

Population: An Unacknowledged Presence At World Food Crisis Talks

An NPG Forum Paper

By David Simcox, NPG Senior Advisor

Continuing world population growth was a huge but unacknowledged elephant in the conference hall at the June 2008 UN-Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) Summit in Rome on *World Food Security: The Challenges of Climate Change and Bioenergy*. Remarkably, only a handful of the more than 200 heads of government, foreign ministers, ambassadors and ministers of agriculture, development and trade even mentioned population growth in their presentations on the world's exploding demand for food and rapidly rising prices.

THE "SCREAM OF THE EARTH" UNHEEDED

To his credit, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, who has called for a 50 percent increase in global food production by 2030, warned that world population would reach 7.2 billion by 2015 and inaction now would only make solutions harder. The most notable and eloquent exception to the general disregard for population growth was Japan's Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda. He recalled that the Club of Rome had begun in the same city forty years earlier and that its publication four years later in 1972 of *Limits to Growth*, warning of resource exhaustion and environmental ruin, was not taken seriously by many:

As a result we continued our dependence on fossil fuels without reflecting on our lifestyle of mass production, mass consumption and mass waste...Thirty-six years have passed since the Club of Rome issued the report. We are finally hearing the scream of the earth...The fundamentals of the supply-demand balance of food are gradually becoming more and more unstable.

Cultivable land barely increases anywhere in the world, climate change continues to develop, and conversion of food for energy use is increasing; nevertheless the world's population is continuing its growth.¹

Fukuda, Ban and many other delegates warned that progress toward the UN's 2000 Millennium Development Goal of cutting the number of the world's poorest and hungriest by half by 2015 (down from 860 million in 2000) was failing as re-improvement by high food prices spreads. Most estimates were that high food and energy prices would add 100 to 150 million more people to the planet's most undernourished masses.

Spokesmen for food-importing and food-deficit nations stressed their urgent need for short-term assistance to get them through the current supply-demand imbalance, for an emergency global food bank, and for more intermediate-term and long-term investment in their farming systems. Jacques Diouf, FAO Director General, bemoaned the steady decline in the recent past of development assistance from rich nations to agriculture in developing countries and called for rich countries to provide \$30 billion yearly in aid and investment to agriculture.²

The conference quickly became another "North-South" face-off. More than a few third world nations blamed farm subsidies in the rich countries for the decline of their agriculture. While the final declaration called for freer trade, many of the delegates and most of the non-governmental observers were skeptical that free market principles in trade and investment would ensure food security. There was near unanimous con-

demnation among food-short countries of export taxes and other forms of “hoarding” by exporting nations.

FOOD-BASED BIOFUELS PROTESTED

In dealing with the demand side of the food imbalance, third world and food-importing states strongly criticized the U.S., European Union, Brazil and other producers of biofuels. Urging the U.S. and European Union to abandon use of food crops for biofuels, the Mexican Minister of Agriculture sent a subtle warning to U.S. immigration policy makers: the surging price of staples was threatening a resurgence of poverty and shrinking buying power for 25 million Mexicans. Seemingly, most delegates felt it was proper to deplore the rising demand for food to feed proliferating motor vehicles but improper to even mention the demand-boosting effect of adding 75 million additional food consumers to the planet each year.

Biofuels, subsidies and international speculators, evils associated with western nations, got a lot of the blame for the food crisis. But oil exporting states got off easy: the vast increases in food transportation and production costs attributable to sky-high oil prices drew few harsh critics. President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, which imports more than a third of its food, called for a Code of Ethics that would rule out all subsidies for biofuels. Mubarak’s concern is well founded: Egypt is a poster child for the imbalance between population and food production and has experienced serious food riots. Its population, now 74 million and growing by 2.1 percent a year, will top 95 million by 2030. And the largely desert nation has only 6.6 million acres of cropland, a little more than half that available to the state of Indiana alone.

Mubarak’s call for an end to biofuel subsidies resonated with the delegates and makes environmental sense. Brazilian President Lula da Silva, noting that Brazil’s large production of biofuels from sugar cane is sustainable, cheaper than the corn-based equivalent, and does not displace resources for food crops, also called for an end to subsidies and import restrictions by food-based biofuel producers. Diplomatically, the Conference’s final declaration called only for close monitoring and study of biofuels to determine whether they are compatible with sustainable development and food security.

Worth injecting here is that the U.S. diverted about 20 percent of its 2007 corn crop for ethanol. That impressive amount of about 60 million metric tons, produced at high environmental and energy costs, represents less than one-third the additional grain the world will need (at 325 KG per capita, average world consumption) to feed the 600 million people it will add between now and 2015 – probably less if per capita food demand continues to rise among the world’s wealthier consumers.

KEY UN AGENCIES AND GROUP OF EIGHT ALSO IGNORE POPULATION GROWTH

Leaders of major UN specialized agencies such as the World Bank and the World Health Organization also disregarded the population factor, even though those agencies have been among the UN’s leaders since the 1974 Bucharest World Population Conference in providing three things: financing, research and guidance for international family planning.

The spokeswoman for the UN Environmental Program (UNEP) warned the delegates against responding to the food crisis simply by intensifying existing farming practices that are already gravely polluting and degrading vital lands and waters. But she too ignored population growth, notwithstanding UNEP’s 2007 warning of population’s contribution to world environmental decline in its latest “global environmental assessment.” At that time, UNEP Executive Director Achim Steiner told the press that “the human population is now so large that the amount of resources needed to sustain it exceeds what is available at current consumption patterns.”³

Most revealing of population’s current low priority, the UN’s main family planning arm, the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), was not represented at all at the Rome meeting and was excluded by the UN Secretary General from his recently created High Level Task Force on the Global Food Security Crisis, which will try to implement the Conference’s findings.

The leaders of the most advanced industrial nations, the Group of Eight, meeting in Japan a month after the Rome conference, also issued their own diagnosis and remedies for the food crisis. Population and

family planning went unmentioned. Not surprisingly the G-8 statement concentrated on market mechanisms, chiefly trade and investment improvements, with increased concessional aid for the poorest food-short nations.⁴

POPULATION STABILIZATION: OUT OF FASHION OR JUST TOO HARD TO ADDRESS?

Life would be easier if we didn't have the kind of population growth rates we have now. But to force people to stop having children would be a simplistic answer. The more realistic, ethical and practical issue is to accelerate human well-being and make more rational use of the resources we have on this planet.⁵

—Achim Steiner, Executive Director, UNEP

Clearly, population – or at least openly talking about it – has lost its once high priority in the UN and the broader international community. Attitudes have changed over time toward the urgency of population stabilization and the international politics of its management.

A key factor in the diminished emphasis is that UN population data over the past two and a half decades have revealed significant declines in world fertility. UN projections once showed world population topping 10 billion by mid-century. The 2006 update now projects about 9.2 billion, while the U.S. Census Bureau projects 9.4 billion. Be mindful that these are not predictions but projections, hypothetical outcomes based on assumptions. The annual increase in the planet's population, now 75 million, is projected by the UN to dwindle to “only” 30 to 35 million by 2050, with fertility falling to replacement level at 2.02.⁶

A premature sense of victory permits many leaders in the international community to turn to more tractable and less delicate issues, such as international trade, finance and, increasingly, international migration. Indeed, some pro-natalist commentators have had some success in turning even this modest victory into fear, warning of an imminent world “population implosion” that would harm the quality of life.⁷

Too often disregarded is the fact that global inter-

ests high on the UN agenda, such as sustainable development, climate change, biodiversity, desertification and diminishing water supplies, are now being gravely if not mortally aggravated by population growth, even at the lower projected rates. Food production already seriously lags the food needs of 6.6 billion humans. With water supplies and arable land per capita now plummeting, and farm productivity seriously menaced by climate change, what possible reason is there to rejoice that a planet now unsustainably populated will threaten its very viability with further growth.

Contributing to the declining priority of family planning has been the emergence of a new paradigm in the 1994 Cairo Conference. This approach dilutes family planning and fertility reduction in a broader agenda that emphasizes commendable but often competing goals such as gender equality, women's rights, maternal and child health, and “gender mainstreaming.”⁸ Underlying all this is the belief that generally improving women's lives will lower their fertility, but with timetables left unstated.

Specific goals such as fertility reduction and lowered population growth rates, or any incentives deemed “coercive” have since been out of favor. The very phrase “family planning” became suspect. In this climate, neither population stabilization nor family planning are mentioned by name in the UN's 2000 statement of Millennium Development Goals, though both critically bear on attainment of all eight of those goals. UNFPA must engage in elaborate circumlocutions, rhetorically coded language, and carefully packaged programs to preserve and promote what remains of its core projects of family planning and contraception.

The United States remains the UN's largest single donor and dues payer. It sets the tone for most international development dialogues. The present U.S. aversion to family planning, its discounting of rapid population growth as an obstacle to development, and its “Global Gag Rule” restraints on contraceptive distribution under Presidents Reagan, Bush I and Bush II have had a chilling effect on population-minded international leaders and activists.

The Bush administration's refusal during the past seven years to pay its contribution to UNFPA – only \$35 to \$40 million yearly – fires a symbolic warning shot for all UN agencies and aid-receiving nations about pushing population issues. And it moves other donor nations toward caution or stinginess. Even the modest funds the U.S. denies UNFPA could make a measurable difference in future population growth, with the potential to prevent or delay 2 million unintended pregnancies a year.

The overall flow of international aid to family planning from all donors has declined markedly in the past decade, with only about half the \$6.1 billion pledged by donors for the 1994 Program of Action having actually been paid. According to UNFPA, in 2004 about 200 million women had an unmet need for contracep-

tion. Meeting those needs, for an annual cost of about \$4.0 billion, would avert or delay 52 million pregnancies a year.⁹

That \$4.0 billion would be an excellent annual investment in balancing food production and consumption in the years ahead. It would represent only about one-eighth the annual investment of \$30 billion in agriculture that FAO head Jacques Diouf is calling for. NPG continues to believe that the world is seriously overpopulated right now and needs to begin movement as soon as possible to reduce its present unsustainable 6.6 billion population by at least half. Otherwise, rising world mortality stemming from climate change, energy and water scarcity and faltering food production may well brutally halt and reverse world population growth long before it reaches the UN's projected 9.2 billion.

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1. Statements of Fukuda and other High Level Conferees are taken from: www.fao.org/foodclimate/conference/statements
 2. *Development*: "Food Production Must Rise 50 Percent," *Inter Press Service News Agency*, June 30, 2008. www.ipsnews.net/print.asp?idnews=42647
 3. "UN Warns of Rapid Decay of the Environment," *New York Times*, October 26, 2007
 4. "G8 Leaders Statement on Global Food Security," July 8, 2008. www.GB.GC.CA/pdf/Gb_Leaders_Statement_Global_Food_Security-eng.pdf
 5. Op Cit. note 3
 6. <http://esa.un.org/unpp/>
 7. See e.g. Nicholas Eberstadt, "The Population Implosion," *Foreign Policy*, March 1, 2001; Phillip Longman, *The Empty Cradle: How Falling Birth Rates Threaten World Prosperity*, New York: Basic Books, 2004; Ben Wattenberg, *Fewer: How the New Demography of Depopulation Will Shape Our Future*, Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2004
 8. See Lindsey Grant. *The Cairo Conference: Feminists vs. the Pope*, NPG Forum Paper, 1994.
 9. *State of World Population 2004*. www.unfpa.org
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