

Sustainability, Part III

Climate, Population and UNCED+5

by Lindsey Grant

Most major world environmental and social problems can be solved only if population policy is an integral part of the solution, but population growth is only occasionally identified as part of the problem and population policies are almost never proposed as part of the solution. I have given a private nickname to the phenomenon: "zip re pop" – nothing about population. In June, the United Nations again demonstrated this blindered approach. If it were only bureaucrats' nattering, perhaps it wouldn't matter, but it was a UN meeting in 1992 that led governments to pledge action on climate warming, and the UN remains sponsor of the effort. If it will not recognize the connection with population policy, hopes of doing anything about climate warming are remote indeed, and so are any hopes for successful action on the other environmental issues on the table.

The United Nations is a good place to observe the "zip re pop" phenomenon. Last June, the UN General Assembly held a Special Session on Agenda 21, or "UNCED+5" – i.e. "UNCED plus five years." (UNCED was the UN Conference on Environment and Development, held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. It passed "Agenda 21," which is a list of environmental action proposals, most notably an agreement that industrial nations should cut their carbon emissions by 10% from 1990 to 2000 to help forestall further human impact on the climate.)

The June meeting was to be the triumph of "sustainable development." A special UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) spent years preparing for the meeting, which was intended to summarize progress on "Agenda 21" and to initiate further action. What it did, rather, was to underline the problem of compartmentalized thinking. There were reports – separate little boxes – covering most of the world's environmental and resource issues. There was even a box about population growth. That growth is an overarching issue and driver of the other issues. The connection was recognized in some of the other reports, but none of them suggested that population policy can be part of the solution.

Population and Climate

Climate warming was the big story, and even the President of the meeting (the Malaysian Prime Minister) described it as a failure because it waffled on climate. News stories echoed that assessment and blamed it on U.S. and Japanese unwillingness to state a target for reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. This silence contrasted with a European Union proposal to pledge a reduction of 15% between 1990 and 2010 (which

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itself was a revision of the 1992 commitment, necessary because nobody is going to reach the 2000 target.) I would call that a secondary failure. The real failure was the unwillingness to make the population connection. If that connection is

not made, stopping the human effect on climate is, like many other environmental objectives, almost certainly an impossible task.

Population was mentioned only once in the Secretary General's background report on climate change "Protection of the atmosphere (Chapter 9 of Agenda 21)."¹ It was a casual reference to "low population densities" in North America. In contrast, the report dwelt at length on consumption habits and technology, both of which influence climate change, but both of which are arguably secondary to population size as the fundamental driver.

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The General Assembly at its close agreed to a Programme for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21. It recognized "*climate change as one of the biggest challenges facing the world in the next century,*" but didn't make the population connection.

In discussing energy, population growth was mentioned only once – and in the wrong context: "*In developing countries sharp increases in energy services are required to improve the standard of living of their growing populations.*" (paragraph 43) It did not comment on what that will do to the climate. When it did discuss energy and climate, the Programme reflected the different pressures from industrialists protecting their parochial interests, from developing countries that plan to use more energy, from oil producing countries protecting their market, and from low-lying countries that fear inundation if climate warming cannot be stopped. The Programme was consequently very cautious. It offered some generalized suggestions about things such as the need for further study, for cleaner fuels, for alternative fuels, and the phaseout of fossil fuel subsidies – but not about population growth.

On the other hand, the Programme was forthright in calling for a re-examination of present transportation policies. "*Current patterns of transportation with their dominant patterns of energy use are not sustainable and present trends may compound the environmental problems the world is facing...*"

On greenhouse emissions themselves, the Special Session simply chided unnamed industrial nations for failure to do more and then passed the ball to the Kyoto Conference scheduled for December, which is supposed to finalize the industrial countries' 1992 pledge at UNCED to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions.

The U.S. unwillingness to state a target for carbon dioxide emissions was the result of intense domestic pressures. The Business Roundtable lobbied hard against any commitments, arguing that the science was problematical, that the economic effects had not been studied, and that the developing countries weren't doing their share. The Roundtable met with the President and with Congress. The Senate passed by 95 to 0 a resolution urging the President not to sign a treaty that would harm the U.S. economy, or one in which developing nations did not undertake "comparable" commitments.

President Clinton, when he addressed the Special Session, offered eloquence but no concrete commitments. He graphically described the effects of climate change. He applauded the Europeans' push for a 15% reduction, but he said only that the "U.S. must do better, and we will... in order to do our part, we must first convince the American people and the Congress that the climate change problem is real and imminent. We will work with our people – and we will bring to the Kyoto conference in December a strong American commitment to realistic and binding limits that will significantly reduce our emissions of greenhouse gases." He has subsequently scheduled a series of scientific meetings, culminating in a White House meeting on October 7th, to build political support for such a commitment, and he has begun to send signals to the third world via Under Secretary of State Tim Wirth that they will have to make some commitments, too.

In fact, emissions are going the wrong way. Far from meeting the target set at Rio, U.S. carbon dioxide emissions are expected to be 11% higher in 2000 than they were in 1990. European Union emissions will be about 6% higher. (Per capita, we emit twice as much.)

The United States' problem is partly demographic. It is easier for the Europeans, whose population is essentially static, to contemplate a 15% reduction than it is for the United States. Our population is expected to grow by 20% between 1990 and 2010. The proposal would

be twice as difficult for us, because it would require a reduction, per capita, of 30% from 1990 to 2010. That is quite a stretch, and we have yet to begin.

The Europeans' proposal is far from enough to stop the engine that drives climate change. Worldwide, it would require **“an immediate 50-70% reduction in CO₂ emissions and further reductions later on to stabilize atmospheric carbon dioxide at current levels.”** (Quoted from the International Panel on Climate Change [IPCC] 1996 report, on which all this activity is based.) This would be needed – not to end the human impact on the climate – but simply to keep it from accelerating. One can imagine such a reduction if somehow population could be brought down to something like half the present level. Without some such reduction, even the most optimistic brainstorming offers little hope of finding ways in which it can be achieved.

The third world compounds the problem. It is there that population growth is occurring, and – although their energy use and carbon emissions are small on a per capita basis – the developing nations' carbon emissions are big overall, and rising fast. In this decade, they are rising 48%. China alone is rising 60%. Third world emissions are expected to pass total industrial world emissions around 2015.² (If forest destruction, which is largely a third world phenomenon, were included in the calculation, third world impact on climate would already be close to industrial nations' impact.) Developing country spokesmen insist they will not be bound to any meaningful measures to stop or reverse that growth until the industrial nations have taken steps to restore “equity” in emissions per capita.

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Here is an issue that finally brings us face to face with the question: How many is too many? What is the trade-off between population and consumption?

■ Would the Europeans and Japanese – living in two of the most crowded regions on Earth – not be well advised to welcome the prospect that their

populations will decline? With a much smaller population, they could look forward to a standard of living comparable to the present one, without the climate damage they are inflicting.

■ The United States would be on the way to population stabilization if it were not for mass immigration. Our present demographic policies (or lack of them) are in stark conflict with the extraordinary change in living styles we face if we are to stop driving climate change. Even with our

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present population, we would face a fundamental reordering of our energy, industrial, transportation and urban policies. But we are heading toward a population doubling in the next century. The possibility is about nil that we would willingly cut back to levels of economic activity that would permit such a population to live in harmony with the climate. On the other hand, with a population of 150 million (about half the present one, and the level we passed in 1950), we could just meet the IPCC's 50%-70% target (above) with present per capita emissions, and we would have room to offer further reductions in light of our role as the source of one-quarter of the carbon emission problem.

■ The desperation of the Chinese effort to stop and reverse population growth (which is severely criticized in the United States) suddenly comes into focus as a policy that will benefit us all, when seen in the context of climate change. The third world is four times as populous as the old industrial countries and it is still growing fast. The combination of population growth and industrialization for even a fraction of that number would be an environmental disaster for all the world.

There is no way that the climate problem can be resolved at Kyoto. A beginning could be made if the nations of the world were to commit themselves to tough policies on transportation, on energy prices, and on the shift of subsidies away from fossil and nuclear power and toward benign energy sources. It would be a more auspicious beginning if third world countries would announce

changes in their ambitions for industrialization on traditional lines. Beyond some token measures, none of those steps are likely. As to the central problem of population growth: some third world countries may taunt us with the fact that they are trying to stop it and we are not, but new and binding commitments to population policies at Kyoto are unimaginable, particularly by the United States. Since we cause so much of the problem, meaningful action on climate change is not possible without them.

Even if the world's nations come eventually to face the population issue, it will take more than a century to bring populations down to a level that would permit us to pursue a decent living in harmony with the climate. During the interim, we face the daunting prospect of rising third world and U.S. populations dependent upon a resource base diminished and made more unpredictable by climate changes that are already under way.

We had better get at it.

Other Worldwide Environmental Issues

I ran an electronic search for the words "population" and "demographic" in the principal conference papers on environmental and resource issues. Let me summarize what I found. I have underlined the references to population. This is all there was about population growth.

"Integrated approach to the planning and management of land resources (Chapter 10 of Agenda 21)"

"3. ...the development and evolution of human institutions – for information-gathering and assimilation, for negotiation and decision-making, for provision of services and implementation – has seriously lagged behind the growth of populations, technology, and social and economic needs..."

"23. Increased population levels and unsustainable resource use have produced social and environmental problems which are among the most serious that society now faces. While global population growth rates seem to have stabilized in recent years, these

pressures are still increasing, particularly in many parts of Africa and Asia, regions where food production requirements will likely be greatest over the coming half century. They argue for the need to devise and apply more efficient systems of resource management as the greatest emerging priority facing the world."

"26. Continuing rapid urbanization in developing countries is resulting in substantial land-use changes in the urban, peri-urban and even rural areas. The inability of planning functions and provision of services to keep ahead of urban population growth is manifested in the development of squatter settlements and slums; problems of pollution, water supply and waste disposal; and a host of social and economic problems. There is a growing need to ... prepare strategies to meet the concentrated demands for food, energy and various material goods..."

The problem is recognized, but the authors have fallen each time into the fatal flaw of attempting to accommodate to the mounting pressures without

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seeking to mitigate or end them.

"Promoting sustainable agriculture and rural development (Chapter 14 of Agenda 21)" Paragraph 30, in addressing the need for intensified cultivation of the better lands, particularly in Africa, contained an incidental remark that "*Such development may be facilitated by increasing population densities that allow the higher labour inputs that intensification demands and the access to markets and inputs that are often required.*"

I find the remark astonishing, applied to a continent that has gone from 250 million to more than 700 million since 1950, and is headed toward two

billion by 2050—if starvation does not intervene—with the attendant decline of arable land per capita, the swiftest in the world. Lack of labor is seldom the problem in Africa, but that is peripheral to this paper. My present point is that the paper said nothing about the basic human dilemma of trying to keep agricultural yields rising as fast as population growth.

On the other hand, the final Programme said that *“The greatest challenge for humanity is to protect and sustainably manage the natural resource base on which food and fibre production depend, while feeding and housing a population that is still growing. The international community has recognized the need for an integrated approach to the protection and sustainable management of land and soil resources...”* (paragraph 62) Unfortunately, “integrated” or not, there was nothing about population.

“Conservation of biological diversity (Chapter 15 of Agenda 21)” said nothing about human population growth, even though the growth of human populations, the destruction of other species’ habitat, and the pollution caused by human growth and development are the critical causes of the loss of diversity.

“Combating deforestation” (chapter 11 of Agenda 21) in paragraph 32 noted that

“...the Commission on Sustainable Development called for further attention to the cross-sectoral factors that were the underlying causes of deforestation and degradation of forests such as production and consumption patterns, poverty, population growth, insufficient environmental education and knowledge, terms of trade, discriminatory trade practices...”

“33. Although some corrective actions have been attempted to alleviate pressures exerted on forest resources, rapidly growing populations, poverty, unsuitable land use, adverse incentives, and the impact of human activities associated with production and consumption patterns have continued to damage forests.”

Population growth was thus briefly mentioned late in the document, but there was no mention of population policy in the dozens of recommendations on ways to save the forests. (An Ad Hoc

Intergovernmental Panel on Forests has been created, by the way, which submitted its own detailed recommendations; they touched upon population only with one delicate reference to “demographic pressure”).

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“Comprehensive Assessment of the Freshwater Resources of the World,” to its credit, stands alone among the reports in its detailed and ominous discussion of the role of population growth, along with industrialization and urbanization, in generating a worsening prospect for water supplies. It noted that *“already a number of regions are chronically water short”* and remarked on the *“increasing demands from a growing population and human activities. By 2025, as much as 2/3 of the world population would be under stress conditions.”*

In proposing solutions, however, the Assessment backed away. It began with a dramatic statement that *“The holistic management of fresh water as a finite and vulnerable resource, and the integration of sectoral water plans and programs within the framework of national economic and social policy, are of paramount importance for actions in the 1990s and beyond.”* It did not, however, get specific about population policies other than calling for better demographic data. Paragraph 78, in discussing certain arid and semi-arid countries, noted that *“In cases where there is high population growth or economic development, there is likely to be an increase in water demand. If that demand is not well managed, it could drive the country into a high vulnerability situation.”* Perhaps they were hinting at a population policy, but elsewhere they retreated: *“To avert such problems countries, particularly water scarce countries, need to look at projections in such sectors as population, urbanization, economic and agricultural development, and establish water strategies and policies”* – not, I would note, population policies.

This assessment was drafted by the Stockholm Environmental Institute. It was used simply as a source document for the official Sec-

retary General report **“Protection of the quality and supply of freshwater resources: application of integrated approaches to the development, management and use of water resources (Chapter 18 of Agenda 21),”** which avoided all reference, even indirect, to a population policy.

“Managing Fragile Ecosystems: Combating desertification and drought (Chapter 12 of Agenda 21)” did not touch upon the relationship between population growth and desertification in fragile regions.

“Protection of the oceans... (Chapter 17 of Agenda 21)” said in paragraph 19: *“...Governments are facing interacting problems resulting from global climate change, growing populations (in the developing world), demand for and pressure on living marine resources, and increasing pollution from urbanization and industrialization in the coastal zone.”* There was no mention of population policies among the proposed remedies.

“Integrating environment and development in decision-making (Chapter 8 of Agenda 21)” made no reference to demographic issues.

“Assessment of activities that pose a major threat to the environment” was the response to specific instructions from the General Assembly to report on the “environmental impact of activities that are gravely hazardous to the environment.” In a saner world, having too many children – and the resultant population growth – would fit precisely into that definition. The report, however, limited itself to hazardous wastes, chemicals and nuclear activities.

The Missing Connection

There was, indeed, in its own compartment, a report titled **“Demographics and Sustainability (Chapter 5 of Agenda 21),”** prepared by the UN Population Fund. Unlike the mislabeled “Programme of Action” that came out of the 1994 UN Conference on Population and Development at Cairo, this report mentioned the impact of population growth on urban degradation, land and ocean resources, resource use, forestry, water availability, agriculture, migration, and on investments in the social sector. As to what to do about it, however, the document adopted the cautious circumlocutions of the UN bureaucracy. It dared go no further than to call population growth one of many “significant factors” in undermining sus-

tainable development. It noted that the Economic Commission for Africa “identified... managing demographic change” as one “strategic area” but did not explicitly endorse the idea. It spoke vaguely of providing technical assistance to officials *“responsible for implementing population and environmental policies and programmes,”* but like the ill-fated Cairo “Programme” it did not advocate an end to population growth.

Redundancy is the soul of UN meetings, and population was also addressed in a summary document titled **“Global Change and Sustainable Development: Critical Trends.”** Amid the general inattention to population, it contained a very good summary of recent thinking about population growth.

There is a good deal of vitalistic thinking in most population projections – i.e. making the projection on the assumption that demographic change has a trend of its own, independent of what people do about it. This report seemed to come close to that fallacy, but avoided it. It is indeed true that, over time and very roughly, the “demographic transition” does happen as economies modernize and the roles of women and children change. In that degree, one may hope that, with luck and successful development, the problem of continuing growth will end in other countries, as it may have in Europe. That is not enough. The arguments for an active population policy are these:

- The process can be hastened and encouraged by education and leadership, as it was in many of the countries which are now cited as examples of falling fertility. Active population policies, as the report noted, are in place in many third world countries, some of them for decades. If things are now happening, in some places, that were intended by those programs and their sponsors, perhaps the policies deserve some credit for the result.

- Population growth itself may prevent the very development that leads to the demographic transition. Active sponsorship may lead to falling fertility in the absence of general modernization, thus freeing resources for that modernization process. This has happened in a number of countries, and it has brightened their prospects. It can be of immense importance in countries such as China, where modernization is under way, but very unevenly, and where the bulk of the population does not participate in the changing conditions that lead to the transition. Given the remarkable conclu-

sion of the IPCC (above) as to how much must be done to forestall further human impact on climate, and given the desperate conditions in parts of the third world sketched out in the various sectoral reports, we cannot afford to miss any ways of stopping and reversing third world population growth as soon as possible.

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The "Critical Trends" summary emphasized the long-term importance of economic and social improvement, particularly for women, in lowering fertility, but it also said that *"In the short term, providing contraceptives to close the 'fertility gap' between the number of children born and the number of children desired remains a powerful and logical policy priority."* (paragraph 39) Good advice. Unfortunately, it did not make an important corollary point: leadership, incentives and disincentives can strongly influence "the number of children desired." Nevertheless, this was the one explicit, substantive suggestion for a definable program of action on population to come out of the June meeting.

The Special Session's final declaration almost came to grips with the population issue, but it missed those critical ideas.

"There is a need to recognize the critical linkages between demographic trends and factors and sustainable development. The current decline in population growth rates must be further promoted through national and international policies that promote economic development, social development, environmental protection, poverty eradication, particularly the further expansion of basic education, with full and equal access for girls and women, and health care, including reproductive health care, including both family planning and sexual health, consistent with the report of the International Conference on Population and Development." (paragraph 30)

Close, but very far. The recognition is encouraging, but the paragraph calls only for slower growth, not an end to growth, and the proposed "policies," drawn from the Cairo Programme, are a wish list rather than a population policy. (See Note 3.)

The Special Session's final document contained a "Programme of Work for the Commission on Sustainable Development 1998-2002." It did not mention population.

That is hardly a call to action. Only when population policies are seen as a necessary component of avoiding a water crisis or a food shortage, or rising sea levels, or political chaos, is something likely to be done about it. Population policies should be among the recommendations on each of the specific environmental/resource problems addressed. And we have seen that they were not.

If this be "sustainable development," it will not take us very far toward true sustainability. To repeat a point that I have belabored in other papers: perpetual growth in a finite world is a mathematical absurdity. The very identification of population growth as a problem in some of the Special Session background papers should remind us that the world has reached the point at which that truism is presently relevant.

I am sure that the drafters of all those documents would defend themselves on the grounds that population policy is the UN Population Fund's responsibility, not theirs. It is "not within their mandate." And yet they were willing to call for other actions outside their mandate: consumption policies, fiscal policies and taxation, new industrial, transportation and urban policies, and all sorts of specific cross-sectoral reforms not within their own areas. Only with population did this reticence about crossing jurisdictional lines arise.

How can we be so dense? If the solution to a problem lies outside the traditional confines of the issue itself, we had better learn to escape jurisdictional confines and say "If we do not solve population growth, we cannot solve the problem." The beginning of foresight is the willingness to make that connection.

