
CURBING RAPID POPULATION GROWTH: THE CRUX OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Over the last forty years there has been a wide success variance in the development of the non-industrialized world. Christopher S. Wendel examines the critical role that population growth has played in determining the rate of development in these countries and suggests some policies for reconciling population growth with sustainable development.

Several months prior to the expulsion of Iraqi forces from Kuwait by the United Nations coalition in 1991, U.S. President George Bush hailed the emergence of a New World Order. In the two seconds it took him to pronounce the phrase, approximately six babies were born in developing countries, five of them into abject poverty.¹ As these children grow, perhaps they will recognize that his New World Order was about maintaining the global security status quo—and they will challenge this idea with the demand for development to alleviate their poverty. A quixotic attempt by President Bush and his successors to defend the concept, will not address the cause of the instability they fear, but rather its symptoms. Perhaps the most urgent problem facing both developing and developed countries is a global population explosion and its resulting potential for instability. The phenomenon of rapid population growth has made traditional paradigms of international political economic relations obsolete because their frameworks cannot accommodate such growth or offer palatable theoretical solutions. A new paradigm, the idea of sustainable development, holds out the hope for an integration of previous knowledge and the formulation of an innovative survivable approach. Within this alternate paradigm, the variable of population growth, which provides the prism for this study, is perhaps the most crucial — and the most volatile.

Faulty analysis has impeded clear and effective understanding of the underlying problems both caused and reflected by population growth. The aim of this article is to analyze this development problem within the proper theoretical framework in order to improve policy-making in this area. Perhaps this exercise

1. Carl Wahren, "The Imperative of the Population Control," *OECD Observer* 167 (December 1990/January 1991): 167.

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will yield a theoretically and practically sound policy agenda to address this urgent problem.

The end of the Cold War broke the forty year spell of the frightening, yet essentially stable East-West rivalry in the international arena. "Vision" President Bush was fortunate enough to preside over the change and to have the opportunity to test the emerging international political climate. Many in the administration must have felt themselves "present at the creation" of this new order that would regulate global affairs in ways unlike any previous system. But what was hailed as "new" about the New World Order seems at best to have been a throwback to Wilsonian ideas of cooperative intervention for justice that were propounded at the close of World War I. At worst, these so-called innovations appear to be an attempt by a declining hegemon to capitalize on the residue of its power, briefly augmented due to the implosion of its nearest rival.

Much more than the questionable intent of the New World Order, its focus on security defined in traditional terms of defense against aggression seems tragically short-sighted and shallow. Though President Bush had hoped for prospering and harmonious relations between the North and the South, he and his successors will be disappointed. His was an error of definition: in the New World Order, security must be seen in a much broader context. It increasingly depends on the intensity of competition over scarce resources, which in turn stems from the constant swelling of the global population and the subsequent depletion of those resources. The Brundtland Commission, established in 1983 by the U.N. General Assembly as an independent commission to address the urgent problem of proposing long-term strategies for achieving sustainable development by the year 2000, underlined this new security dimension asserting that:

a comprehensive approach to international and national security must transcend the traditional emphasis on military power and armed competition. The real sources of insecurity also encompass unsustainable development, and its effects can become intertwined with traditional forms of conflict in a manner that can extend and deepen the latter.²

Most dangerously, those who live in less developed areas perceive themselves as having been unjustly thrust into their position by the greatest beneficiaries of the old world order. This status will make for approximately four billion revisionists, and counting. Their definition of the New World Order will be different than that of President Bush. The developing world's present grievances must be addressed now if this order is to become a viable one.

In discussing the role rapid population growth plays in creating instability in global political economic relations, the inadequacy of classifying this line of argument in one of the three major paradigms of political economic thought —

2. World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 290.

liberalism, radicalism or realism — becomes apparent. Instead, sustainable development can be seen as a new, more comprehensive paradigm.

Sustainable development is defined as “a process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development, and institutional change are all in harmony and enhance both current and future potential to meet human needs and aspirations.”³

Since this approach to development gained currency, wide-ranging debate has contemplated how “sustainability” and “development” ought to be defined in terms of the existing paradigms of international political economy. Disappointingly, none of these approaches offer satisfactory road maps for action, even though they have managed to paralyze constructive debate on the problem for decades.

Interestingly, the call for sustainable development has been a Northern initiative, fueled primarily by growing concern over environmental degradation. The last time the current international system was challenged, the challenge came from the developing nations, who demanded a redistribution of wealth from the North in their call for a New International Economic Order (NIEO). This time, the North is making the demands, namely that LDCs pursue their development strategies factoring in concern for the environment. Cynics could argue that this demand represents another case of the North trying to thwart progress in the South. After all, during the Industrial Revolution, nobody really harbored any fears for the environment, so it is unfair that LDCs’ present development process be made more complicated as a result of the developed world’s negligence during their own.

Nevertheless, sustainable development is ultimately a notion conceived with the global interest in mind. The twenty-one individuals who made up the Brundtland Commission eloquently summed up the idea best with their eminently non-ideological message in their “call for action:”

...the relationship between the human world and the planet that sustains it has undergone a profound change... The rate of change is outstripping the ability of scientific disciplines and our current capabilities to assess and advise. It is frustrating the attempts of political and economic institutions, which evolved in a different, more fragmented world, to adapt and to cope. It deeply worries many people who are seeking ways to place those concerns on the political agenda. [We must] achieve the needed change in attitudes and reorientation of policies and institutions. ...the security, well-being, and very survival of the planet depends on such changes, now.⁴

The security dimension merely illustrates how striking the wide-ranging consequences are that population growth, improperly addressed, can create.

3. Jean Philippe Barde, “The Path to Sustainable Development,” *OECD Observer* 164 (June/July 1990): 33.

4. *Our Common Future*, 343.

Recent Demographic Trends

The world population has grown by more than 80 million people annually since the mid-1970s. The vast majority (80 percent) of these new citizens of the Earth live in the nations that can least afford them.⁵ Forty-two countries have population growth rates over 3 percent per year, and twenty-four of these are in Africa, by far the poorest continent. Africa's population will have soared from 220 million in 1950 to a projected 880 million by the end of the century. By contrast, the population of economically advanced nations grew by an average of 0.74 percent from 1970 to 1985.⁶

Even though these numbers suggest a repetition in developing countries of the developed nations' experience of the demographic transition,⁷ two distinguishing features related to recent population growth figures in the Third World are clear: First, the speed of the mortality rate decline in developing countries following World War II was much faster than the equivalent phase in earlier demographic transitions, explicable in large measure by imported medical and public health technology, and improvement in food production. Second, the pre-transition birth rates in most developing countries were much higher than was typically the case in the North's experience. At the beginning of its demographic transition in 1950, the South as an aggregate had birth rates of 45 per 1000 of population, whereas the nineteenth century Western European states had a 30-35 per 1000 ratio at the outset of their decline in fertility.⁸

As a result, in 1950 many developing countries faced population growth rates of between 2 and 3 percent, with the expected outcome a twenty-four fold multiplication of the global population if this growth were to be sustained over one century. These rates were more than double the peak growth rates of nineteenth century Western Europe, where high infant mortality and emigration acted as a significant brakes on more spectacular growth. Despite the drop in fertility rates for developing countries over the past four decades, the picture today looks a bit more bleak, owing to the sheer number of people born during the transitional growth phase.⁹

It is important to note that demographic trends in the developing world are by no means uniform. Africa, the Arab Middle East and Central America continue to have high birth rates, higher than any other country before the beginning of the demographic transition. This high fertility belt continues generally eastward through the Moslem regions of Southern Asia, with the exceptions of the Punjab region of India and smaller Persian Gulf states. South and Southeast Asia, however, show a marked decline in growth rates, suggest-

5. Wahren, 167.

6. Robert McNamara, "The Population Problem," in *Earth and Us*, eds. Mostafa Kamal Tolba and Asit K. Biswas, United Nations Environment Program (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 1991), 50.

7. Demographic transition refers to the change from high to low mortality and to lower fertility which occurred in developed countries without an explicit public policy

8. McNamara, "The Population Problem," 50-51.

9. *Ibid.*, 50.

ing further progress in their transitional growth processes. These slowdowns in fertility are largely the result of successful family planning programs, especially in Indonesia and in China.¹⁰ Nevertheless, though showing signs of having slowed, recent demographic trends still promise to put unprecedented numbers of people on the planet.

One fundamental question which arises from the recent figures for population growth is: Why have populations risen so rapidly in such a short time? In groping for an elusive answer, demographers have constructed a model of demographic transition to explain this phenomenon. The model is useful for illuminating the propellant forces behind population growth, and offers a convenient framework within which to illustrate how today's population dynamics differ from the past.

The model of demographic transition assumes that only fertility, mortality, or migration can cause populations to change. The model operates along three periods, two in which the birth and death rate are in balance resulting in slow population growth, and one transitional phase in which rapid growth takes place due to an imbalance in the two rates. The first period, called "high growth potential," combines high birth and death rates and relatively short life spans because of harsh living conditions. The pre-modern age until 1750 fits this category well. In the second period, "transitional growth," fertility and mortality diverge, as advances in social and economic factors such as better agricultural yields, sanitation, health, and transportation, contribute to a decline in the death rate. Human fertility, however, retains a force of inertia composed of historical values and attitudes that favor large families as insurance against demise. At this stage, rapid population growth takes place. Currently, most of the developing world falls into this category. In period three, "incipient decline," fertility declines and reaches a new equilibrium with mortality, now both at much lower rates. Populations grow slowly, if at all, reflecting the demographic position of today's developed nations.¹¹ Considerable debate continues among demographers, political scientists, and economists as to the validity of this model, particularly in terms of whether and to what degree population growth is the causal factor in the changing relationship between a nation's fertility and mortality rates.

Since the peak levels of population growth occur in the "transitional growth" phase, the developing world, which has begun to witness declining population growth rates since the 1970s, should soon exit period two and see fertility and mortality rates converge, if this model has any applicability. The vital question for policymakers both in the North and South is not, therefore, whether or how to slow population growth, but rather, how quickly. Rapid, decisive policy may mean the difference between 10 and 15 billion inhabitants on planet Earth.

10. Robert Repetto, "Population, Resource Pressures, and Poverty," in Robert Repetto, ed., *The Global Possible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 131-135.

11. James E. Harf and B. Thomas Trout, eds, *Population in the Global Arena*, Global Issues Series (New York: CBS College Publishing: 1982), 9-15.

Some Consequences and Implications of Population Growth

Population growth can be accommodated up to a point, but growth rates higher than 2 percent have a variety of detrimental effects on nations. Unlike the beneficial moderate population growth of 1.5 percent experienced by Europe, Japan, and North America during their transitional periods, developing countries in this half of the twentieth century face a much greater burden of growth, with unprecedented levels of 2 to 4 percent. Compared with the transitional growth stages of now-developed countries, LDCs today are relatively poorer and their human and physical capital less developed, a situation which is compounded in many by frail political and social institutions. Also, emigration is no longer a viable option for high-growth countries, due mostly to political reasons. One must look only to growing anti-immigrant pressures in the European Community states and in the United States to realize that migration will not be an option to the majority of would-be emigrés. Finally, the supply of unused land has diminished considerably, making LDCs much more vulnerable to population pressures.¹² Rapid population growth therefore has the potential to cause deep-seated trouble, with particular repercussions for the environment, international political and economic relations and security.

Population and the Environment

Degradation and displacement, the links between population growth and the environment which have historically received little recognition, are critical. Degradation results from the overuse of limited natural resources like land and wood, which is a function of drastically growing demand for these finite raw materials. Considering that the highest levels of population growth seem to occur in the poorest areas, mostly the rural agricultural regions, poverty, coupled with population growth, becomes a terrible obstacle to sustainable development. By definition, the poor have limited access to resources, and thus are frequently forced to make use of those resources they do have, mostly land and forests, in a manner incongruous with the idea of sustainable development.

Until the 1960s, increases in agricultural production necessary to feed growing populations came largely from new land use.¹³ Since then, a combination of fertilizer, pesticide use, irrigation, mechanization, and utilization of "green revolution" grains offset perceived declining land availability and kept food production ahead of population growth.¹⁴ That famine and malnutrition were still wide-spread shows the critical impact that poor distribution policies have in complicating population pressures. Thus, the tragic exception to the overall rosy food supply picture could be found in 27 of the 39 sub-Saharan nations in

12. World Bank, *Population Change and Economic Development*, (Washington D.C.: Oxford University Press, 1984), 39.

13. Robert Repetto, *Population, Resources, Environment: An Uncertain Future* (Washington DC: Population Reference Bureau, 1991), 14-15.

14. For the period from 1950 until 1985, food production grew at a rate of 2.7 percent while population growth for the same time period was 2.1 percent. *Population Change and Economic Development*, 50.

Africa which faced a 1.1 percent decline in the rate of per capita food production.¹⁵

In addition to problems like poor distribution policies, soil degradation has also intensified the negative effects of population growth on the environment. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) predicts that without the adoption of conservation methods, soil degradation and erosion will claim 544 million hectares, or 65 percent of the rain-fed cropland in Asia, Africa and Latin America by the year 2100. Additionally, in response to the demand to drive up the productivity of this limited land, agriculture has relied increasingly on irrigation. In India, for example, 30 percent of all cultivated land is irrigated, producing 55 percent of output whereas 50 percent of China's cropland is irrigated, yielding 70 percent of output.¹⁶ Water, however, is rapidly becoming an ever scarcer resource, driving up the cost of irrigation to governments. Furthermore, alkalinity and salinity threaten the long-term sustainability of irrigated fields. Eventually, land becomes unusable, driving farmers, who represent the fastest growing population group in most of the poorest nations, further onto marginal lands in search of subsistence.¹⁷ Clearly, population growth interacts in a vicious cycle with environmental degradation and displacement of the poor.

This cyclical relationship is also evident when one considers deforestation and desertification. Though population growth is not necessarily the main culprit, it almost always exacerbates the situation. Those who cannot find subsistence on the land, the landless peasants, become part of another consequence of accelerated population growth—rapid urbanization and internal migration.

If the industrial cities of Western Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries provided a precarious environment for human life, the large cities of the developing world in the late twentieth century offer appallingly insecure living environments for an ever greater portion of the world's population. Of some twenty-five mega-cities, areas which are projected to be home to ten million or more inhabitants by the year 2000, twenty will be in the developing world, with Mexico City leading as home to a staggering 31 million.¹⁸ These figures are open to wide fluctuation and should be used cautiously in prediction. That figure stands in stark contrast to 1950, when New York and London were the only mega-cities. Migration from rural areas has been the principal contributor to this process of population concentration.

In marked contrast to nineteenth century European city growth, LDC mega-cities are not typically a result of industrialization, so their development follows a different pattern. For many migrants, these cities do not promise a well-paying job in the "official" sector, but rather a chance at survival jobs in the informal

15. *Ibid.*

16. United Nations Population Fund, "State of the World Population 1988," UNFPA REPORT 1987 (New York: UNFPA, 1988), 20-21.

17. *Ibid.*, 22-23.

18. Philip Sarre, ed., *Environment, Population, and Development*. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1991), 31.

service sector. Nevertheless, though many cities look grim, staying in the rural areas looks even more grim.¹⁹ As much as urbanization is driven by the poverty resulting from rural population pressures, it is also propelled by the lure of an improvement in health care, employment, and general standard of living promised by city life.

Urbanization need not necessarily be a problem, however. The increased concentration of suppliers and consumers gives rise to economies of scale, and the sizable, diversified labor pools available in large cities may have an accelerating impact on technological innovation. From the perspective of administration, cities also allow economies of scale for public utilities like water, sewage, and transportation. A World Bank study of Indian cities showed that these benefits are maximized in urban areas with up to 150,000 inhabitants. It remains unclear, though, at what point the diseconomies of scale set in for which the LDC mega-city is infamous; that is, at what point the urban population growth rate hopelessly outstrips the administrative capabilities and fragile infrastructure of these areas.²⁰

Despite questions about the threshold of detrimental rates of urbanization, the environmental strain this process exacts has been well documented. The enormous growth of the cities poses a tremendous challenge to urban infrastructure, one which is seldom met, either for lack of funds or lack of management expertise. Most prominent among these problems are the frightening levels of air and water pollution. Mexico City, with estimated pollution levels six times above acceptable standards, far surpasses the concerns of any Northern metropolis. The Huangpu river which flows through Shanghai, for example, has been without aerobic or other aquatic life since 1980 as a result of pollution from industrial waste and a daily dose of four million cubic meters of untreated sewage.²¹

Despite these horrendous problems, urbanization could be construed to be "ecologically innocuous, were it not for one feature of modern urban dwellers: their unprecedented mobility."²² Middle-class residents of urban areas in both developed and developing countries damage the ecosphere because they move incessantly, as commuters, vacationers, business professionals, using cars, trains, and planes. Each of their 500 million registered automobiles, found mostly in the North but increasingly in the South as well, burn nearly two gallons of fuel every day, which amounts to one third of the world's production of oil. Projections for growth in the use of motor vehicles estimate that by 2025 there will be two billion cars in operation, with most of that growth occurring in LDC mega-cities, further contributing to their environmental woes.²³ The excessive release of greenhouse gases, therefore, seems guaranteed for some time. Smoggy future indeed.

19. Harf and Trout, *Population in the Global Arena*, 258.

20. World Bank, *Population Change and Economic Development*, 57.

21. Philip Sarre, ed., *Environment, Population, and Development*, 267.

22. Nathan Keyfitz, "The Growing Human Population," *Scientific American* (September 1989): 121.

23. *Ibid*, 121.

International Political and Economic Relations

Recent demographic trends have shifted the global center of gravity, that is, the ability to set the global political agenda, increasingly toward developing nations, which has important implications for relations between states. Political instability within nations caught in the underdevelopment trap of rapid population growth often and easily spills over into the wider international arena. In an era of increasing interdependence, the wealthier nations of the North are no longer insulated from the demands of a growing South for more equitable distribution of wealth as the remedy for underdevelopment. The international political agenda will reflect this structural shift. As population numbers rise, the possible solutions available for the international system to confront the development crisis will narrow.

Differential population growth contributes significantly to maintaining or widening the income gap between rich and poor countries. Between 1950 and 1980, per capita income in the United States rose from \$7,000 to \$11,500, while India grew from \$170 to \$260 in the same period.²⁴ In addition to this state of absolute poverty, developing countries' share of world output has never been commensurate with their share of global population. In 1800, the South accounted for 44 percent of production while constituting 74 percent of the global population (then 944 million). By 1900, their share had declined to 19 percent of production and 66 percent of the population. This trend continued so that by 1980, 21 percent of a total global output came from the developing world, which by then made up 75 percent of the globe's 4.3 billion people.²⁵ Another telling indicator of global income distribution is the world equity ratio, which in 1985 showed the income share of the richest 20 percent to be 15 times that of the poorest 20 percent of the population.²⁶ A vast plurality of the world, therefore, lives in poverty, and most strikingly, they live in the areas identified earlier as exhibiting the highest rates of population growth, promising a worsening of the problem in the future.

Disaggregating some of the growth predictions yields an even bleaker picture. For the rest of this century, the growth of the labor force-age population will exacerbate the gap between rich and poor. In the developed countries, the growth rate for this sector hovers around 0.26 percent, while developing nations gallop ahead at a 2.6 percent growth pace. In absolute figures, this amounts to approximately 19 million new laborers in the North and a stunning 600 million in the South, equivalent to the current working-age population of China.²⁷ This trend in the developing world constitutes a powerful force to keep real wages down, and exacts further strain on fragile infrastructures and unemployment, since the possibility that LDCs can generate enough new jobs to keep pace is

24. All of these figures assume constant 1980 dollars. From McNamara, "The Population Problem," 58.

25. World Bank, *Population Change and Economic Development*, 6.

26. Alan B. Durning, "Poverty and Environment: Reversing the Downward Spiral," *Worldwatch Paper 92* (Washington, DC: Worldwatch Institute, November 1989), 13.

27. *Population Change and Economic Development*, 60.

highly questionable.

On the other hand, prudent population policy can turn this liability into an asset by enhancing education and infrastructure, in addition to fertility control. In this manner, countries with such a massive work force could compete with the industrialized countries in international markets for foreign direct investment to create necessary jobs. Under relative free-trade conditions, basic stability in the political structures, and the free mobility of international capital, industry would probably shift to take advantage of lower wages, precipitating a massive structural change in the global economy. No doubt, however, developed countries would seek to stem this tide of change, increasingly calling into question the system of relatively free trade which has served them well. Rapid population growth, therefore, spells an indirect, yet fundamental challenge to the current international economic order.

Such hypothetical futures aside, however, the proper management of the population transition in LDCs is far from a foregone conclusion. More likely than not, the strain on the social and physical infrastructure will lead to political turbulence, driven not least by increasing populations wanting fair access to the modern economy. One highly visible international outcome of this situation is migration. Most of this population movement occurs in order to escape the low-wage poverty trap. Spawned by political crises, famine, or war, mass migrations may occur on a much larger scale in the future. Simply the vast numbers of moving people will overwhelm any administrative effort or border enforcing capacities.

Security Dimension

Factoring all of the preceding effects of rapid population growth into a global security equation, it seems likely that intensified competition for resources could lead to threats to international peace. Add to this competition the prevalence of a global arms culture which invests over \$900 billion annually in military spending. The Brundtland Commission recognized this link between population dynamics, the environment, and security, and warned that "conflicts may arise not only because of political and military threats to national sovereignty; they may derive also from environmental degradation and the preemption of development options."²⁸ Thus recalling the words of President Bush about global security, the specter of armed "revisionists" rejecting his New World Order is easily conjured up in one's mind.

Fast forward a generation into the future, when the following scenario might become plausible: The Middle East Peace, which had been brokered 20 years ago after long negotiations in the spirit of a so-called New World Order, collapses as Iraq, Turkey, and Syria begin a brawl over the scarcest resource in the region: water from the Euphrates and Tigris. All three have developed nuclear capability by buying old Soviet weapons from the new Central Asian and Russian Republics, desperate for hard currency in their drive for modern-

28. *Our Common Future*, 301.

ization. Neighboring Israel and Palestine are drawn into the fight, so the New World Policemen have to intervene. In northern Africa, the steadily declining patches of arable land spark great migrations of environmental and economic refugees toward the United States of Europe, a rich and plentiful magnet for the needy. The move is spearheaded by Libya, armed with several surprise weapons, wanting to do unto Italy as Italy had done to it... Paranoid? Perhaps, but the confluence of technological advancement, weapons proliferation, population pressures, and scarcity of resources could unleash potent forces which will clearly be a threat to global security.

Toward a Solution

Surprisingly, there is no consensus on whether population growth is a boon or a bane for development. Even less agreement exists about whether population policies can effectively address and remedy population growth in such a way as to allow development to proceed. Critics of population control policies point out that the demographic transition is in fact unaffected by any policy. As a result, these critics see little role for, or efficacy in, attempting to control population growth as a precondition for accelerated development of the Third World. Arguments such as these, however inconsistent they may be, are rooted in a debate that has raged for years with little hope of offering a definitive answer to the conundrum of population growth.

The question philosophers and economists have been investigating concerns that of the Earth's "optimal population." Empirically, the problem of how many people the Earth can support has no definite answer. In addition, the scale is shifted by ethical choices we make for the allocation of resources: If one strives to maintain the high living standards of the developed countries, concessions by the developing world will be necessary, since the North uses an inordinate share of the Earth's resources. Similarly, raising the standard of living of the developing world would require an adjustment of expectations in the North.

In essence this dichotomy represents a classic collective action problem. In isolation, individuals make decisions for private benefit which are often to the detriment of most people, contrary to what many liberal economists assume. Unless they know that others will act in a manner that serves the common interest as well, they have no incentive to cooperate. In terms of the population problem, the common interest is clearly to limit population growth to a sustainable level which allows development to lift the majority out of poverty. Yet here the paradox is lethal: The traditional security net in poverty has always been a large family to maximize potential access to scarce resources. Creating a large family, however, puts more competitors for resources into the arena. Therefore, if parents had their way, they would limit the fertility of others, but if their children had their way, they would limit the fertility of their parents. It is a paradox of isolated choices.

Moreover, the problem of optimum population growth at the national level raises a dilemma faced by nations which cope with the various results of

population dynamics. Characteristics which suit certain aims of a state may create problems for others spheres of policy. For example, promoting a population growth policy in order to strengthen the military and economic pool of human resources may conflict with a state's inadequate health and education infrastructure. Such policies may also lead to international conflict, as armies swell concurrent with increasing resource needs. Formulating a population policy therefore clearly requires the careful calibration of factors and dynamics — a tough assignment for even the most efficient government. Yet, considerable window of opportunity presently exists to adopt policy with critical long-term objectives in mind.

What is to be Done?

Although the immediate and urgent problem under investigation is rapid population growth, the long-term crisis facing the global community is that of progress toward economic development in the developing world. Prior to the 1974 World Population Conference of Bucharest, the orthodox view was that growth in population acted as a barrier to development. Subsequently, this orthodoxy has come under heavy intellectual fire. Critics reversed the previous logic, arguing that because couples living in poverty do not experience the benefits of development, such as lower infant mortality and better education, they will not be motivated to have smaller families. Through this intellectual challenge, the context of population policy has been broadened to include the spectrum of economic and social development; the interconnected problems of rapid population growth and underdevelopment were recognized as necessitating a comprehensive approach to its solution.²⁹

A look at the actual policies followed by advanced nations is instructive. The old, post-World War II order was essentially one of East-West competition. Until the emergence of the New International Economic Order (NIEO) pushed Third World development on to the international political agenda, development assistance was largely a smokescreen for the ideological battles of the era of containment. Bilateral aid was a political tool. Throughout this period, the proportion of resources allocated to development by donor nations was a pittance compared to the magnitude of the problem. In the early 1980s, the World Bank put a price tag on effective population control policies which could stabilize the global population at the lower end of the ten to fifteen billion range; for such a "rapid" decline in fertility, \$7.6 billion 1980 U.S. dollars would have been needed—four times the actual amount available.³⁰ No surprise then, that the plight of roughly 75 percent of the global population has on the whole worsened, since those with the means really did not concern themselves too critically with development, and serious mismanagement of development pol-

29. Donald P. Warwick, "The Ethics of Population Control," in Geoffrey Roberts, ed., *Population Policy; Contemporary Issues* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1990), 21-22.

30. World Bank, *Population Change and Economic Development*, 140.

icy in LDCs themselves only exacerbated this negligence.

The objective of any population policy is not merely stabilization of the population, but rather improvement of human welfare. At the root of every population policy, however, lurks an ethical issue. Procreation is by definition a deeply personal event, held up by many societies as superior to any other "good" and therefore not part of an equation of trade-offs. Yet when the rights and welfare of future generations clash with those of the current generation, arbitration of the conflict then becomes difficult. Population policy must be able to mediate using a combination of incentive schemes and pressure. It must be kept in mind, though, that lower fertility is only a means to an end—that of raising the welfare of individuals. Population policy must therefore never work to the detriment of the greater goal in pursuit of the lesser. Countries which have adopted policies with individuals in mind have on the whole shown a remarkable improvement in their situation.

Maddeningly though, the current jump in global population figures, perhaps the single greatest obstacle to sustained development, is partially the result of complacency on all sides. From the 1960s onward, the United Nations recognized that managing demographics was vital to any attempt to lift the Third World out of its predicament. The U.N. Population Fund (UNFPA) and the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), in cooperation with many non-governmental organizations, actually seemed to be containing the explosion through successful family planning programs in many LDCs. The success in some countries was so much so that it "provided decision-makers with an alibi for inaction."³¹ This complacency allowed the effort to control population growth to stagnate. In addition, the "unmet need" of countries which still desired access to U.N. programs remained large, since contributions to the operating funds of these two largest population-oriented organizations were not commensurate to the task.

The U.S. government was one of the principal culprits in this tragedy when it decided to cut funding to the UNFPA and the IPPF in 1984, largely to pander to domestic constituencies. The United States had previously been a major contributor and supporter of family planning programs, but when allegations surfaced that U.S. aid funds were being used for abortions in China and a few other states, the support was cut because of the Reagan Administration's anti-abortion stance.³² Even though the U.S. portion of the UNFPA budget has since been filled from other sources, that action may reverberate much further than it appears.³³

The American refusal to contribute signals that a major Northern actor has little interest in helping to alleviate the problems caused by rapid population growth. In an era which requires international commitment to solve problems, strong leadership — "vision" — is at a premium.

31. Wahren, 167.

32. Interestingly, an internal USAID study rejected these allegations twice, in 1984 and 1985.

33. Nafis Sadik, "The Role of the United Nations: From Conflict to Consensus," in Godfrey Roberts, ed. *Population Policy: Contemporary Issues*. (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1990), 204-205.

To the Future

In its admirable effort, the Brundtland Commission outlined why sustainable development is necessary, but it was rather vague on exactly how to achieve this goal. Since 1987, however, this issue has occupied a prominent position in political discourse, both internationally and domestically. One may conclude that the Commission succeeded in framing a new, solid normative framework within which subsequent thinkers can maneuver to reconcile the Southern yearning for "development" with the Northern call for "sustainability." Though the potential for cooperation seems high in this endeavor, given the clear overlap and frequent incompatibility of both sides' long-term objectives, the actual policy arena reflects the realities of myopic short-term focus. That will not do.

In terms of the population crisis, eliminating the vicious cycles outlined above which drive families to have too many children is imperative. At the root of these cycles lies a deep despair over high infant mortality, increasingly scarce resources, and worsening environmental conditions. The short-term solution to have more children offers a longed for, yet illusory insurance.

Perhaps the example of Costa Rica offers hope. Successful government policies have cut fertility rates in half in one generation. There, the demographic transition was well managed. The government emphasis on education resulted in a 93 percent literacy rate; nearly universal access to birth-control in that highly Catholic nation is also guaranteed. Together these two factors allow families to make informed decisions about reproduction, especially when the policy is reinforced with an effective government-sponsored advertising campaign.³⁴

Ultimately, the problem of rapid population growth is a global phenomenon which requires collective, global action for a solution, and provides an apt illustration of the interdependent nature of problems afflicting the world today. Clearly, solving this one issue in isolation from the melange of issues included in the sustainable development concept is neither desirable nor possible. A true New World Order will rest on a consensus of peace, not the fear of armageddon which marked the Cold War, or the specter of instability that bodes when the desperation of an overpopulated South clashes with Northern anxiety over threats to the status quo.

34. Sharon Begley, "Is it Apocalypse Now?" *Newsweek*, June 1, 1992, 39.

