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Burning the Bridge to the 21st Century: The End of the Era of Integrated Conferences?

By Frederick A.B. Meyerson

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The media room at the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development.
(PHOTO: GEOFFREY D. LABELKO)

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At an exciting time when science may be on the verge of merging diverse disciplines and data-sets towards an understanding of the complex interactions among population, development, and the environment, we appear to be moving backwards in terms of integrated international conferences that lead to action on these issues. Prior to the recent Johannesburg World Summit in Sustainable Development (WSSD), its chairman Emil Salim remarked that the Summit would likely be the last of its kind. Others in the U.S. government and the NGO community made similar

assessments after the close of the conference. While global environmental challenges are clearer and more pressing than ever, the international community seems less capable of constructive agreement and action.

On the climate front, there is finally nearly universal agreement among scientists that the earth's surface temperature is warming significantly, that the warming is likely due to human activity, and that the consequences of surface warming will have a substantial negative impact on humans and other species. Yet the poorly conceived Kyoto

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Report From Johannesburg: Wither Population, Environmental Change, and Security?

By Geoffrey D. Dabelko

Along with over 100 heads of state and government and tens of thousands of others, I attended the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa in late August and early September. The conference was about numerous things: its ground-up approach to agenda-setting guaranteed that many—perhaps too many—topics were up for discussion. Delegates agreed to courses of action on everything from poverty and water resources to energy, governance, and ecosystems.

But Johannesburg also neglected a number of key topics. It only glancingly addressed contentious yet critical challenges such as population dynamics or the deeper linkages among the environment, develop-

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"Is it not shortsighted and counterproductive for the United States to forego even just the political benefits... that would accrue from addressing these day-to-day survival challenges for literally billions worldwide?"

—GEOFFREY D. LABELKO

WORLD SUMMIT

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Protocol has been watered down, burdened with fuzzy math, and rejected by the United States—to the point where it “does not do much of anything for the atmosphere,” according to Eileen Clausen, President of the Pew Center on Global Climate Change.¹

Only a handful of countries are on track to meet their Kyoto obligations. After more than a decade and hundreds of climate conferences and meetings involving long-term investments by thousands of academics and policymakers, the result appears to be capitulation. A recent Worldwatch paper concluded that “the gap between climate science and policy has widened, rather than narrowed, since Rio.” The most recent round of climate talks in October 2002 shifted the emphasis away from preventing climate change to ways to adapt to it.

The same acceptance and malaise may now be affecting international population policy. The 1994 Cairo agreement set forth bold goals for universal access to reproductive health by 2015. Cairo +10, scheduled for early 2004, was to be a re-affirmation of those goals and assessment of progress to date. However, it now appears that the 2004 conference will be only a low-key event with minimal expectations for new actions or pronouncements. Instead of resembling the ministerial level conferences of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, it is more likely to hearken back to the meetings of the 1950s and 1960s, in which population experts met to review the demographic data and trends rather than to change the future.

With little more than a year to go before Cairo +10 opens in early 2004, UN Web sites are devoid of any information concerning preparations for the meeting. Because successful international conferences require long lead times and multiple preparatory events to create new agreements, this lack of public preparation is an indication that the 2004 conference will be descriptive rather than prescriptive, reporting progress since Cairo rather than creating new mechanisms for action. The role of NGOs at Cairo +10 could well be limited to separate press

conferences and side events of the sort that garner little press and have no significant effect on the official proceedings. More surprisingly, the NGO community—particularly population-environment organizations—thus far seems to be accepting this diminished role without putting up a fight.

If the international community were on track to fulfill the Cairo goals, a subdued 2004 conference would not be of great concern and perhaps even appropriate. In reality, however, almost all donor countries have fallen far short of their Cairo commitments. For instance, U.S. international family planning contributions have fallen by about 35 percent in constant dollar terms since 1995, so that the United States is providing less than half of its estimated share as agreed to in Cairo. The international donor community actually supplied fewer condoms in 2000 than it did in 1990 (950 million vs. 970 million), at a time when the current need of 8 billion condoms is expected to rise to 18.6 billion by 2015. An estimated 14,000 people become infected with HIV every day, many of them for want of a condom that can be produced for three cents.

Some have suggested that the UN is taking a low-profile approach to Cairo +10 because it is now focused on the Millennium Development Goals. Yet those goals—which include maternal health and child mortality reductions—do not include reproductive health. Another theory is that conference fatigue has

overcome the UN system and the international community after so many huge circus-like events and ambitious ideas that have not reached fruition.

Others suggest that the international political climate has soured to the point that it would be too risky to re-open the Cairo goals for broad discussion, out of concern that the result would be another Mexico City and a step backward rather than forward. This “Pandora’s box” fear may be well-founded. The American delegation to an October 2002 Bangkok population conference suddenly announced that the United States would not reaffirm its support for Cairo unless the terms “reproductive health services” and “reproductive rights,” which can be construed to include abortion, were removed from the text.²

Rio and Cairo both held out the promise that the links between population and environment

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¹ Quoted in *The New York Times*, October 23, 2002, p. A8

² “U.S. May Abandon Support of U.N. Population Accord” (2002, November 2). *New York Times*, p. A8

could be explored scientifically, and that these relationships might be prominent enough at the 2002 and 2004 conferences to shape policy on both fronts. Instead, population and reproductive health were almost absent at Johannesburg, and environment may be completely omitted from consideration at Cairo +10. Moreover, the population-environment community seems to be oddly complacent about this turn of events.

Perhaps we will look back at the last three decades of the 20th century as a brief golden era of international cooperation on environment, population, and development. The environmental conference in Stockholm in 1972 and population conference in Bucharest in 1974 ushered in an era of constructive, high-level engagement between governments and the scientific and NGO communities. It could be that the stalemate of the Cold War and the lull afterwards produced a calm that permitted the extraordinary results of Rio, Cairo, and their predecessors. Whatever the cause of this success, now that we have crossed the bridge to the 21st century, we may wish that we

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could go back. We should at least try to keep the bridge from burning.

Three recommendations come to mind. First, the Cairo goals—particularly the reproductive health goals—should be specifically referenced and reaffirmed in the UN Millennium Development Goals process. Second, Cairo +10 should be more than just an experts’ meeting. It should offer the opportunity and responsibility for governments,

scientists, and the NGO community to jointly explore national and international successes and failures since 1994, and to revise the strategy for reaching the Cairo goals as appropriate.

Finally, Cairo +10 should be used as an opportunity to integrate the Rio, Cairo, and Johannesburg nexus between population and environmental goals, and to harmonize and coordinate those goals. This will require specifically including the environmental science and policy community at Cairo +10, as well as creating a true two-way street between population and environment research and action. In an era when science is being fully integrated, we should not allow another critical policy decade to slip by. ■