



# A Negative Population Growth

## — Position Paper —

## The Cairo Conference on Population and Development

By Donald Mann, President, NPG, Inc.

The preparations for the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) to be held in Cairo, September 5-13, 1994, leave me convinced that the Conference will offer a totally inadequate response to the crisis confronting humanity as a result of the relentless growth of world population.

If the international community cannot propose better ways to stop world population growth than those recommended in the Draft Final Document for the Conference, then we must reconcile ourselves to living in a world, a few decades from now, with 12 to 14 billion people, or more. There is the disturbing possibility, of course, that world population growth will be halted long before those numbers are reached by higher mortality rates brought on by famine and pestilence, at an incalculable cost in human suffering.

Part of the problem is that some refuse to see any crisis. But it looms nonetheless. With a present population of nearly six billion, already far beyond a sustainable level, and still growing by almost 100 million each year, the world faces a cataclysmic threat.

The Draft Final Document and the 20-year Program of Action, which set the agenda for the Conference, offer us only business as usual, as is evident from its grave flaws and omissions:

### **Lack of Population and Fertility Goals**

Setting specific goals for world population size, and for fertility, then recommending policies to achieve them, should be the central concern and primary focus of the Conference. Sadly, that is not what the Preparatory Documents offer. As Lindsey Grant, a former State Department population expert recently noted, "Running a population program without population goals is about like trying to build a road without deciding where it should go."<sup>1</sup>

For the Conference to produce action for change, the following should have been its essential goals:

1. Halting population growth before world population reaches eight billion (the awesome momentum imparted by past population growth makes it virtually impossible to stop it before that).

2. Gaining acceptance of the two-child maximum family as essential to achieve sub-replacement fertility.

Setting such goals, which are designed to halt population growth as soon as it is humanely possible to do so, then to reverse it, would reveal a massive problem, one that both our own government, and the international community, have been simply unwilling to grapple with. The problem is that to achieve those goals measures would be required that go beyond family planning programs. Specifically, family planning would have to be supplemented by non-coercive incentives to encourage couples not to have more than two children.

The Draft, however, frowns on just such "schemes," noting in Chapter 7.20:

"In support of fully responsible, informed, (legally permissible) reproductive choices, Governments are encouraged to focus most of their efforts towards meeting their population and development objectives through education and voluntary measures rather than schemes involving incentives and disincentives."

But what if the measures recommended offer little hope of halting population growth before world population doubles or triples? What then? Do we just go quietly to our doom, or do we consider measures that offer the hope of halting and reversing population growth soon, such as non-coercive incentives to reduce desired family size?

### **An Unfounded Claim**

The 20-year Program of Action proffers many goals and objectives, but inducements to reduce desired family size are missing. If the action program's proposals were



adopted, what would be their impact on world population growth?

The Preamble of the Draft claims that, "Implementation of the goals and objectives contained in the present 20-year Program of Action...would result in world population growth during this period and beyond at levels close to the United Nations' low variant." That is an astonishing and baseless claim. According to the United Nations' low variant (for projected population growth) world population would peak at 7.813 billion in 2050, and then gradually decline.

For that to happen, major and unprecedented declines in fertility would have to occur in a very short time. Specifically, by 2025-2030, fertility would have to decline by the following percentages: in Africa by 61 percent; in Latin America by 34 percent; in China by 25 percent; in India by 57 percent; and for the world as a whole by 44 percent.

This means that in just 30 to 35 years the total fertility rate would have to fall: <sup>2</sup>

In Africa,	from 5.9 now to 2.31
In Latin America	from 3.2 now to 2.11
In China	from 2.0 now to 1.50
In India	from 3.6 now to 2.04
In the entire world	from 3.2 now to 1.79

The actions recommended in the Draft Final Document rely chiefly on family planning to achieve fertility reduction. They also emphasize gender equity, and the empowerment of women and improvement of their status. Not only are these goals extremely important and laudable in their own right, but they would also help to reduce fertility. As Lindsey Grant has pointed out in a recent NPG Forum paper, "Improvements in the educational and economic status for women contribute to fertility decline, and the correlation has long been recognized."

Significant progress toward those commendable goals, however, will require the virtual remaking of the entire societies and cultures of many nations. Overcoming sheer inertia and centuries-old customs will require time, measured in decades if not centuries, while the planet's population crisis is now. We must improve the education and status of women, but with no illusions that it will markedly reduce fertility within the short space of a few decades.

In sum, it is unrealistic to think that the measures recommended in the Draft Final Document, even if fully implemented, could result, in only 30 to 35 years, in the dramatic declines in fertility noted above. The drafters of the Preamble, and those who approved it, must re-examine their data. If the review shows Conference officials that the statement in question is in fact wrong, then the Conference leaders should delete it from the Final Document.

### **Needed: Responsibilities To Balance Rights**

The Draft asserts an array of rights of various sorts. But it says little about reproductive responsibilities,

either of individuals or of nations. Such a vitally important subject deserves an entire chapter in the Draft. It should state explicitly that individuals, nations, and international organizations have the responsibility to make their actions and policies consistent with halting world population growth as quickly as is humanely possible.

A right of nations that is not mentioned in the Draft, but one that deserves emphasis, is the right and responsibility of all nations to make their immigration policies conform with the objective of population stability or reduction.

A troubling omission is the Draft's silence about the responsibility of each nation to stabilize its population size at a sustainable level, well within the carrying capacity of its resources and environment.

For most countries in the world, and certainly for the United States, that would mean a substantial reduction in present population size. That fact should be explicitly affirmed.

The devastation of the planet's resources and environment by overpopulation threatens all nations. But in a world of sovereign states overpopulation can only be solved by the actions and commitment of each individual nation.

### **Can Any "Right" Be Absolute?**

With regard to individual rights, the Draft Final Document states that, "All couples and individuals have the basic right to decide freely and responsibly the number and spacing of their children and to have the information, education and means to do so." That is, of course, a prescription for further population growth, since 90 percent of future world population growth is projected to occur in the developing countries where couples desire, on average, three or more children.

If that statement could be deleted, and the following statement substituted for it, it might prove to be, if heeded, the salvation of the world: "Because world population growth cannot otherwise be halted, in nations that have not yet achieved a sub-replacement fertility, no couple or individual should have the right to have more than two children." The argument for that statement of rights is both simple and irrefutable. Population growth can never be halted unless almost all couples and individuals around the world have two or fewer children. Yet, many people and organizations, including our own government, have great difficulty acknowledging that simple, indisputable fact!

A recent report by the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, a lay panel of the Vatican, stated the obvious. It noted that increases in life-span and advances in medical care "have made it unthinkable to sustain indefinitely a birth rate that notably exceeds the level of two children per couple -- in other words the requirement to guarantee the future of humanity."

All nations must make the two-child maximum fam-



ily, and a sub-replacement level of fertility their fundamental planning goals. Those should have been a central theme of the Cairo Conference.

Blind adherence to an impractical idea (such as the unqualified right of parents to have as many children as they wish), regardless of consequences, can prove fatal. One is reminded of the sad tale of the king and queen that Thorstein Veblen recounted in his book, "The Theory of the Leisure Class." The royal couple was obliged by long tradition never to walk, but to be carried about on their thrones by servants. One day the palace caught fire, the courtiers fled, and the king and queen, unable to escape by walking away, were obliged to remain on their thrones and were burned to death.

### **Family Planning Is Essential, But Not Enough**

Why does the international community (and our own government) persist in espousing family planning as the means to halting world population growth, even though it is obvious that family planning programs alone are insufficient to achieve that goal?

Family planning is a necessary, but not sufficient, measure for halting population growth in most of the world's nations. The provision of contraceptive information and services, together with safe, legalized abortion are essential parts of any national population policy. But in countries where the desired family size is three or more children, family planning must be supplemented by non-coercive incentives to encourage couples, and individuals, to have no more than two children.

In an article in the March 1994 issue of *Population and Development Review*, Dr. Lant H. Pritchett, Senior Economist at the World Bank, argues convincingly that high fertility primarily reflects desired births, and that couples are roughly able to achieve their fertility targets. According to Dr. Pritchett, " 'Excess' or 'unwanted' fertility plays a minor role in explaining fertility differences. Moreover, the level of contraceptive use, measures of contraceptive availability (such as 'unmet need'), and family planning effort have little impact on fertility after controlling for fertility desires." <sup>3</sup>

Dr. Pritchett concludes that, "Our analysis indicates that the challenge of reducing fertility is the challenge of reducing people's fertility desires, not reducing 'unwanted' fertility."

Findings of Dr. Pritchett and others bear out what we at NPG have contended for nearly a quarter of a century: the present focus of population assistance programs on family planning alone should yield to a twin focus on family planning and on non-coercive incentives to encourage couples everywhere to desire two children at most. Their view, and NPG's as well, is that, "fertility desires are largely determined by socioeconomic forces other than family planning and that fertility desires determine fertility."

But even if the opposite were true, and contracep-

tive prevalence did significantly reduce fertility, as family planning advocates mistakenly believe, our main contention would still be valid: Incentives are necessary to reduce fertility sufficiently to achieve the United Nations' low variant, which requires a total fertility rate of 1.7 by 2025-2030.

In support of that assertion, consider the following example. According to Steven Sinding of the Rockefeller Foundation, if all the demand for family planning were met, the use of contraceptives in developing countries would rise from 51 percent to more than 60 percent.<sup>4</sup> Such an increase would cause fertility to fall from the current average of four children per woman to about three, Sinding believes. If that estimate is accurate, such a decline in fertility would, of course, be a major step in the right direction, but it would still fall far short of the 1.7 total fertility required in order to achieve the United Nations' low variant.

### **Sustainable Development, An Oxymoron?**

The Draft Final Document is replete with calls for sustained economic growth, and sustainable development, ignoring the fact that the inevitable by-products of economic and industrial activity are resource depletion and environmental pollution. United Nations documents often cite the complex relations among population, resources and the environment. Yet, in reality, the relationship is simple and direct. Our impact on the environment is the product of numbers of people times per capita consumption.

Per capita consumption can be reduced in some measure by changing life-styles, and by using energy and materials more efficiently. But those measures alone would not be sufficient for the creation of a truly sustainable economy in a world with our present population of nearly six billion people.

The evidence is overwhelming that sustainable development is impossible in a world with a population of that size. If impossibility admits of degrees, how much more impossible would it be in a world of 10, or 12, or 14 billion people? Can the world provide a higher standard of living for ever increasing numbers? The question answers itself. Attempts to achieve that impossible dream of unending growth with sustainability are doomed to fail.

### **NPG's Proposal: Prompt Reduction of World Fertility**

NPG's conviction is that the world must expect disaster if population growth is not stopped short of eight billion, and then reversed. After all, eight billion is larger by a factor of at least four than the two billion or less we consider to be the optimum size for world population.<sup>5</sup>

The world community must set adequate goals, and stop population growth rather than try to accommodate to it. An interim goal must be to stop population growth short of eight billion, with the long term goal of reducing it to an optimum size. We propose measures that would



result in achieving the United Nations' low variant, i.e., stopping population growth when world population peaks at 7.8 billion by the middle of the next century, after which it would start a gradual decline.

Mere attainment of a replacement level of fertility (roughly, an average of 2.1 children per woman) would not stop growth short of eight billion. A sub-replacement level of fertility is essential -- specifically, the 1.7 rate projected by the United Nations by 2025-2030 to reach the low variant population projection. That means that fertility of women around the world would have to fall rapidly by nearly half, from the 3.2 they average now. Such a drastic reduction of fertility would, beyond any doubt, require measures that go beyond family planning.

### **The Urgency of Changing Desired Family Size**

Unless we can succeed in reducing desired family size in almost all nations to not more than two children, there is no hope of achieving sub-replacement fertility, and, therefore, no hope of halting population growth before world population reaches eight billion. Lowering desired family size in all nations (including the United States) that have not yet achieved a sub-replacement level of fertility, is the critical key to halting growth short of eight billion.

There is a good deal of controversy about how best to go about reducing fertility. As we have seen above, increased contraceptive prevalence by itself is not the answer. Couples use contraception to achieve their desired family size, which is independent of contraceptive supply.

The correlation between contraceptive prevalence and fertility is clear. But, as Dr. Pritchett points out above, association does not prove causation. Rather than contraception prevalence resulting in lower fertility, it is the other way around. Lower desired family size results in increased contraceptive prevalence. In brief, it seems clear that we cannot look to increased supply of contraceptives alone to reduce fertility, but rather we must increase demand for contraceptives by reducing desired family size.

Achieving population stabilization will take more than universal access to family planning, Judith Bruce, senior associate at the Population Council, told the House Foreign Affairs Committee last September. The Population Council estimates that if today's level of unwanted childbearing fertility were entirely eliminated, the developing world would still move only one-third of the way towards population stabilization.<sup>6</sup>

That is because people in many societies want more than two children (the average desired family size in sub-Saharan Africa remains between 5 and 6) and the built-in momentum of population growth would keep world population rising for decades after replacement fertility was achieved.

### **Can the World Wait for "Modernization"?**

How about modernization to reduce fertility? As Lindsey Grant writes in his recent NPG Forum paper on the Cairo Conference:

"Modernization, eventually, results in lower fertility. High fertility and resultant population growth throughout much of the third world are delaying that modernization and perhaps making it impossible. The issue is how to get birth rates down without waiting for the traditional 'demographic transition,' which may never happen in much of the third world."<sup>1</sup>

Assertions that eradicating poverty is a prerequisite for halting population growth have the process backwards. Only by halting their population growth can the developing nations begin to bring their standard of living up to an adequate level.

Improving the education and status of women holds a great deal of promise for the long term, and is essential for its own sake. Like modernization, however, it cannot realistically be expected to markedly lower desired family size in the near term.

There is almost no chance that better education and higher status of women will come fast enough, and in enough countries, to lower fertility sufficiently to achieve the goal we propose: halting the growth of world population at 7.8 billion by 2050, and then reversing it.

Certainly we must move ahead with family planning, modernization, and improving the education and status of women. The point is, however, that even taken all together, they would be clearly incapable of achieving the United Nations' low variant. Those programs must be supplemented by non-coercive incentives to reduce desired family size in almost all nations to not more than two children.

There is simply no other way. Incentives do not, of course, guarantee the attainment of our population goal. But they do offer a reasonable expectation of success.

### **Non-Coercive Incentives**

The purpose of incentives is to reduce desired family size in a non-coercive manner. There can be incentives for individuals and couples, as well as community incentives for villages or even entire regions. Possible incentives vary widely, and include tax and financial incentives, and those for schooling, housing, jobs, pensions and late marriages, among others.

They also include cash bonuses for voluntary sterilization for individuals of fertile age who have already had no more than one or two children, and desire to have no more. Such bonuses should not be paid to health care providers, since that invites coercion.

For example, NPG has long recommended that a tax credit be given to couples in the United States with



not more than two children, but that this credit be taken away completely if that number is exceeded.

China and Singapore are examples of countries where incentives have resulted in unprecedented and rapid declines in fertility. In China, from 1965-1970 to 1975-1980, fertility fell by more than three births per woman, largely due to its national program of incentives and disincentives.

There were undoubtedly elements of coercion in the Chinese program, and those elements have been widely, and rightly, denounced. Without either condoning or defending those coercive practices, we should, however, endeavor to understand the magnitude of the problem China faces. Chinese authorities point out that they are struggling to feed 22 percent of the world's population on just seven percent of its arable land. They maintain that the staggering pressure of China's huge and still growing population on a land of scarce resources made tough controls unavoidable.

The point here is that a program of incentives need not be coercive, and is not, as some might argue, inherently so. Because China's program was in some respects flawed, does not mean that the entire concept should be abandoned. No less an authority than the late Bernard Berelson, formerly president of The Population Council, had this to say about incentives:

"... by definition incentives are rewards or penalties, tangible or intangible, given to a couple or group in order to induce some specific fertility behavior. As such, they are expressly designed to alter parental choice; their use would otherwise be unnecessary.

"... positive incentives serve to enlarge options, not diminish them, and hence can serve both freedom and (interclass) justice. The individual is presented with a choice he did not have in the absence of the incentive, since he can decline the incentive, he has lost nothing from his previous state but has gained an option -- the incentive rather than his normal fertility behavior." <sup>7</sup>

### To Summarize

The Draft Final Document for the Cairo Conference simply reflects the conventional wisdom with regard to population size and growth. It does not come to grips sufficiently with the problem of world overpopulation. In discussing it in this paper, I have tried to comment on these aspects of it:

1. A goal for stopping world population growth. The Draft does not mention one. I have argued that the only adequate goal is to follow the United Nations' low variant, and to stop world population growth at 7.8 billion by 2050, then reverse it. Even that goal, the best we could possibly hope for, would result in an increase of 2.2 billion people in world population in a little more than a half

century! That would increase our present world population of 5.6 billion by 39 percent. It is sobering to realize that because of the tremendous momentum of past population growth, and the resulting age structure of world population, we cannot possibly halt population growth before the number of people added to world population (2.2 billion) exceeds the total world population of 1.65 billion at the beginning of the century.

2. What measures would be necessary to achieve the United Nations' low variant? Incentives are essential. Family planning, modernization, and better status and education for women alone are incapable of achieving that goal. As I have tried to show, reaching the low variant would require tremendous reductions in fertility in a very short time.

3. Sustainable development. According to the conventional wisdom, sustainable development is possible in a world of 10 billion people, or even more. I have argued that we cannot possibly create a sustainable economy in a world with our present population, much less in one with double that number.

A far smaller world population than today's is the *sine qua non* for sustainability.

### The Optimum Rate of Growth is Negative

World population should have been stabilized long ago at one to two billion (it was 1.65 billion at the beginning of this century). Our urgent task now is to halt world population growth as soon as humanely possible, then to reduce world population gradually, so that it can eventually be stabilized at a sustainable level of two billion or less.

To some, that goal might appear utopian. But it is not nearly as unrealistic as the expectation that we can create a sustainable economy in a world of six billion people, or more, with an adequate standard of living for all.

In any event, there is no need to decide now on an exact number, or range, for optimum population size. At this point a precise numerical target is relatively unimportant. For purposes of setting population policy, the central fact to be taken into account is that optimum size is substantially below our present numbers.

It follows, therefore, that what is needed is a gradual decline in population size, and that can only be achieved by a negative rate of growth. Once it is agreed that we need a smaller population, it should be obvious that the optimum rate of growth is negative, not positive.

At best, it will take a half century or more to halt population growth, and then reach a negative rate of growth. A substantial reduction in numbers will take much longer. We will have ample time, therefore, to do research and decide at what level world population should eventually be stabilized.



The world is now vastly overpopulated. Population must be rolled back to a state of balance with our resources and environment. That can only be achieved with a negative rate of growth. That must be our top priority goal.

### **Whither Humanity?**

Erich Fromm, the psychologist, once said, "The history of man is a graveyard of great cultures that came to catastrophic ends because of their incapacity for planned, rational, voluntary reaction to challenge."

It is more than likely that the entire human race will meet with catastrophe if our present unwillingness to face up to the crisis caused by world population growth continues for just a few more years. As Eugene Linden wrote in a recent essay in *Time* magazine, "If governments continue to fiddle while human numbers explode, it becomes ever more likely the horsemen of famine, disease and anarchy will have their day."<sup>8</sup>

I am convinced that if we do not take steps now to halt, and then reverse, world population growth, humankind's ancient dream of a good life for all, free from material want, will be destroyed, perhaps forever.

### **NOTES**

1. Lindsey Grant, *The Cairo Conference: Feminists vs. the Pope*, NPG Forum paper, July 1994.
2. Current fertility from the Population Reference Bureau, *1994 World Population Data Sheet*. Target fertility from the United Nations publication, *Long-Range World Population Projections, Two Centuries of Population Growth, 1950-2150*, published in 1992.
3. Lant H. Pritchett, *Desired Fertility and the Impact of Population Policies*, *Population and Development Review*, Volume 20, Number 1, March 1994.
4. *Scientific American*, December 1993, p. 67.
5. See Gretchen C. Daily, Anne H. Ehrlich, and Paul R. Ehrlich, *Optimum Human Population Size*, *Population and Environment*, Volume 15, Number 6, July 1994. The authors conclude that, "To us it seems reasonable to assume that, until cultures and technologies change radically, the optimum number of people to exist simultaneously lies in the vicinity of 1.5 to 2 billion people."
6. See *Global Stewardship*, May/June 1994, published monthly by the Population Reference Bureau, Inc., Washington, D.C.
7. Bernard Berelson and Jonathan Lieberman, *Government Efforts to Influence Fertility: The Ethical Issues*, *Population and Development Review*, Volume 5, Number 4, December 1979.
8. *Time* magazine, July 1994, Volume VIII, Number 4.

## **Negative Population Growth, Inc.**

210 The Plaza, P.O. Box 1206 • Teaneck, N.J. 07666-1206 • Telephone: (201) 837-3555

*NPG, Inc., is a nonprofit organization founded in 1972. Annual dues are \$30, and are tax deductible to the extent the law allows. NPG is the only population/environmental organization that calls for a smaller U.S. and world population, and for specific, realistic measures to achieve those goals.*

*NPG papers are \$1.00 each, including postage and handling. Copies of each paper are sent to members and are free to the media upon request. For orders totalling ten or more, the price is \$.25 each. Single copies of papers are free to libraries if orders are accompanied by one self-addressed stamped envelope for each paper ordered. Papers longer than four pages require a 9" x 12" envelope with a 52c stamp.*