

A MESSAGE FROM NEW YORK: RE-STATING THE POPULATION DEBATE

The Population and Sustainability launched its New York debut at a highly successful event in April 2004.

Organized in tandem with the UN Population Fund, and Chaired by Coordinator Catherine Budgett-Meakin, the launch was held to explain the aim of the new format PSN – which is to reestablish the profile of population growth centre stage as perhaps one of the two greatest challenges facing the world today – the other one being climate change.



[Catherine Budgett-Meakin with Rene Desiderio of the UN Population Fund at a joint UN/PSN information stand]

Speakers included Francois Farah of UNFPA, recently relocated to the head office from his role as representative in India and Nepal. ***[Photo: Francois Farah]***



Presentations were also given by Marta Benavides of IICP (El Salvador), Daisy Owomugasho (African Women's Economic Policy Network) and Toby Aykroyd representing the PSN Steering Group



[PSN Speakers during the UN session: from left Francois Farah, Daisy Owomugasho, Catherine Budgett-Meakin, Toby Aykroyd, Marta Benavides with Rene Desiderio]

The Impact of Population Increase on Sustainability

Another three billion people will be added to the planet over the next 50 years – each deserving the right to a decent standard of living.

In many areas, this represents an absolute level of population increase that will severely compromise the environmental, social or economic goals of sustainability. There is a severe shortfall in the level of resources and political priority given to this issue. In 2003 alone there was a \$3 billion gap in developed country contributions to funding objectives of the 1994 Cairo UN Population conference.

Yet there are still 350 million couples who would use family planning but do not have access to appropriate facilities.

Empowering the Reproductive Healthcare Movement

The reproductive healthcare movement currently focuses on women's rights and the fight against AIDS. Whilst these aims are entirely valid, on their own they lack sufficient weight to secure adequate funding and political priority.

Yet the key aspect of high population increase – its impact on economic development – remains largely unacknowledged and unpromoted.

Over last two decades clear evidence has emerged of how high levels of population increase can hinder poverty alleviation - compromising capital formation, productivity growth and investment in healthcare and education.

This generates high unemployment, fueling emigration from rural areas to towns, adding to poverty and alienation.

Internationally it swells the rising tide of economic refugees and creates conditions of poverty and alienation in which extremism can flourish.

Ironically, just three days of expenditure from the global defence budget would restore the funding shortfall needed to meet the Cairo objectives – providing the best possible return on investment in our future security.

Extracting the Ostrich's Head from the Sand

This evidence is so overwhelming that it must dispel the myth some governments and NGOs hide behind that population growth will somehow take care of itself as development advances.

There is a self-evident contradiction in this approach. Whilst there is no doubt that there is a positive linkage between economic growth and declining fertility, it is generally the poorest countries that have the highest population growth rates, hindering seriously poverty alleviation. In such countries, the effect of economic progress will take longest to impact on population growth rates - a vicious circle will thus pertain in the absence of more substantive family planning provision.

Moreover, even with falling fertility rates elsewhere, the sheer volume of of population growth to date will lead to huge future increases in *absolute* levels.

Practical Proposals by the PSN

As part of its contribution to helping tackle this unsustainable mismatch, the PSN tabled two proposals at the UN in New York:

1. A fast-track project to collate quantified information on the social, environmental but above all the overarching economic impact of unsustainable population increase.
2. The results from the research project to be used in a proactive strategy to inform policy in all key sectors: governments, NGOs, the business sector (a so far neglected ally of huge potential), education and, last but not least, religious institutions.

The overall objective is that population planning should be seen not as low priority or even a topic to be avoided, but one which urgently requires fullest clarification and support.

[The above script was extracted from presentations made at the PSN launch presentations in New York on 27th April].