
2. Who will spend the money, and how? How will monies be allocated between governments and non-governmental organizations? Between family planning and allied programs like reproductive health?
3. How will environmental goals be balanced against economic goals? If reducing poverty requires increasing production in developing countries, can the increased production be achieved at acceptable environmental costs?
4. How will cultural change be balanced against cultural continuity? In some cultures, the notion of empowering women contradicts directly the persistent call in the ICPD document for "full respect for the various religious and ethical values and cultural backgrounds." U.S. women achieved the vote only in 1920 and only after considerable struggle. Demanding equality for women asks some cultures to make far greater change in far less time. Such demands should be made with a clear and sympathetic understanding that they entail profound cultural change.

5. How will the often-asserted right of couples and individuals to control their fertility be reconciled with national demographic goals if the way couples and individuals exercise that right happens not to bring about the demographic goals?
6. How will national sovereignty be reconciled with world or regional environmental and demographic goals? The control of migration, reproduction, and economic activities that involve the global commons (atmosphere, oceans, international water bodies, plant and animal populations) could easily generate conflict.
7. How will the desire and moral obligation to alleviate poverty and suffering in the short term be reconciled with the use of local scarcities as an efficient market signal? How can market economies meet the immediate needs of the world's poor?
8. On this finite sphere, how will rapid population growth and economic development in poor countries be balanced against high consumption per person in the rich countries?

These questions will not be answered easily, or perhaps at all. But they will persist for decades as a troubling heritage for our children. ■



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