

BURNING THE BRIDGE TO THE 21ST CENTURY: THE END OF THE ERA OF INTEGRATED CONFERENCES?

By **Frederick A.B. Meyerson**

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This is an exciting time—when science may be on the verge of merging diverse disciplines and datasets to achieve an understanding of the complex interactions among population, development, and the environment. Unfortunately, we appear to be moving backwards in terms of the political will for multilateral actions and integrated international conferences. Prior to the 2002 Johannesburg World Summit in Sustainable Development, its chairman Emil Salim remarked that the Summit would likely be the last of its kind. Others in the U.S. government, foreign governments, and the NGO community made similar assessments after the close of the conference.

In June 2003, the United Nations General Assembly voted to end the automatic five-year review of UN conferences, moving instead to a system in which both the format and timing of these conferences will be decided on a case-by-case basis. The rationale is that these large events should be more strategic and less routine. It remains to be seen whether this significant change will increase the conferences' efficiency and effectiveness, or instead make them more likely to be held hostage to the prevailing political winds. While global environmental and population challenges are clearer and more pressing than ever, the international community seems less capable of constructive agreement. There has been a lot more talk than action.

Climate and Biodiversity: An Unimpressive Record

On the climate front, there is finally near-universal agreement among scientists that the earth's surface temperature is warming significantly, that the warming is likely due to human activity, and that this warming will have a substantial negative impact on humans and other species (IPCC, 2001). Yet the Kyoto Protocol—a political tightrope of an agreement with limited goals—has been watered down, burdened with fuzzy math, and rejected by the United States. To date, Kyoto has had a negligible effect on emissions and atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gas.

Only a handful of countries are on track to meet their Kyoto obligations. Many of those nations have achieved that status more as a by-product of economic problems and fortuitous circumstances than environmental policy. A dozen years and hundreds of climate conferences and meetings involving long-term investments by thousands of academics and policymakers have yielded disappointing results. A recent WorldWatch paper concluded that “the gap between climate science and policy has widened, rather than narrowed, since Rio” (Dunn, 2002). In a move that at least hints of resignation, the most recent round of climate talks in New Delhi in October 2002 shifted the emphasis away from preventing climate change to ways to adapt to it.¹

Editor's Note

This commentary has been updated and expanded from an original version that appeared in the ECSP newsletter *PECS News* 8 (2003, Spring).

After weakening the Kyoto Protocol, the United States, by far the largest greenhouse gas emitter, has essentially walked away from the agreement along with any serious effort to lower U.S. emissions. Average American fuel economy has been worsening in an era when hybrid technology and other advances should point in the other direction. Even William K. Reilly, EPA Administrator under the first Bush Administration, recently chided George W. Bush for not coming back to the table to reshape climate policy and for being “widely seen as unfriendly to the environment” (Reilly, 2003). This impression was reinforced by the Bush Administration’s blatant censorship of climate-change science and analysis in a recent EPA report on the state of the U.S. environment.²

The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) is another troubling example. Since the CBD’s birth in Rio, there have been more than fifteen major international meetings under its aegis—but little progress towards either measuring biological diversity declines or slowing down the extinction of species. Again, the United States is one of a tiny handful of countries that have not ratified the CBD; yet it routinely sends large delegations to CBD meetings and tries hard to influence their outcome through direct or indirect means.

At a recent CBD meeting, the United States opposed many aspects of the agreement that would actually protect biodiversity or set standards, apparently out of concern that the CBD might impede the sovereignty and economic free range of America. In fact, it is now often difficult to discern any compass other than economic self-interest guiding U.S. policy towards climate and biodiversity. The State Department under the Bush Administration has exercised increasingly rigid control over U.S. delegations and has reduced the role and independence of scientists on those teams.

The Preemptive Repression of Cairo +10?

A related paralysis and malaise may now be affecting international population policy. The 1994 Programme of Action at the United Nations International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo set forth bold goals for universal access to reproductive health by 2015. Cairo +10,

originally scheduled for early 2004, was to be a reaffirmation of those goals and assessment of progress to date. Ministerial-level population conferences have been held every ten years since 1974, and prior to that, there were international technical conferences in 1954 and 1965.

However, it now appears that there will be no Cairo +10 in 2004, at least not at the intergovernmental level. The official events are likely to be limited to an informational reaffirmation of the 1994 agreement, with no

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new actions or pronouncements. International Planned Parenthood Federation and other NGOs are organizing a series of related events, but these meetings will focus on the status of intergovernmental reproductive-health efforts rather than altering or improving the underlying agreement.

Fear of the United States is considered to be one underlying reason that the Cairo document will not be actively reconsidered in 2004. Some family-planning advocates are concerned that, given the opportunity, the United States would pressure the UN into a complete review of the Programme of Action with the goal of severely weakening it. Indeed, statements by U.S. delegations at recent international conferences have been worrisome. For instance, the American delegation to an October 2002 Bangkok population conference suddenly announced that the United States would not reaffirm its support for Cairo unless the terms “reproductive-health services” and “reproductive rights” (which the United States construes as including abortion) were removed from the text (Dao, 2002).

The United States might be chastened by its 32-1 and 33-1 defeats at the December 2002 Pacific and Asian Population Conference, where it unsuccessfully attempted to convince other parties that previously negotiated reproductive-health language in some way promoted abortion and underage sex. However, more observers think that the

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supporters therefore feel that there might be a lot more to lose than there is to gain by opening this particular Pandora's box.

Proponents of international family-planning programs have consequently adopted a minimalist approach to Cairo +10. In April 2003, the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) released a statement that “any intergovernmental negotiation of previously agreed—and indeed reinforced—commitments to ICPD goals is neither appropriate nor useful at this time” (IPPF, 2003). In the current climate, many international family-planning advocates consider that the best function of any Cairo +10 events will be to analyze and critique successes and failures since 1994. This may be accomplished by “report cards” on the ICPD goals for reproductive and maternal health; HIV/AIDS; unsafe abortion; empowerment of women; adolescent pregnancy; and national financial commitments, ranking both developed and developing countries by relative performance. Population Action International (PAI), Family Care International (FCI), the London School of Tropical Medicine, and other NGOs are also planning activities along those lines.

However pragmatic this minimalist course of action may be, the diminution of Cairo +10 is an unfortunate outcome. While the ICPD agreement is essentially a sound instrument, it undoubtedly could be improved, and even small substantive adjustments could reenergize the global community towards achieving the Cairo goals. If the international community were on track to fulfill these goals, a subdued 2004 conference would not be of great concern and perhaps even appropriate.

In reality, however, almost all donor countries have fallen far short of their Cairo

commitments. Global international population assistance dropped from \$2.6 billion in 2000 to \$2.3 billion in 2001 (the most recent years available)—a figure that represents only 40 percent of the \$5.7 billion target agreed to in Cairo.³ U.S. international family-planning contributions have fallen by about 35 percent in constant dollar terms since 1995, so that the United States is providing less than half of its estimated Cairo share. The international donor community actually supplied fewer condoms in 2000 than it did in 1990 (950 million vs. 970 million), at a time when the need for condoms is expected to rise from 8 billion to 18.6 billion between 2000 and 2015 (UNFPA, 2002). An estimated 14,000 people become infected with HIV every day, many of them for want of a condom that can be produced for three cents.

Some observers have also suggested that the UN is taking a low-profile approach to Cairo +10 because the organization is now focused on the Millennium Development Goals. Those goals—which include maternal health and child mortality reductions—pointedly do not include one of the main goals of Cairo: full and complete access to sexual and reproductive health. But according to Steven Sinding, Director-General of IPPF, “fulfillment of the Cairo goals is absolutely fundamental to every one of the Millennium Development Goals” (Sinding, 2002).

Unmet Needs—Counting Unhatched Chickens?

Complicating the issues surrounding Cairo +10, the UN Population Division (UNPD) recently released its 2002 revision of global population projections. Using new lower assumptions about future fertility in the developing world, the report suggests that the world will rapidly move beyond the era of population growth into a period when aging and dependency ratios are the primary global concern (UNPD, 2003). Some family-planning proponents feel that UNPD's continuous lowering of global population projections is irresponsible and creates a false sense of optimism about population trends. Recent population declines, attributable in part by mortality related to AIDS and other problems, obscure the role and efficacy of reproductive-health programs. Many donor countries—particularly some European

nations—are concerned that a shift of focus may divert attention and resources away from still-pressing international family-planning needs that will last for decades. For example, governmental resolve and support for reproductive-health programs appears to be faltering in Peru and the Philippines.

In fact, there is still a great deal of unmet reproductive-health need, not only in many parts of the developing world but also here in the United States. Over one hundred million women in developing countries have little or no access to family planning services. Some progress has been made in reducing that number since Cairo, but not at a pace that will achieve the ICPD goals by 2015. Moreover, there is a growing gap between reproductive-health service needs in developing countries and the international financial resources devoted towards meeting those needs.

Closer to home, while almost all U.S. women have at least theoretical access to reproductive-health services, the United States has an unintended pregnancy rate substantially above that of Canada and most European countries (Belanger & Ouellet, 2003). The United States trails many countries in terms of the kind, quality, and breadth of family-planning services and education that would reduce its unintended pregnancy (and therefore abortion) rates. A 1980s study, for instance, found that the average American woman had 1.4 unintended pregnancies in her lifetime, compared to only 0.1 for the average Dutch woman (Belanger & Ouellet, 2003). Approximately half of unintended pregnancies in the United States result in abortions.

The Death of a Brief Golden Era?

Perhaps conference fatigue has overcome both the UN system and the international community, which have staged many large events and entertained ambitious ideas that have not always reached fruition. Peter Haas has described global conferences as “momentary media events that provide sound-bite opportunities without lasting effects on policies or the quality of the environment.” But Haas also admits that these conferences also “provide indirect effects that may be beneficial for inducing states to take more progressive steps toward governance and

sustainable development” (Haas, 2002).

The 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm provides a classic example of the significant indirect effects of international gatherings. When Brazil’s delegate to the conference (Henrique Brandao Cavalcanti) returned home, he convinced his government to create a Secretariat of the Environment—an action that permanently improved the prospects for protection of Brazil’s vast biological resources. Population conferences have had a similar effect in spreading information and practices around the world. Even in the Internet era,

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critical ideas are most effectively delivered in person, as demonstrated by frequent diplomatic forays of American presidents to the Middle East. But there is also evidence that the freshness, excitement, and big ideas of early conferences can be rapidly overtaken in later conferences by the staleness and inertia that often characterize much of the diplomatic world.

Another dream that may be dying in this increasingly unfavorable atmosphere for international conferences is the possibility of linking population and the environment politically and diplomatically as well as scientifically. Both Cairo and the 1992 Rio Earth Summit held out the promise that these relationships might be prominent enough at the follow-on 2002 and 2004 conferences to shape policy on both fronts. Instead, population and reproductive health were almost absent at Johannesburg, reduced to what Bob Engelman of Population Action International described as “sideshows at a circus” (Solomon-Greenbaum, 2003).

And a ceremonial Cairo +10 agenda is likely to completely omit environmental issues. What this marginalization means from a practical perspective is that there will be little progress on improving the substance of either international environmental or population agreements for as much as another decade when in theory the next round of conferences

should take place. Surprisingly, the population–environment community seems to be relatively complacent about this turn of events. If anything, the trend has been towards placing less emphasis on the links between population and environmental change.

We may well look back at the last three decades of the 20th century as a brief golden era of international cooperation on environment, population, and development. Stockholm 1972 and the World Population Conference at Bucharest in 1974 ushered in an era of constructive, high-level engagement between governments and the scientific and NGO communities. The stalemate of the Cold War and the lull afterwards produced a calm that may have facilitated the extraordinary results of Rio, Cairo, and their predecessors. Whatever the cause of this success, now that we have crossed the bridge to the 21st century, we may wish that we could go back. We should at least try to keep the bridge from burning.

Three recommendations come to mind with regard to population and environment issues. First, the Cairo goals—particularly the

reproductive-health goals—should be more specifically referenced and reaffirmed in the UN Millennium Development Goals process. Second, Cairo +10 should offer the opportunity for governments, scientists, and the NGO community to jointly explore national and international successes and failures since 1994, and to revise the strategy for reaching the Cairo goals as appropriate.

Finally, countries should use the Cairo +10 events to take a thoughtful look ahead to the next series of international conferences. Side events could develop ways to integrate the Rio, Cairo, and Johannesburg nexus between population and environmental goals, and to harmonize and coordinate those goals. This effort would require the meaningful inclusion of the environmental science and policy community as well as the creation of a true two-way street between population and environment research and action. In an era when science is being fully integrated elsewhere, we should not allow another critical policy decade for population and environment to slip by. **W**

Notes

¹To review these talks, see <http://unfccc.int/cop8/index.html>.

² See Revkin (2003) and Symons (2003).

³ For more details, see <http://www.unfpa.org>.

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