

The 'Population Summit'*

Almost fifty national academies, etc., convened in New Delhi from 24th to 27th October 1993, which is believed to have been the first time that so many such bodies have come together to discuss a specific topic of common interest. They convened to consider an issue no less controversial than human population, in conjunction of course with environment and development. Scientists tend to be an argumentative lot, and it can happen that if just ten of them get together in one room, they'll hardly agree on the time of day! Assemble 120 of them, and from a dozen disciplines and fifty countries, and the prospect would seem promising for endless debate and ultimate discord. As it was, the New Delhi gathering came up with a Conference Statement that earned the signatures of almost all participants, supporting the notion that population is indeed a problem of a super-pressing sort.

This in itself was a gesture of salient significance. The population 'debate', if debate it should ever have been, has dragged on for decades. Various scientists have asserted there was a problem, or no there wasn't but there might be one day — they'd have to research it more lengthily before they could decide. Now we can accept that many scientific and other leaders from North and South, East and West, have determined that the essential issue is established: the population problem is not good news at all, and should be tackled with all due despatch and vigour before it becomes worse news — or even dreadful news, and conceivably devastating news.

To Cairo Next September

The inspiration for the New Delhi conference came from the idea that the scientific community should support the UN Conference on Population and Development in Cairo next September. Were the experts to clear the air by removing scientific dissent so far as possible, their initiative would smooth the way for the political leaders and policymakers en route to Cairo. So four major academies — the Royal Society of London, the US National Academy of Sciences, the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, and the Indian National Science Academy — took the lead, together with twelve co-sponsoring academies, in organizing what came to be known as the 'Population Summit'.

The summiteers proclaimed in their Statement that 'Ultimate success in dealing with global social, economic, and environmental, problems cannot be achieved without a stable world population. The goal should be to reach zero population growth within the lifetime of our children.' This goal will require prodigious planning efforts, pursued with far more urgency and incisiveness than has been the case to date. The resource in shortest supply is probably not money but time.

The 3,000-word Statement contains many more such uncompromising assertions. This is all the more gratifying in that a statement with fifty national signatories must perforce be a 'lowest common denominator' affair. Not surprisingly, the Statement fell short of a statement published last year by the Royal Society and the US National Academy of Sciences: 'If current predictions of population growth prove accurate and patterns of human activity on the planet remain unchanged, science and technology may not be able to prevent irreversible degradation of the natural environment and continued poverty for much of the world. ... Some of the environmental changes may produce irreversible damage to the Earth's capacity to sustain life. ... The future of our planet is in the balance.' A similar message was released last year by the Union of Concerned Scientists, signed by 1,680 eminent scientists in 70 countries, including 104 Nobel Laureates: 'Human beings and the natural world are on a collision course. ... Pressures resulting from unrestrained population growth put demands on the natural world that can overwhelm any efforts to achieve a sustainable future.'

Altogether it was a thoroughly worthwhile gathering in New Delhi. It could have achieved more, but the fact that it took place at all is a sizeable step forward, and its conclusions and recommendations will surely make a substantial contribution to the population cause.

There were some startling findings presented in the background papers, worth recounting here:

The Great Watershed

Humanity is poised to shift from being a highly reproductive species throughout its quarter-of-a-million years of existence, to becoming a highly contraceptive species for (presumably) evermore. It must achieve this watershed transition within just a few generations. Ever since its emergence as a species, *Homo sapiens* has experienced profound pressures to reproduce with utmost commitment. As documented by Dr Massimo Livi-Bacci in his 1992 book, *A Concise History of World Population*, published by Blackwell, Oxford, England, UK, there were only six million humans as recently as 12,000 years ago, with a life expectancy of 20 years and a population doubling-time of 8,000 years. If the annual death-rate was, say, 40 per 1,000, then the birth-rate, being only 0.008% higher, must have been 40.08 per 1,000. If the birth-rate were to fall to 39 per 1,000, the

* See Dr Myers's notable paper entitled 'Population, Environment, and Development' and presented at the New Delhi 'Population Summit' after wide circulation in pre-print form. It was finally published in our preceding issue (*Environmental Conservation*, 20(3), pp. 205–16).

result would have been virtually instant extinction. Hence there has been a permanent premium on maintaining the highest possible birth-rate. Hence, too, the pro-fertility attitudes enshrined to this day in many cultures and traditions.

Contraceptive Research and Development

Despite the need for contraceptives that are safer, cheaper, and more convenient, than the present lot, annual world-wide funding to produce new types is — according to Dr Steven Sinding, Director of the Population Program at the Rockefeller Foundation in New York — only US \$57 millions, worth a mere 3% of contraceptive sales and well below the pharmaceutical industry's norm of investing 16–19% of sales revenues in R & D. Public sector contributions represent 3–4% of the \$800 millions of annual international support for population and family planning.

Maternal Mortality

Out of 500,000 maternal deaths that occur world-wide each year, perhaps one-third are due to 'coathanger abortions' performed in developing countries. Say the total is almost 500 per day, and suppose this mass mortality occurs because the women are denied freedom of choice concerning their reproductive activities. If, as Dr Mahmoud Fathallah, of the Rockefeller Foundation, points out, there was a freedom movement in which 500 people died in a single day as a once-only event, the world would be outraged. But when 500 women die every day in pursuit of their reproductive freedom, the world hardly flickers an eyelid!

Reproductive Roulette in Africa

Due to too many births spaced too closely together, the traumas of female circumcision, and poor health generally, the chance of a Sub-Saharan African woman dying from pregnancy-related troubles is, as pointed out by Professor Partha Dasgupta of Cambridge University, 1 in 20; and in the more impoverished countries, it can be as high as 1 in 6: contrast this with the North American rate of 1 in 4,000, and the Scandinavian rate of 1 in 20,000!

'Missing Females'

Because of the role played by the human female in the survival of the species, she has become the biologically stronger sex. Not only do females generally live longer than males, but more males are born — as if in order to offset their greater mortality. So females should enjoy a higher survival-rate right from the start. In those many countries where they are socially disadvantaged, however, females tend to get a deal much poorer than males. Thus girl children suffer poorer nutrition and inadequate health-care overall; female fetuses are increasingly aborted in China, India, and a growing list of other countries; and female infanticide is still a pervasive practice. Whereas in developed countries there are usually 95–97 males to every 100 females, in countries of developing Asia there are now 105 males per 100 females. According to Dr Mahmoud Fathallah, some 60–100 million females have 'gone missing' in the recent past.

Misunderstandings on Population

Misunderstandings abound — such as the one about the exhortation in Genesis to 'go forth and multiply' — an injunction issued when the world's population was two!

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