

Population, Resources' Consumption, and Developmental Possibilities*

The unprecedented growth in human numbers in our time will have profound effects on our physical environment. Population is growing faster than ever before, at 93–95 million people a year. Our current population of 5.6 thousand millions is expected to grow to 6.2 thousand millions by the end of the century. Nearly all of this growth will be in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. More than half will be in southern Asia and Africa — the poorest regions in the world.

One result of this skewed growth will be to stimulate movement. People are leaving the rural areas for the cities in greater numbers than ever: by the end of the century, half the world's population will live in cities or large towns. Conversely, some of the world's poorest people are invading forests and fragile watersheds in search of land and a livelihood.

Population growth also means that there are more very poor people in the world than ever before, with fewer prospects for an improvement in their lives. Somehow, if the world is to make progress towards development, and avoid the destructive effects of poverty, some way must be found to give hope to the 'bottom billion' poorest people. Some means must also be found to meet the aspirations of the 3,000 millions who are neither very poor nor very affluent.

At the same time we must not forget the importance of the relationship between population and consumption. Whilst we ask the peoples and governments of the developing world to be conscious of the importance of achieving a balance between population and the sustainable development of their resources, we must also ask the peoples and governments of the developed countries to change the manner and rate at which they consume their own and others' resources.

Environmental Effects of Population Growth

All of these changes will have deep and interacting environmental effects. The challenge is to raise the living standards of four-fifths of the world's people — an increasing number of whom live in cities, and who are increasingly mobile — without destroying the environment on which we all depend. We need development; but development without sustainability defeats its own purpose.

Considerable knowledge of a general kind has been generated about population/environment relationships. Much general research has been carried out in many parts of the world. Demand is now increasing for case-studies at the local or community level, in order to understand better than hitherto the many causes that are likely to lead to environmental stress, and assess realistically what can be achieved through population measures and policies.

The role of women in the entire population–environment nexus is more widely appreciated now than before — especially their actual and potential role as protectors and managers of the environment — and this, too, is stimulating interest in pertinent programmes. Much, however, remains to be done in the area of consciousness-raising, among all groups of people, on the relationship between population and environmentally sound development.

It should now be possible to formulate and implement policies and programmes over a broad range. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) is trying to respond to some of those needs. Both our mandate and UNCED's Agenda 21 place much emphasis on the eradication of poverty. At the same time it is clear that population interacts with poverty and environmental degradation in ways which are often not well understood. We are therefore looking for approaches with direct relevance to policy formulation and remedial action. This Roundtable* should be seen also within this context.

Changes Since UN Population Conference of 1984

Much has changed since 1984, when the latest United Nations' population conference was held. Let me mention three instances:

First, there is the large influx of new members in the United Nations since 1984, when the membership stood at 159 as against the present membership of 184. The demographic circumstances of many of these new states are quite precarious. Our forthcoming International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD)[†] offers these states the opportunity to participate in an international consensus-building endeavour on an issue of great importance to their future.

Second, many other states have redefined their attitude to the population issue, and these new attitudes need to be integrated into a new consensus.

Third, since 1984 the entire development paradigm has undergone profound changes which will inevitably influence the population field as well.

* Substance of Dr Sadik's Keynote address to the Roundtable on 'Population, Environment, and Sustainable Development', held at the International Academy of the Environment, Conches, Geneva, Switzerland, on 24 November 1993. — Ed.

[†] For this important occasion we have in press a book aimed primarily at enlightening participants regarding the enormous environmental implications of population pressures and the quintessential need to limit them by means which should not be draconian. — Ed.

Hopes for ICPD

These and other developments will be reflected in next September's ICPD, which I hope will accomplish at least the following:

1. Outline a plan of action linking population concerns to those of economic growth and sustainable development. Two goals are prominent — first, more effective local action to meet individual needs and aspirations of both men and women, and, second, more effective *national policies and programmes to bring population into balance with available resources*.
2. Reaffirm the right of women of access to good-quality reproductive health-care, including access to safe and affordable methods of *family planning as a basic human right of all women*.
3. Ensure that all population and development policies and endeavours emphasize the *empowerment of women*.
4. Decide on a plan of action which will *stabilize population growth-rates*, ease pressures underlying rapid urbanization and migration within and across national borders, and safeguard the rights of international migrants.

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 GUEST COMMENT

Desertification Convention Essential for Food Security*

The deterioration of land resources in the world's arid and semi-arid regions is one of the gravest problems facing our planet and its people. Desertification, broadly defined, is one of the principal barriers to sustainable food security and sustainable livelihoods in our world today. It is not a future global threat; it is a devastating day-to-day local reality. If we aspire to provide sustainable food security and sustainable livelihood for the world's expanding populations, we must not merely attack desertification; we must not merely halt desertification, but actually reverse desertification.

Sustainable Food Security Fundamental

A central development objective, fundamental to all else, is sustainable food security. At the very centre of concern about development must be due concern with food, agriculture, and people. In the developing countries, an estimated 13–18 million people, mostly children, die from hunger, malnutrition, and poverty-related causes, each year. That is about 40,000 people a day, or 1,700 people an hour. One thousand million people — nearly 20% of the global population — live in households that are too poor to obtain the food which is necessary for sustaining normal work, and some 500 millions live in households that are too poor to obtain the food which is needed for minimal activity. One child in three is underweight by age five. As the Bellagio Declaration on Overcoming Hunger in the 1990s states, 'In a world of potential food plenty, we have collectively failed more than one [thousand millions] of our people.'

Today's failure may be but a prologue to a much larger failure in the future. The average person among the four thousand millions living in the developing countries now consumes about 2,500 calories of food each day. The average person living in Western Europe consumes 3,400 calories per day or, in the United States, more than 3,600 calories. If the world's people are to have a nutritionally adequate diet, world food output must at least triple over the next half-century, given likely population increases. It would be difficult enough to achieve this expansion under favourable circumstances, and conditions may be far from favourable.

For example, according to recent estimates by some of the world's leading soil scientists, an area of about 1.2 thousand million hectares — about the size of China and India combined — has experienced moderate to extreme soil deterioration since World War II as a result of human activities. Over three-fourths of that deterioration has occurred in the developing regions, most of it in arid and semi-arid areas. When combined with other environmental threats to the agricultural resource-base — loss of water and genetic resources, loss of cultural resources, and climate change, both local and global — the situation is disturbing indeed.

* Mr Speth kindly provided this editorial comment based on his address to the Third Session of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee for the International Convention on Desertification, New York, NY, USA, on 17 January 1994. — Ed.