The Cairo Conference on Population and Development: A New Paradigm?

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The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), held in Cairo in September 1994, was the third decennial conference convened by the United Nations to address major issues related to population. Although many of the specific recommendations of the Program of Action, the main document that emerged from the deliberations at Cairo, can be traced back to the Bucharest and Mexico City conferences, the Cairo statement differs substantially in mood, tone, and purpose from its predecessors. The delegations struggled with controversial topics—as well as over petty semantic differences—to produce a Program of Action for which there was wide consensus. Most significantly, a new definition of population policy was advanced, giving prominence to reproductive health and the empowerment of women while downplaying the demographic rationale for population policy. Furthermore, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) had unprecedented involvement in formulating national policy statements and drafting the Program of Action.

In this article we analyze how and why these transformations took place; in doing so, we examine the interactions among the major ideological and political forces that shape international population policy. While the article touches on the role played by governments, religious organizations, women’s advocacy groups, and other NGOs, it is not our intention to examine any of these entities in depth, or beyond the extent necessary to understand their behavior at Cairo. We focus on the small but critical group of actors, individual and institutional, that were most influential in determining the thrust and shaping the language of the Cairo document.

When individuals or organizations invest time, energy, and resources in a cause, there is a marked proclivity for these supporters to favorably
evaluate the cause. Cairo, the largest and costliest of all UN conferences on population, was no exception. In her closing speech, Nafis Sadik, Secretary-General of the conference and Executive Director of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), declared the new Program of Action a “quantum leap” forward for population and development. Fred Sai, Chairman of the Main Committee (the key working committee of the conference), concluded that “we have succeeded beyond our wildest dreams” (International Planned Parenthood Federation 1994). Members of the US delegation proclaimed Cairo to be a foreign policy triumph for President Clinton. Under Secretary of State Timothy Wirth said, “I think the world is never going to be the same after Cairo” (Los Angeles Times 1994). Feminist groups expressed pleasure that they had achieved much of what they had wanted at Cairo. Other participants went so far as to assert that it had been a conference with no losers. All parties left with the sense that they had been witness to a significant moment in history.

The formal purpose of the conference was to formulate a consensus position on population and development for the next 20 years. As might be expected, most of the actors had private or national agendas of their own, which they sometimes regarded as more important than the formal agenda. Among the major players, a prime example is the Holy See, which, consistent with the importance attached by Pope John Paul II to reproductive, sexual, and family values, wished to eliminate any language implying toleration of abortion, “artificial” contraception, and any form of the family other than the one that corresponds to the traditional Christian family.

The Holy See was not the only participant with an agenda of its own. At a time when the abortion controversy is as intense as any other domestic issue, the US position at Cairo was seen by many as standing for the liberalization of abortion laws throughout the world; the adoption of this position, however, as well as US support for the rights and empowerment of women, grew out of a clear desire to reverse the policies of the Reagan and Bush administrations. Even UNFPA had its own agenda—the strengthening of its area of responsibility and resource base. Without going through the less than public agendas of all the conference participants, it should suffice to say that, in addition to the serious business on the formal agenda, there were the equally serious political agendas of the actors. In short, Cairo was a political conference.

A number of explanations for the euphoria after Cairo might be advanced. First, agreement had been reached by more than 180 governments on a Program of Action intended to chart population policy for the next 20 years. Second, there was a sense of relief that the much-publicized conflict between the Holy See and the United States over abortion had been “resolved” without derailing the conference. Indeed, the Holy See had, for the first time, joined the consensus on approving the document, entering
formal reservations primarily on those parts explicitly or implicitly dealing with legalized abortion and artificial methods of contraception. Third, the lengthy preparatory process was widely judged by participants to have benefited from the collaboration of NGOs. This opening-up of the conference preparations to diverse interest groups representing women, the environment, family planning providers, and religious organizations, among others, was not entirely novel. Something similar had been attempted at the "Earth Summit" in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and at the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993; however, the participation of NGOs in the ICPD process was of a different order. Whereas NGOs have had significant input at previous United Nations conferences, they have not had access to the conference halls; in the ICPD preparations, by contrast, many country delegations included numerous NGO representatives who did have access to conference halls and, more importantly, participated in drafting successive versions of the document and the final report.

The enduring legacy of the Cairo conference will most likely lie in the content of the final document, which both critics and admirers agree reflects the agenda advanced by a coalition of women's organizations and Western governments. While it is not true, as was often claimed by the press and many NGOs, that the ICPD was the first UN conference to consider population in relation to development, it marked the first time that environmental concerns had been addressed in a population context; nevertheless, the Program of Action essentially limited itself to endorsing Agenda 21, the document of the Rio conference. The elation displayed by participants arose, however, not from the new language on sustainable development but rather from other formulations that broadened the concept of family planning to include reproductive and sexual health. The Program of Action enjoins governments to restructure their population policies to address such issues as the reduction of maternal mortality, the prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS, the prevention and treatment of unsafe abortion, and, above all, the empowerment of women.

As guides to future action, the role played by intergovernmental conferences is ambiguous. The documents that emerge from UN conferences, including the ICPD, are in no way binding on the countries that joined the consensus in approving them. At Cairo, where the most contentious and delicate issues in the 118-page draft document were addressed, governments were reluctant to commit themselves until the chapter on principles, and specifically its overarching first paragraph, was firmly in place. In this paragraph, countries insisted that the document reaffirm the "sovereign right" of each country to implement the recommendations in ways that are consistent with "national laws and development priorities" and with "full respect for the various religious and ethical values and cultural back-
grounds of its people" (United Nations 1994: Ch. 2, first unnumbered paragraphs, p. 14). Once they were protected by this language, governments were prepared to move the debate forward by joining the consensus even on parts of the language with which they were not in full agreement.  

While the resolutions and documents of Cairo are nonbinding, they are nonetheless important because they become part of the historical record of the United Nations, where they are included as recommendations that have been universally endorsed. If reaffirmed often enough by countries or other international bodies, these recommendations gradually take on the qualities of an international norm that exerts its own pressure to conformity by the global community. This is, of course, a very slow process, best measured in decades rather than years and probably applying to only a small subset of the recommendations produced by each major conference. Recommendations that do not command broad support, or that appear to be peripheral to the main task at hand, tend to fade from memory.

In arriving at a consensus, UN conference documents evolve through a protracted series of negotiations, involving national governments, the conference secretariat, academic and technical specialists, and representatives of civil society. In this process much of the initial clarity and coherence is lost, and contentious issues tend to be elided or obfuscated; and, since the views of no delegation can be slighted or ignored, the recommendations multiply, new chapters may be added, and the document may lose its sense of direction and urgency. The ICPD final document conforms to this generalization. Within it, the diligent researcher will be able to find language supporting almost any course he or she may wish to pursue. Nevertheless, the overwhelming thrust of the Cairo document and the sense and tone of the aggregated recommendations are such that, if implemented, presage a major change of emphasis, even a paradigm shift, in the international community’s approach to population growth.

Although academic demographers and economists have long debated the relationship between population growth and socioeconomic development (see, for example, Cassen 1994), members of the broader population community have acted for over 30 years in the belief that rapid population growth impedes development. The theoretical underpinnings of this belief had been developed in the 1950s by leading American demographers who argued that the rates of population growth in poor countries, especially those in Asia, not only were far higher than had been observed in industrialized countries during their demographic transition, but also originated from different causes. They questioned whether economic growth could occur in developing countries unless fertility had first been reduced. The most influential among these studies was the simulation project undertaken by Ansley Coale and Edgar Hoover (1958) to examine the impact of India’s population growth on its economic development. This study sug-
gested that lower fertility would be followed by measurable increases in per capita income over and above what may be obtainable with continued high fertility. Since the provision of family planning services was expected to lower birth rates and was a relatively low-cost intervention, governments in countries with high rates of population growth were encouraged to introduce family planning programs.

In later years, the prognostications underlying the Coale–Hoover model were tempered, as many developing countries shared in the booming world economy of the 1960s. Calmed by the lessened sense of crisis, many academic social scientists questioned and modified the model, suggesting at times that rapid population growth is a minor economic problem or no problem at all and that economic development would suffice to bring fertility under control (see, for example, Easterlin 1967; Kocher 1973; Kuznets 1967; National Research Council 1986; Simon 1977, 1981). Nevertheless, policymakers in poor countries came to accept the basic premise that rapid population growth and rapid economic development are incompatible. Today, the deepening poverty, indebtedness, and political turmoil in much of Africa might suggest that the message of the Coale–Hoover model still has validity on that continent, if not elsewhere.

The agenda advanced at the ICPD and enshrined in the Program of Action reflects a very different type of thinking about the population issue in the developing world. The new model asserts that programs that are demographically driven, and are intended to act directly on fertility, are inherently coercive and abusive of women’s right to choose the number and timing of their children. Such programs should be replaced by others that “empower” women by increasing their educational levels, providing them with satisfying jobs, lightening their domestic responsibilities, and otherwise raising their status in the family and community. While family planning services should be provided, they should be only one element in comprehensive programs of reproductive health services, designed and managed with intensive inputs from women. Feminists advocating this agenda assert that once women become more empowered and development advances, women will opt to have fewer children and population growth will slow. For many in the women’s movement, however, the effect on population trends would be incidental because it is the effect on women’s rights, status, and empowerment that matters to them.

It is our view that this shift away from attention to population as an aggregate phenomenon is the most unexpected feature of the Cairo Program of Action. In later sections of this article we suggest how the shift came about, focusing primarily on the roles played by the international women’s movement and the United States government. As members of the population community are aware, however, the last six months of the preparatory process were marked by an intense ideological conflict between
the US government and the Holy See over abortion and other reproductive issues raised by both the women’s movement and the US government. We also briefly analyze this historic battle.

The preparatory process for Cairo

Like the preparations for all global United Nations conferences, preparations for Cairo stretched over several years, from the initial General Assembly Resolution in 1989 (GA Resolution 1989/91) deciding to hold an international population meeting in 1994 under UN auspices, to the conference itself in September 1994. In the intervening years, important procedural work was undertaken during 1990–91 to set up the structure of the conference, establish the formal Preparatory Committee (commonly referred to as Prepcom), and form the ICPD Secretariat within the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). The main substantive preparations were made in the later period, 1992–94. The purpose of the Cairo conference differed somewhat from that of the previous two conferences, and especially from the 1984 Mexico City conference, whose objective was to revisit the World Population Plan of Action adopted at Bucharest in 1974 and to develop recommendations for its further implementation (see Finkle and Crane 1985). For Cairo, the identification of “sustained economic growth and sustainable development,” along with population, as the overall theme of the conference (ECOSOC Resolution 1991/93) necessitated a completely new document and required the meeting to take cognizance of environmental concerns.

The Cairo conference benefited substantially from the demographic expertise and experience of the UN Population Division, which had played a critical role within the Secretariat at both Bucharest and Mexico City. While the preparations for Cairo followed the general form of all UN conferences, they were far more elaborate and sophisticated than the preparations for the population conferences at either Bucharest or Mexico City. Bucharest was the first population conference at which governments were represented, and the Secretariat and major donors expected that it would proceed smoothly, as had the two previous United Nations population conferences, held in Rome in 1954 and in Belgrade in 1964.

These previous meetings, however, had been gatherings of population specialists and technical experts who were invited in their private capacities or represented agencies doing scientific work in the field of population. The possibility of controversy was greatly reduced by restricting the agenda primarily to technical issues of demographic research (Symonds and Carder 1973: 82–86). These specialists had relatively few difficulties with the draft document prepared by their counterparts at the United Nations. At Bucharest, therefore, the Secretariat was taken aback when gov-
ernment delegations chose to use the meeting as a vehicle to advance political demands (Finkle and Crane 1975). Having learned from this experience, the Secretariat for Mexico City instituted a more elaborate preparatory process that combined both technical and political elements to ensure that political and ideological issues would surface and be resolved prior to the meeting itself. Even this new process proved inadequate to the task, and the conference was overtaken by a major political crisis engineered by the United States government (Finkle and Crane 1985).

Believing that the best way to prevent surprises at Cairo would be to open the discussions as widely as possible, the ICPD Secretariat embarked on a strenuous, well-orchestrated series of meetings, approximately 35 in number, and invited NGO participation. The idea was that this laborious process would ensure that controversial issues would be aired and resolved before the draft Program of Action was taken to Cairo for final approval. Thus, starting in January 1992 with six Expert Group meetings charged with identifying the issues to be addressed, the schedule included five regional intergovernmental conferences, meetings of intraregional governmental associations, a meeting of Eminent Persons, several Roundtables on specific issues, and numerous additional formal and informal intergovernmental meetings. The reports of all these meetings were reflected in successive drafts of conference documents prepared by the ICPD Secretariat and discussed at the second and third meetings of the Preparatory Committee in May 1993 and April 1994. Notwithstanding the elaborate care given to producing a document that would be acceptable to all participants, there were serious conflicts over parts of the draft Program of Action, as was evidenced by the position taken at the Third Preparatory Committee Meeting. Thus, although consensus on most of the document was achieved before Cairo, a number of delicate issues remained to be negotiated at the conference itself.

It would be a mistake to assume that the role of the ICPD Secretariat was confined to orchestrating meetings and synthesizing the views of participants. The responsibilities and vision of the Secretariat go far beyond the role that is frequently ascribed to “the secretariat” of an organization. While the Secretariat was desirous of having a well-run conference and of producing a document to which a large majority of the participants could subscribe, it was equally concerned to run a conference that would be seen as historically significant. For this purpose, a simple reaffirmation of the population policies and demographic goals of the past 20 years was unlikely to suffice.

Although Nafis Sadik had not been perceived as an ardent feminist when she first went to UNFPA under Rafael Salas, the late first Executive Director of the Fund, she came gradually to embrace women’s interests, partly out of personal convictions and partly through her continuing dia-
logue with women’s advocates. She was confirmed in this approach by the strong support of US foundations and of several Western governments, especially those of the United States and the Nordic countries. Having endorsed this objective, Sadik remained firmly in control of drafting the document and did not hesitate to overrule groups whose views she did not endorse.

Inevitably, the decision to take an individual rather than societal approach to population growth—for example, to stress individuals’ interest in having access to family planning services rather than the collective interest in having such services available to individuals—was not entirely free of difficulties and costs. Under Sadik’s direction, the original draft of the Program of Action was revised more than a dozen times; in this process the demographic chapter was severely cut and lost much of its punch. This dilution of the document’s demographic content has led population specialists to criticize the inadequacies of relying on a policy focused on the individual in those areas of the world where there is little demand for contraception, where economic development is stagnant or declining, and where religion and culture tend toward pronatalism (van de Kaa 1995; Westoff 1994, 1995).

Abortion also presented Sadik with a dilemma. As Executive Director of UNFPA, Sadik was inhibited from promoting the legalization of abortion; as Secretary-General of the Cairo conference, and as a physician, she was aware that unsafe abortion is responsible for numerous maternal deaths each year and believed that this issue should be addressed in the document. After much discussion with members of the Secretariat, she decided to treat abortion as a major public health issue that governments were urged to address, rather than as a matter of women’s rights. Shortly before the third meeting of the Preparatory Committee, however, Sadik responded to the continued demands of women’s groups and Western governments to take a stronger position; against the advice of some of her UNFPA colleagues she added a sentence stating that safe abortion should be available in cases of rape and incest. This change, regarded by many as an act of courage, also proved to be one of several events that inspired the exceptionally strong protest leveled by the Holy See against the draft Cairo document. The language that was finally adopted at Cairo is reproduced in paragraph 8.25 of the final document (United Nations 1994: 61–62).

The political environment of the conference

The Cairo conference took place against a background of momentous geopolitical change that brought to an end the structure of power that had shaped international relations for 50 years. The collapse of the Soviet Union, prefigured by the fall of the Berlin Wall barely two years before the main preparations for the conference got underway, removed a source of ten-
sion and introduced a new dynamic into global politics that was ultimately reflected in the Cairo process. Gone was the ever-present fear among conference organizers that East–West conflicts might erupt to derail the proceedings, as indeed they had almost done at Bucharest and Mexico City (Finkle and Crane 1975, 1985); in its place was a new openness and willingness to cooperate among members of the former Soviet bloc, which simplified the work of the ICPD Secretariat. The political climate in which the conference and its preparatory process took place was also improved by the signing of a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization. At previous conferences, supporters of the Palestinian cause had frequently disrupted the debate by demanding that the document contain references to the right of self-determination as well as the rights of refugees and people under occupation, both of which topics are included in the Geneva Convention and other international agreements. Palestinians also repeatedly argued for the inclusion of a statement about freedom of movement within the occupied territories (Joseph Chamie, personal communication, 6 May 1994).

Changes in the balance of power

The collapse of the Soviet Union did not simply remove one superpower, leaving the other as undisputed world leader. The United States lost standing as well. Through much of the Cold War, the standing of the United States had rested not only on its military might, but also on the economic strength that permitted it to sustain its political and philosophical commitment to the Western strategic alliance. The vibrant US economy allowed it to extend economic assistance to developing countries; additionally, to prevent the spread of communism, US wealth was employed to attract and maintain client states around the world. In the late 1960s, moreover, under President Lyndon Johnson, the United States launched the "Great Society," a vast program of social regeneration at home, while maintaining its Cold War commitments abroad and engaging in the Vietnam war. The combination of these costly domestic and international policies placed a strain on the US economy from which it has yet to recover.

Although the United States still has a strong economy, by almost any indicator there has been a decline in its economic standing relative to other industrial nations. Many Americans have come to recognize that for a large part of the US population standards of living have ceased to grow, that the income gap between rich and poor has been widening, and that a growing array of serious domestic social problems must be dealt with. With the fear of communism no longer providing an overriding imperative, prominent American political figures are questioning, more than at any previous time, the wisdom and ability of carrying the global responsibilities of former years.
More and more, the United States is urging its Western partners to absorb a growing proportion of development assistance. With Germany straining under the cost of reunification and much of Europe still in recession, attention has been increasingly focused on Japan, which has become the largest contributor to overseas development assistance.

One might infer from this that Japan’s economic prominence would translate into political influence and that Japan would be highly visible at such meetings as the Cairo conference. At Cairo, however, as at other international conferences, Japan remained virtually silent. There are two principal reasons for the low profile adopted by Japan. The first and more general is that Japan has become the most successful mercantile state of modern times. As salesman to the world, Japan has no wish to offend its customers and potential customers by expressing its opinions on sensitive issues, whether they be human rights, women’s status, or the various forms of the family.

Second, Japan is still uncertain of its place in the world and feels itself vulnerable to criticism for its behavior in World War II. It is particularly sensitive to the legacy of ill-will among its Asian and Pacific neighbors that suffered from Japanese occupation before and during the war. Japan’s unease over its past may have led it to adopt a low-key position at Cairo, especially as abortion, which had sparked serious controversy and debate, has long been a favored method of family limitation in Japan. Thus, as the world is commemorating the 50th anniversary of the ending of World War II, Japan remains hesitant to take the prominent place in international affairs that its economic strength would otherwise command.

Another major change in the political environment of Cairo was the status and influence of the Group of 77 (G77). At Bucharest, the G77, a loose association of nonaligned states, was one of the most prominent and effective actors. Not only did the G77 speak generally for the developing countries, it also took a leading role in attempting to bring about a New International Economic Order (NIEO), which would have meant a major transformation of the global economy (Finkle and Crane 1975). The G77 played a much lesser role at Mexico City and, notwithstanding some significant contributions by individuals and individual countries, was even more subdued at Cairo. As most of the world’s population growth takes place in developing countries, and as they are the primary recipients of population assistance, the failure of the G77 to make its presence more strongly felt deserves comment.

The most important reason for the lack of visibility of the G77 at Cairo was that the organization no longer represents a cohesive whole. At the time it was formed in the 1960s there was far less diversity among developing countries than there is today. When the alliance was formed, developing countries in Asia, Africa, and even Latin America were uniformly
poor and, at most, in the early stages of the demographic transition. Many had recently achieved independence from one or another of the colonial powers, and they were united by a strong anticolonial bond. Moreover, developing countries as a group had produced a number of towering leaders—Nehru of India, Nkrumah and Nyerere of sub-Saharan Africa, and Nasser of Egypt among them—who gave voice to the aspirations of their peoples to participate in world affairs on an equal footing with their former masters.

During the ensuing 30 years, the G77 has increased in numbers and has undergone marked economic and demographic stratification. Parts of Asia cannot by any stretch of the word be considered as still developing; several of them have completed their demographic transitions. At the other end of the spectrum, some countries are declining economically and show little progress toward demographic transition. On a worldwide basis, the consciousness of ethnic and religious differences is more important today than in the heady days of nationalism in the 1950s and 1960s. Quite simply, in 1994 the countries of the G77 had much less in common, and their interests and aspirations no longer coincided.

The influence of location

In a variety of ways, the location of an international conference also influences the process and outcomes of the deliberations. The host country has a larger than usual investment in achieving a successful event, and its voice carries additional weight by virtue of its role as host. Less obviously, the quality of the logistical arrangements made for the accommodation and transportation of the delegates, press, and observers can do much to reduce inconveniences, ease tensions, and furnish the comforts that facilitate a productive meeting. The selection of Cairo as the conference site was not part of a master plan but was made largely through a process of elimination. The original intent soon after Mexico City was to hold the 1994 meeting in Beijing. Later this idea had to be dropped because of the controversial nature of China’s human rights and population practices. Latin America was also ruled out because the Earth Summit was to be held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. Western Europe was considered too expensive to attract a wide attendance, and many felt that Africa was due to have a major conference. Cairo was one of the few cities on that continent that could accommodate the number of people who were expected to attend. Because of recent violence and threats against foreigners, there was concern that the United Nations would change the site of the meeting. The Egyptian government, however, was determined that the conference would take place in Cairo as planned and conveyed this sentiment emphatically to United Nations personnel. President Mubarak and his government took
great care to ensure the security of the delegates and visitors to the conference. In addition, it probably did not hurt the cause of Egypt that the current Secretary-General of the United Nations, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, is an Egyptian.

The choice of Egypt, a moderate Muslim state, as host country proved felicitous after the Holy See became alarmed over its perception that the US government intended to promote abortion as an internationally recognized method of family planning. Egyptian officials, including Maher Mahran, the Minister of Population and Family Affairs, were highly supportive of the ICPD Secretariat and worked hard in trying to reassure the Holy See. Immediately before the conference, in response to the Vatican’s attempt to forge alliances with fundamentalist Islamic states, including Iran and Libya, Egypt quietly mobilized the voices of moderate Islam in support of the conference.12 As a result of Egypt’s efforts, the United Nations was spared the embarrassment of the withdrawal of Muslim countries from attending the conference. Although a number of such countries initially indicated an intention not to attend, in the end only four failed to turn up: Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan. In addition to its role in calming the controversy over the abortion issue, Egypt also helped to ensure a hearing for the views of the Group of 77, whose current leader, Algeria, weakened by political unrest at home, was unable to exercise the strong leadership it had exercised at the Bucharest conference and on many occasions since.

The politics of the new paradigm

Even before 1994, developing country governments had reached a clear consensus on the need to continue vigorous efforts to reduce the rate of population growth.13 Although social science research on the precise relationship between population growth and economic development remains inconclusive, most policymakers are convinced that rapid population growth limits a nation’s ability to improve the standard of living of its people.14 By this time, also, nearly all developing countries had introduced population policies, and there was mounting evidence that widespread access to modern contraceptives had been successful in lowering fertility (Bongaarts, Mauldin, and Phillips 1990; Freedman and Freedman 1992; Lapham 1987). There was emerging evidence, moreover, that vigorous delivery of contraceptive, motivational, and informational services was capable of lowering fertility in the absence of significant social and economic change (see Cleland et al. 1994). In the years immediately prior to Cairo, there was every reason to believe that the governments assembled there would commit themselves to improving their efforts to bring population growth under control as a means of enhancing the productive capacities of their people.
Instead, the Cairo deliberations and the final document took a different tack. Rather than calling for a redoubling of efforts to reduce population growth to more manageable levels, the document avoids a demographic and populationist approach and endorses an individualistic plan that gives pride of place to women’s rights, status, and empowerment. The recommendations in the Program of Action reflect the assumption that fertility will not fall until a number of preconditions have been satisfied: children survive, men take responsibility for contraception, and women have the right to control their own fertility—as well as the political power that will enable them to secure this right (United Nations 1992–94).

In formulating this position and shepherding it through the Cairo process, feminists in the international women’s movement, with the strong support of some Western industrialized countries, were thus returning to the earliest roots of the birth control movement. Many of the first birth controllers were anarchists and social reformers, most of them male, who saw the ability to control fertility as a way to strengthen the power of the working classes (Fryer 1965). Later, birth control was adopted by radical feminists as part of their movement for women’s rights, emancipation, and political reform (Fryer 1965; Gordon 1990; Riemer and Fout 1980). These were the initial motivations behind the efforts of Emma Goldman and Margaret Sanger to establish birth control clinics for women in America. Sanger was thought by many feminists to have betrayed her feminist ideology when she concluded that contraception would have to be medicalized and made institutionally respectable if family planning was to become a mainstream health and social program serving the multitudes of women who needed and demanded it (Gordon 1990; Reed 1978).

In both the United States and Europe, feminist rhetoric diminished as family planning became established as the domain of the medical profession (Dixon-Mueller 1993). Even when feminism made a resurgence in the 1960s and early 1970s, feminists, themselves deeply engaged in the struggle for better access to family planning methods and the legalization of abortion, supported the fledgling international family planning movement. While they welcomed the new programs as a necessary first step in liberating third world women, they did not seriously challenge the dominant roles of demographers and physicians in this field. Only later did feminists elaborate a severe ethical critique of international family planning programs.

The role of the women’s movement at Cairo

Two events occurring early in the preparatory process can now be seen to have presaged the unexpected outcome of the ICPD. First, the decision of the General Assembly (1992/93) to invite the full participation of NGOs in
the Cairo process promised to provide a forum of unprecedented prominence in which the international women’s movement, along with many other voluntary organizations, could press for the incorporation of their ideas into the proceedings of the conference. Second, the election of Bill Clinton as President of the United States, and his reversal of the restrictive “Mexico City policy” immediately after taking office in January 1993, sent a signal to feminists that the political climate had changed dramatically and would be more hospitable to women’s issues. More than this, however, the Clinton policy change also heartened the population community, including the US Agency for International Development (USAID), UNFPA, US foundations and NGOs, and their counterparts in other countries.

The women’s movement was well prepared for the opportunity presented by the Clinton administration. The UN Decade for the Advancement of Women, 1975–85, had encouraged women activists, researchers, and policymakers worldwide to carry out innumerable projects aimed at enhancing women’s economic and political status. Women also undertook research examining the social, economic, and political status of poor women, as distinct from the poor in general. International conferences brought women together, and many women’s organizations were founded in developing countries, often under the discreet tutelage of Western women’s organizations. The women’s decade generated large amounts of data on the conditions under which a majority of third world women live; it also inspired a more profound sense of solidarity among women than had existed previously.

The women’s decade produced two streams of literature that informed the agenda feminists brought to the ICPD. First, feminists mounted a spirited ethical critique of the demographic approach to population problems and to what feminists see as the instrumental and narrow approach to family planning service delivery (García-Moreno and Claro 1994; Germain 1987; Hartmann 1987; Jaquette and Staudt 1985; Ruzek 1978).16 In its place they sought a broad range of voluntary family planning services integrated into a program of reproductive and sexual health care that would include access to safe, legal abortion, based on women’s right to control their own reproduction. Second, feminists from the developing world launched a critical attack on the models of development that have been applied by colonial powers, postcolonial national governments, and postcolonial development organizations, especially the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). They argued that development projects have systematically ignored women, have destroyed the local environments on which women depend for employment, household food security, and water, and are ultimately unsustainable. They also argued that the structural adjustment policies introduced by the IMF as a response to economic and political crises have further undermined the social and economic status of women (Sen, Germain, and Chen 1994; Sen and Grown 1987).
The importance of Rio While the women’s decade furnished the intellectual and ideological ammunition employed by feminists in their assault on population programs at the ICPD, the Rio de Janeiro Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) two years earlier brought together the disparate forces that would engage in the Cairo debate. If environmentalists saw the population community as a natural ally in their efforts to reduce the impact of population growth on renewable resources and prevent other types of environmental degradation, populationists were also looking for a new and dynamic source of support. After 12 years in which the Reagan and Bush administrations had downplayed the effects of rapid population growth and given only tepid support to population programs, the population community felt a need for political help and turned to the environmental movement. Environmental concerns attracted a broad constituency among the general public, foundations found them popular and worthy objects of their largesse, and a number of mainline environmental organizations were developing research and action programs that attempted to link environmental and population variables. Judging, however, that discussion of population at Rio would divert attention from the issues of poverty and sustainable development to which it attached great importance, the Vatican exercised its considerable influence to eliminate population topics from the formal agenda (Cohen 1993).

Although population was excluded from formal discussion at UNCED, it became a subject of lively debate—and deep division—among environmentalists and feminists at the NGO forum that was held alongside the conference itself. Feminist organizations had a number of reasons for the attention they gave to the Rio conference. On the one hand, those who concerned themselves with the effects of development on women had a direct and substantive interest in environmental problems, to which the slums of Rio de Janeiro bore witness. On the other hand, women’s health activists were alarmed that many environmentalists were making a direct connection between population growth and environmental degradation. They feared that an uncritical acceptance of this relationship would reinforce the demographic dimensions of population policies that they were determined to repudiate (Cohen and Richards 1994). Many newcomers to the environmental movement received their introduction to the complexities of population policies, and especially to the negative feminist view of family planning programs, from feminist spokespersons during and after UNCED.17 The Rio conference thus proved to be a critical step in implementing a global strategy to advance a broad feminist agenda through the medium of UN conferences, each of which would address part of the whole.18

The feminist campaign The international women’s movement has elaborated an agenda with broad appeal to constituencies in the population,
health, and development arenas. In the population field, its arguments are especially attractive to a new generation that has not experienced the difficulties of initiating either development or fertility decline and has less sense of urgency than did the generation it is supplanting. Nevertheless, it is not solely the freshness of its ideas to a new generation that enabled the women’s movement to succeed at Cairo. Two other factors also proved important. First, as a result of the women’s liberation movement in the United States, many women who are deeply imbued with feminist ideals are now found in high-level policy and management positions in foundations and in family planning, health, research, and advocacy agencies. Such women are well placed to further the acceptance of women’s goals within their organizations, to provide platforms for the expression of feminist perspectives, and to secure funds for the support of feminist activities. Second, with more than 20 years of activism behind them, in both the national and international arenas, US feminists have honed their organizational skills and developed a clear sense of what had to be done to exploit the opportunity offered by full participation in the ICPD.

In March 1993, just before Prepcom II, a Women’s Declaration on Population Policies was circulated by the International Women’s Health Coalition (IWHC), a feminist health organization based in New York City. This document, calling for a broad range of reproductive health and development issues to be incorporated into population policies, had been prepared by some 24 “initiators” representing women’s organizations in all five continents. The document was circulated around the world and received the endorsement of numerous organizations and individuals. The acceptance of the Women’s Declaration by feminist activists and some family planning agencies notwithstanding, tensions between feminists and family planners were clearly visible at Prepcom II in May 1993. At this meeting, which presented to country delegations the ICPD Secretariat’s proposed “outline” of the Cairo document, concerns were expressed by orthodox “populationists” about what they feared would be a serious dilution of population objectives by the women’s agenda (Population Action International 1994). Nevertheless, the meeting ended with what the State Department called a “fragile consensus” on the scope and structure of the recommendations yet to be drafted for Cairo. It was decided to accommodate the women’s demands by including two new chapters, on “Gender Equality, and the Empowerment of Women” and “Reproductive Rights, Reproductive Health, and Family Planning.” Language recognizing that there are “various concepts of the family” was included in a chapter on “The Family, Its Roles, Composition and Structure.”

In the ensuing 11 months prior to Prepcom III, at which time it was hoped that the draft document would be approved by consensus, feminist activists undertook an energetic and sophisticated campaign to gain acceptance for their position. Women worked hard to bring other women to-
gether; they sidelined radical feminist views that they judged to have little chance of winning approval; they worked intensively with sympathetic population/family planning agencies to find language that might be acceptable to both sides. Feminists gave lectures, appeared on panels, lobbied the ICPD Secretariat, gave briefings to State Department officials and members of Congress, participated in numerous intersessional meetings (between prepcoms) where they helped draft language for the document, and secured a significant number of places on the US delegation.

Feminists in IWHC and the Women’s Environment and Development Organization (WEDO), which is chaired by Bella Abzug, a former member of the US Congress and a veteran of population conferences since Bucharest, banded together to form the Women’s Caucus with a membership, by Prepcom III, of over 300 individuals, many of them members of NGOs from both developed and developing countries. At the Prepcom, the Women’s Caucus organized workshops and meetings, formulated lengthy resolutions for the consideration of delegates, issued informative updates on the proceedings on the floor, and drafted new language on issues that were proving difficult. Although not all NGOs, especially some from developing countries, were in agreement with the women’s position, there was a strong tendency to close ranks in the face of the intense attack mounted by the Holy See against a list of feminist issues. Where Prepcom II had ended with a “fragile consensus,” by the end of Prepcom III only one position seemed to be open to a large majority of participants, that of the feminist agenda.

The United States and Cairo

Since the beginning of official international population assistance in the mid-1960s, the United States has been the acknowledged leader in the field. Not only has the United States consistently been by far the largest donor, it has also provided much of the intellectual leadership that has helped to make efforts to limit fertility one of the more successful development programs mounted by the international community. During the 1960s, the United States urged the United Nations to play a more active role in fostering the regulation of fertility. In pursuit of this objective, the United States in 1967 was instrumental in the creation within the office of the Secretary-General of a small trust fund for population that soon became the UN Fund for Population Activities, now the UN Population Fund. US influence was also important in encouraging the World Bank to take a serious interest in population growth and in prodding the World Health Organization to view rapid population growth as a legitimate health problem (Finkle and Crane 1976; Symonds and Carder 1973).

Through USAID’s extensive program of population assistance, the United States has also fostered the involvement of the private and voluntary sectors in population and family planning activities. Except for the
period when the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) was defunded because some of its affiliates were engaged in abortion-related activities (Crane and Finkle 1989), USAID has been a consistent and liberal supporter of IPPF. USAID has also used a broad network of US private family planning agencies to implement its programs. This mode of operation strengthened these agencies as it broadened their reach, while simultaneously endowing USAID’s own programs with professional and technical expertise. Even when population funds failed to keep up with demand between 1980 and 1992 and the executive branch of the US government officially denied the seriousness of the population problem, continued congressional support and the dynamism of USAID ensured that the United States still exerted influence in international family planning programs.

The victory of the Clinton/Gore team in the presidential elections of 1992 was welcomed by the US population establishment, who saw in it a sign that their 12 years in the wilderness were over. Both Clinton and Gore were known to be concerned about the implications of global population growth for development and the environment. Moreover, both men had liberal views on women’s need for access to family planning programs and safe abortion. Immediately after taking office, Clinton provided clear evidence that things had changed. He reversed the “Mexico City policy” that prohibited US funds from being used to assist any agency that engaged in abortion-related activities, even with funding from private sources; he also promised to reinstate funding for UNFPA and IPPF in the next budget cycle, and later requested an additional $100 million for the US international population program for fiscal 1994.

The appointment of Timothy Wirth as Counselor in charge of population matters at the Department of State was also greeted with satisfaction by international population professionals. Wirth, a charismatic and energetic former US Senator from Colorado, was known to be deeply concerned about both population and sustainable development, and women’s issues. His speech at Prepcom II announcing that the United States was “back” as a world leader in population and laying out a “comprehensive and far-reaching new approach to international population issues” was greeted with tumultuous applause by the delegates.24 Other Clinton appointments, notably those of Donna Shalala, a former University of Wisconsin president, as head of the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), and Joycelyn Elders, a physician and close political associate of Clinton’s from Arkansas, as Surgeon General, also gave promise of liberal changes in the policy domains having to do with the family and reproduction.

As favorable as was the arrival of the Clinton administration for global population policy, the timing of the change was less than propitious: by January 1993, when President Clinton took office, the ICPD Secretariat, national governments, and experts had already invested heavily in identi-
fying the issues that should be addressed at Cairo. These were to be presented as an outline of the document for discussion at the second Prepcom in May 1993, the meeting at which Wirth made his public debut as the US government’s point man on population. Although the Clinton administration did not delay unduly in nominating Wirth for this position, it inherited a State Department that was weak in the population area. Population affairs, other than migration and refugees, were represented by a single, relatively low-level coordinator, a Bush administration appointee. Wirth brought two key aides with him from the Senate, but it was many months before he was designated Under Secretary for Global Affairs, which included responsibility for population, and was able to appoint staff. Inevitably, also, it took time for the new office to develop expertise in the area.

During this period, before Wirth and his staff were fully in command, USAID stepped into the gap and played an important role in helping define the substantive basis for the US position. The Office of Population wrote the briefing paper on population for an interagency meeting held immediately after the Clinton administration took office. The US delegation to the European Population Conference in Geneva in March 1993 was led by the Director of USAID’s Office of Health, who was also the Acting Assistant Administrator for the Bureau of Research and Development. Wirth’s speech at Prepcom II was drafted by USAID, and at various times the Office of Population seconded three staff members to the State Department to assist with the preparations and negotiations for Cairo.

Although USAID’s mandate in population has always been the reduction of global population growth, the issues within its purview are far different from those of the State Department. Historically, the State Department has considered population in the light of US and global security and, broadly speaking, as a development and economic assistance issue; today, population’s relationships to the environment and sustainable development have been added to the list. By contrast, from its inception USAID’s Office of Population has considered the delivery of family planning services to be its primary mission. It was inevitable that the issues considered most salient by USAID would differ from those that might have been identified by the State Department.

From the moment the Clinton administration took office, AID’s Office of Population had started to consider how best to respond to the new directions that were emerging from the ICPD preparations. Because of disagreement within the Office over the appropriate balance between AID’s traditional mandate in population and the new focus on the individual, the Office of Population proceeded with caution. As part of the process, AID held discussions with women’s groups in an effort to identify parts of the women’s agenda that could be incorporated incrementally into its ongoing programs. By the time Wirth made his appearance at Prepcom II,
the Office of Population was moving toward incorporating its family planning program into a broader framework of maternal and reproductive health.  

In elaborating the US position, Under Secretary Wirth decided to canvass public opinion in a manner more typical of elected political leaders on Capitol Hill than of officials at the State Department. Wirth and his staff made themselves available to a broad spectrum of representatives of civil society. Environmentalists, health organizations, religious leaders of many denominations, pro-life and pro-choice groups, family planning agencies, and foundations made their way to Washington to present their views. In a move reminiscent of the Clinton/Gore bus tours across the country during the Clinton presidential campaign, Wirth’s officials attended coast-to-coast town meetings to solicit the views of ordinary Americans. Back in Washington, negotiations were entered into with the major proponents of the women’s agenda. The one constituency that does not seem to have been seriously consulted was the community of demographers and other academic social scientists who have provided the theoretical and analytical underpinnings of US international population policy for nearly 30 years. As a result, the hard analytical questions that might have been raised concerning the demographic implications of the feminist agenda were elided, leaving an opening for those more ideologically inspired. As Wilmoth and Ball have observed (1992: 662), “an important function of demographic science is to serve as a corrective for the excesses of policy advocacy in population matters.”

Once formed, the US position was advanced with determination and skill through every available channel. Collaboration with the ICPD Secretariat, as with women’s organizations and other NGOs, was close, with exchanges taking place daily. Consultation with and lobbying of foreign missions to the United States and the United Nations were continuous, and US officials participated in numerous intersessional meetings with governments on a variety of delicate issues. At Cairo itself, Under Secretary Wirth deployed a large, highly disciplined, and effective delegation that seldom spoke on the floor but worked around the clock with developing country delegations to produce acceptable language in the short time available. In the judgment of most seasoned observers, the United States, the Holy See, and the women’s movement were the three most organized, best disciplined, and effective participants in the conference.

The battle over abortion

Earlier in this article we observed that the exceptionally elaborate preparations for the ICPD were motivated, in part, by a desire that no unanticipated issues or controversies arise to divert attention from the main pur-
pose of the meeting. As late as September 1993, when we first interviewed members of the ICPD Secretariat, we were told that there was no reason to expect any major conflicts to occur. With the clarity of hindsight, however, one can see that the abortion battle was almost inevitable.

It has been evident for some time that Pope John Paul II is engaged in an epic struggle against the individualism and consumerism of Western life (John Paul II 1987, 1993, 1995). He is distressed about what he perceives as the decline of the family—the “natural and fundamental unit” of society—especially as it affects the morals and ideals of young people (Vatican 1994b). He is determined, to the limits of his office, to prevent a similar degeneration of family and society in the developing world. John Paul perceives that artificial methods of contraception, divorce, single-parent families, and, above all, abortion are inextricably linked to the decline of Western morals and society. He had been greatly encouraged at Mexico City by the consonance between the views of the Church and those of the Reagan administration, and by the inclusion in the document of a phrase stating that abortion “in no case should be promoted as a method of family planning.” He had reason to fear that the Clinton administration would press for the liberalization of abortion at Cairo.

The pontificate of John Paul II has been shaped by his responses to two organizational changes that have been evolving within the Catholic Church during the last 100 years. First, as nations have become more secular, democratic, and accepting of religious pluralism, the political influence of the Church within states has declined; indeed, many states have disestablished the Church (Vallier 1972). As the political influence of Rome has lessened, the Church has come to rely on its spiritual and moral leadership as a more potent source of influence. In the judgment of Ivan Vallier (1972: 150), as it has yielded some of its political autonomy and flexibility to local hierarchies, religious orders, and other community structures, the Church has acquired “more freedom to assert general stands on controversial issues and ethical problems.” Although this transformation has been taking place for more than a century, it was greatly advanced by Pope John XXIII at the Second Vatican Council, 1962–65. Since becoming Pope, John Paul II has continued to develop the spiritual and ethical mission of the Church, assuming the role of “global pastor” and taking a principled stand on such social issues as poverty, oppression, and human rights (Kelly 1986). His stand against artificial contraception and abortion, issues on which many Catholics feel they can disobey without violating their consciences, may be seen as an integral part of this pastoral role.

Second, as political power has been devolved and national populations have been enfranchised, the Church has become an advocate for the rights of the urban and rural poor to education, health, employment, and a decent standard of living. In addition, as the Church has faced compet-
ing ideologies such as communism and Protestantism, it has sought to amplify its spiritual leadership at the periphery by recruiting a cadre of laymen in support of its spiritual mission. The movements for Catholic Action in some countries in the 1920s, the worker-priest movement in France in the 1950s, and the base communities of Liberation Theology in Latin America more recently, are all examples of this trend within the Church (Keely 1994; Vallier 1972). This shift in the locus of authority has not infrequently been the cause of tensions between center and periphery as local communities have interpreted the "sacred truths" in unorthodox ways. At times, Rome has stepped in to suppress local movements, as it did with the worker-priest movement and Liberation Theology.

John Paul’s social liberalism notwithstanding, he has found his authority as global pastor seriously undermined by independent thought and action at the periphery. During his pontificate, he has sought to reassert the authority of Rome and, on some issues, his personal authority. One of the most significant of these domains is the entire realm of sexual, reproductive, and women’s issues on which, like Popes Paul VI and John XXIII before him, he has reserved to himself the ultimate authority (Keely 1994). Although, unquestionably, many Church leaders in Rome and elsewhere see these issues differently from John Paul, by the time of the Cairo preparations no one dared, at least in public, to depart from his frequently articulated position.

While John Paul II is now an elderly man, viewed by many in the Church as nearing the end of his term, Bill Clinton belongs to a generation that has been shaped by very different life experiences. One of the youngest presidents ever elected in the United States, Clinton grew up in the 1960s and absorbed the moral values of the times. Throughout his campaign for the presidency, Clinton made clear that "family values" for him did not mean the ultra-conservative values of the "traditional" family that were promoted during the campaign by the right wing of the Republican Party. For Clinton, family values means the more liberal social values of a younger generation who take for granted easy access to contraception, legal abortion, and divorce, and recognize the special needs of single-parent and other "nontraditional" families. On abortion, specifically, whereas the Catholic Church regards it as a "heinous evil," for many of the Clinton generation the difficulty lies rather in forcing women to bear children that they do not want and cannot support. On taking office, President Clinton surrounded himself with a youthful White House staff, and his appointees to government departments tended to reflect the liberal values he shared with his Vice President, Al Gore. Among his early pieces of legislation was a family and medical leave act, intended to make it easier for couples, especially women, to care for ailing family members while remaining in the labor force. Finally, on the subject of abortion, Clinton has frequently stated his view that it should be "safe, legal, and rare."
The Clinton administration made no secret of its intention to include legal abortion in the position paper it would take to Cairo. Timothy Wirth's first speech, at Prepcom II in May 1993, included the sentence, "Our position is to support reproductive choice, including access to safe abortion" (US Mission to the United Nations 1993). After that, speeches by Wirth and other US officials routinely included special mention of access to abortion. Occasionally, the phrase used was "access to reproductive health services," which is widely understood, and was defined by the World Health Organization, to include legal, safe abortion. The Cairo document redefined reproductive health to elide the abortion issue. The critical sentence refers to "the right of men and women to be informed and to have access to safe, effective, affordable and acceptable methods of family planning of their choice, as well as other methods of their choice for regulation of fertility which are not against the law" (United Nations 1994: paragraph 7.2, p. 43). Until Prepcom III, in April 1994, the Vatican did not protest publicly about this language. On the first day of Prepcom III, however, Monsignor Diarmuid Martin, representing the Holy See, vigorously attacked the draft document, asserting that it "lacked ethics and a coherent moral vision, promoted contraception and tolerated abortion" (Reuters 1994b). This statement provoked a sharp rebuke from the committee Chairman, Fred Sai, who retorted that "people who read clearly would not find the document lacking in ethics." From that point on, the Holy See objected to any language that might, however obscurely, be thought to refer to abortion. The Vatican delegation requested that all such terms be placed in square brackets, indicating that the bracketed passages had not been approved and would have to be negotiated in Cairo.

One can only speculate on what provoked the extraordinary resistance of the Holy See, but two events that took place immediately before Prepcom III may have contributed. First, up to this point, the ICPD Secretariat had felt that something needed to be said about abortion, but they had decided to treat it as a public health problem that is responsible for a significant number of maternal deaths each year. Early drafts of the document went no further than urging governments to reduce the number of unsafe abortions. As we noted above, shortly before Prepcom III, however, under pressure from women's groups and from the US and some European governments, Nafis Sadik, Secretary-General of the conference, decided to include a modest statement on the need for safe abortion to be available in cases of rape and incest (United Nations 1992–94, A/CONF.171/PC/5). She felt that because these "hard" cases are widely accepted as grounds for legal abortion, they might pass muster in the Cairo document (interviews with members of the ICPD Secretariat).

Second, on 16 March the US State Department sent a cable to all diplomatic and consular posts that was leaked to delegations and other interested parties, though not immediately, it seems, to the press (US Depart-
ment of State 1994a). The cable stated unambiguously: "The United States believes that access to safe, legal and voluntary abortion is a fundamental right of all women." The relevant paragraph also notes, "The current text . . . is inadequate as it only addresses abortion in cases of rape and incest." The paragraph ends, "The United States delegation will be working for stronger language on the importance of access to abortion services." The cable significantly sharpened the US language on abortion and appears to have given the Holy See the hard evidence it needed to press its case against the United States.

There can be no doubt that John Paul became seriously alarmed that the United States was trying to promote abortion on demand worldwide. In consonance with his perceived mission as spiritual and ethical guide in a world that was being led astray, John Paul became personally involved in a campaign, not only to overturn the position taken by the United States and the ICPD Secretariat, but also to win support from other countries, Catholic and non-Catholic. During Prepcom III in April, and again at Cairo in September, he was briefed almost daily by telephone by members of the Holy See delegation. After a previously scheduled meeting with Nafis Sadik on 18 March, John Paul ignored what UNFPA understood to have been the ground rules worked out between the Vatican and the UNFPA and unilaterally made public the text of his remarks (Joseph Chamie, personal communication, 8 May 1994; see Vatican 1994a). The next day, he summoned to the Vatican all ambassadors accredited to the Holy See, some 120 in number, to explain the Church's position (Reuters 1994a). On 16 April the Vatican's Secretary of State transmitted to all heads of state and heads of international organizations a letter written personally by the Pope and signed by him on 19 March (Vatican 1994b). In early June, the Vatican sent to the governments of moderate Muslim states the text of a report by what was termed the Joint Expert Group on the Draft Final Document, which was signed by three Islamic World leaders and three representatives of the Holy See. Finally, in what can be seen as a desperate effort to mobilize Muslim support in the abortion fight, the Holy See dispatched envoys to the fundamentalist states of Iran and Libya.

For some time after Prepcom III the United States gave little sign in public that it was seriously considering the Holy See's alarm over the US position. The language in Wirth's public speeches and the negotiating positions adopted by his officials remained unchanged: the United States supported comprehensive reproductive health care including safe abortion (e.g., US Department of State 1994c). The remarks of President Clinton before the National Press Club on 29 June repeated his view that abortion should be "safe, legal, and rare" (White House 1994). Behind the scenes, however, Wirth and his officials met frequently with US cardinals and members of the Holy See's delegation to the United Nations to explain the US
position and attempt to reduce tensions. Wirth’s efforts were not well received. After the paper trail left by public speeches, cables, and internal documents, as well as reports of US negotiations with the delegates of third world countries, the Holy See was skeptical of Wirth. In an interview with the authors, a member of the Holy See delegation described him as “lacking in sincerity and of acting always on the basis of politics rather than substance.”

As the date of the conference approached, the US government appeared to be making a greater effort to lessen the level of tension with the Vatican. The reason was not a change of heart on the abortion question; rather it was a response to the serious drop in the credibility and popularity of President Clinton among the US electorate. With the failure of health care reform, the crime bill moving with difficulty, the seemingly endless array of ethical problems displayed by members of the White House staff and Clinton appointees to the bureaucracy, the President’s domestic policies appeared in tatters. No help seemed to be forthcoming from foreign policy either. After a few successes in Ireland, Iraq, and North Vietnam earlier in the year, his lack of resolve over Bosnia and Rwanda, the inherited debacle in Somalia, and increasing controversy over matters having to do with Cuba and Haiti contradicted the earlier impression that Clinton had begun to master foreign policy. With the mid-term elections only a few months away, Clinton could not afford to risk losing the votes of US Catholics (Washington Post 1994b).

The reply sent on 28 July by Wirth to John Cardinal O’Connor, Archbishop of New York, in response to a letter sent to President Clinton by the US cardinals suggests that this may have been the point at which the United States felt it needed to repair the breach with the Vatican (US Department of State 1994d; see also Associated Press 1994a). The reply discussed the many areas of agreement between the Holy See and the US government and pointed out that the draft document did not propose the use of abortion as a method of family planning. Wirth was also careful to underscore the public health background of the United States’ “safe, legal, and rare” position on abortion. In keeping with the Holy See’s assessment of Wirth’s sincerity, however, this letter failed to calm the Vatican. Finally, on 25 August, ten days before the conference, Vice President Gore was brought in to defuse the issue in a speech before the National Press Club, arguably the forum that would achieve the widest and quickest publicity for his remarks (Federal News Service 1994). At about the same time, it was announced publicly that the Vice President would lead the US delegation to Cairo.

Officials in the State Department and the White House disagree on whether the United States softened its position before going to Cairo. A careful reading of Gore’s speech suggests that the position remained intact; however, Gore gave a more elaborate explanation of the position—what
was intended and what was not—which, together with tone of the Vice President's address and the fact that he had not previously been deeply involved in the Cairo preparations, seems to have mollified the Holy See (Washington Post 1994c). The US government was irritated, however, by the immediate riposte of the Vatican spokesman, Joaquín Navarro-Valls, that Gore had “misrepresented” what was in the document (New York Times 1994b). Indeed, even at Cairo, the Holy See delegation kept up a spirited attack, filibustering on several parts of the bracketed language and delaying the work of the conference.

In the end, however, the Holy See, like the United States, found it necessary to make a conciliatory gesture. On the last day of the conference, after an all-night session and acting on instructions from Rome, the Holy See delegation took the unusual step of joining the consensus on most of the document, entering formal reservations primarily on those parts dealing with reproductive issues.42 Although it was presented in as positive a light as the delegation could muster, the significance of the gesture was not lost on the seasoned participants and observers at the conference. At both Bucharest and Mexico City, after much less confrontational meetings, the Holy See had declined to join the consensus, even though the issue in those days was solely the use of artificial methods of contraception. Joining the consensus at Cairo, even with reservations, looked like a conscious effort by the Vatican to repair its bridges to the global community.

Interestingly, the considerations that prompted this denouement paralleled in some ways those that motivated the softening of the United States position. In both cases, the decision to retreat was taken by the highest authorities for political reasons that transcended the issues at stake in the ICPD. While President Clinton was concerned about the possible effects on his political power and influence in the domestic arena. Pope John Paul II wished to avoid a further decline of Catholic influence around the world.

On arrival at Cairo, the Vatican delegation had found that its alliance with Muslim countries was dissolving. The substantial number of Islamic nations that had said they would withdraw from the conference had already shrunk to four, and those countries that attended now found themselves at odds with the positions taken by the Holy See (Associated Press 1994e). Even more seriously, the support of Catholic nations seemed to be waverling. The Church had long ago lost its ability to influence Western industrialized countries over reproductive and sexual behavior; while several Latin American and African countries supported the Vatican, a number of them did so because they wished the Church to be respected rather than because of agreement on the full range of reproductive issues.43 The Philippines, the one Catholic country in Asia, resisted Church influence and argued strongly for family planning and reproductive health programs. The Church’s staunchest support came from a handful of countries, the
most prominent being Argentina, Benin, Ecuador, Honduras, and Malta. Finally, as the days wore on, a growing irritation over the delaying tactics and intransigence of the Holy See delegation pervaded the conference and was openly discussed in the halls and meeting rooms. For the first time, questions were being raised about the propriety of the Vatican’s privileged position within the United Nations system. While the Vatican had put up a strong defense of its doctrine and principles, the time for reconciliation had come.

Reflections on the conference

At the start of this article we referred to the immediate assessments of the participants that the Cairo conference had been an outstanding success. There is, of course, more than one way to measure the success of international conferences like the ICPD. When participants declared forcefully that Cairo was a “landmark” meeting, they were measuring success in terms of the new symbols and concepts that entered the discourse on population. With several “firsts” to its credit—the first mention in a UN document that abortion could be legal and safe, the first time that women’s interests in population matters had been broadly and seriously considered, and the unprecedented level of NGO participation—Cairo might justly be termed a landmark. If, however, the conference is viewed as a policy exercise linked to the elaboration of new policy instruments, it is still too early to make a judgment. As Finkle and Crane observed after Bucharest, “Governments do not generally address their own population problems in the context of a world conference . . . but attempt to cope with them in a far less dramatic local setting” (1975: 109). Like the United Nations itself, international conferences sponsored by the UN are free to formulate ambitious ideas that are binding on no one. Back at home, the policy proposals that may emerge have to compete with many other domestic demands for the limited resources in the national exchequer.

In an ideal world, perhaps, programs would be available in every country to satisfy all the needs and desires expressed in the Cairo Program of Action. Very few would not endorse the improvements in health, education, and social, economic, and political welfare enshrined in the Cairo recommendations. Moreover, if ample resources were available or if there were agreement on how to prioritize the objectives of the Program of Action, the recommendations adopted at Cairo would undoubtedly work to lower fertility. In the real world, however, even the richest and most benign of governments have to make hard choices against constraints on available resources. To do this, they need a clear sense of goals and priorities. The difficulty presented by the Cairo document is not that the objectives to which it aspires are less than desirable, but that it fails adequately to ad-
dress the issue of rapid population growth, which many poor countries still consider the first priority.

By attempting to estimate the long-term cost of implementing the reproductive health and family planning components of the Program of Action, Cairo was the first UN conference to link policy to implementation. The initial result of this estimation is somewhat unsatisfactory, largely because, unlike the cost of family planning programs which is reasonably well known, data on which to base estimates of implementing reproductive health services are scarce. Assuming the calculations to be approximately on target, the figures arrived at for all population, family planning, and reproductive health components will be, in constant dollars, $17 billion annually by 2000, rising to $21.7 billion in 2015, compared with the current cost of population and family planning programs that was estimated to be $4.5 billion in the mid-1980s (Bulatao 1985). The proposed distribution of cost between donor and recipient countries, one-third to be provided by donors and two-thirds by recipient countries—compared to the estimated present division of approximately 25 percent from external assistance and private sources and 75 percent from recipient governments—was thought to be out of reach by both sides. While some donors at and before Cairo announced that they would try to increase their contributions, at a subsequent meeting of donor countries held in Paris “virtually all governments were lamenting budget pressures.” Referring to the euphoria of Cairo, one speaker commented, “The DAC meeting was a reality check.”

Delegates meeting in Cairo did not discuss the cost of implementing the “development” parts of the document because the only proposal on the table, the so-called 20–20 proposal, was acceptable to no one. Under this suggestion, recipient governments would have agreed to allocate 20 percent of their budgets to the social and economic programs recommended in the document, and donor countries would have earmarked 20 percent of their foreign development assistance budgets to the same programs. Luckily for the ICPD, the Secretariat and the Chairman were able to refer the topic to the Social Summit, which was held in Copenhagen in March 1995. This transfer of responsibility was made on the grounds that delegations to the population conference did not have the authority to make commitments on broader social and economic issues. The Social Summit, by contrast, was planned as a meeting of heads of state, who have more authority to commit their governments to any course of action. Nevertheless, world leaders showed themselves no more enthusiastic about any of the funding proposals presented at Copenhagen than had their colleagues at Cairo, who represented less powerful offices than heads of state and ministers of finance (The Economist 1995).

The development issues raised in the Cairo document deserve far greater attention than the international community has given them in re-
cent decades. In essence, they deal with the distribution of wealth and power and thus have a critical bearing on some of the most troubling questions of our time—the increasing poverty and indebtedness of many developing countries and countries in transition, national and global security, international migration, and ultimately human rights. Population policy is a feeble instrument with which to address questions of such enormous complexity, which engage so many diverse interests and on which the protagonists are so unevenly matched in terms of power and influence. A carefully nuanced population policy that made a determined attempt to lower growth rates where they remain high might buttress the efforts of these countries to pull themselves out of poverty. A “population policy” that ignores population as an aggregate phenomenon and that regards fertility decline as secondary to other objectives may be less likely to aid the development process.

Significantly, the change of direction, which paid less heed to demographic and development objectives than to women’s issues, was brought about indirectly by the high level of NGO participation in the Cairo process. It will require much more time and serious study to arrive at a fair evaluation of the NGO role at Cairo; however, a few observations can be made with some confidence. First, the introduction of NGOs into the United Nations system seems to have energized what many regard as a tired and staid bureaucracy. Second, at the national level, the inclusion of NGOs in the preparatory process fostered a new, sharper discourse and disrupted the complaisance of the rigid bureaucratic political structures that are characteristic of many developing countries. However, whether the process was more democratic, as many have claimed, is still to be examined; it is unlikely that the NGOs that participated were in any way representative of, or accountable to, the diverse cultural, religious, or political constituencies within each country. Internationally, the issues of democratic representation and accountability are made more complex by the fact that donor governments and foundations were instrumental in facilitating and funding the participation of a significant number of NGOs from developing countries. While this is understandable and may have been unavoidable given the limited financial resources of many third world countries and NGOs, the questions of accountability and representativeness remain. Notwithstanding these problems, it is clearly desirable to include some kind of popular or civic participation in the policymaking process at UN conferences. The method used to achieve this objective at Cairo was somewhat deficient, but the issue is one that deserves continued attention.

It is evident that in the field of social policy UN conferences have become an institutionalized part of international relations. As a means of policy formulation, global conferences serve an important function in permitting the expression of views that might not otherwise be aired, and in widening the circle of decisionmakers. In this regard the Cairo conference may
have exceeded expectations. It delivered very effectively a number of messages about the status and aspirations of women, the strengths and limits of papal power, the vitality of NGOs, and the unequal distribution of power and influence in the world.

At the same time, the Cairo conference demonstrated weaknesses that may be endemic in the UN system of global meetings. Inevitably, given the structure and conventions of the United Nations, these large global meetings produce an unwieldy, excessively comprehensive, and indigestible set of recommendations that bind no one.47 Ironically, some of the hard prioritizing that UN conferences are unable to accomplish is, in the case of Cairo, taking place as governments, UNFPA, donors, and some NGOs struggle over how to implement the Program of Action under severe resource constraints. Second, in the search for consensus, conferences are also likely to be excessively sensitive to the “political correctness” of the day. This tendency exemplifies what has been called the “mobilization of bias,” meaning that “some issues are organized into politics while others are organized out” (Schattschneider 1960: 71). The formulation of policy is a quintessentially political process; as such it is almost inevitably accompanied by some mobilization of bias. In most policymaking situations, the political process is to some extent informed by serious scientific analysis, which acts as a counterbalance to ideological and political preferences. At Cairo, however, the demographic objective was subordinated to other social goals; the dominant decisionmakers, therefore, saw no serious need to analyze the likely impact of the Cairo recommendations on rapid population growth in those regions where it still exists. For both critics and supporters of the new paradigm, this remains the difficult task for the coming years.

Notes

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1 Among those familiar with the language of the United Nations, the term “strengthening” is often a code word for “extending” or “expanding.”

2 Most of the language on development in the World Population Plan of Action approved at Bucharest in 1974 and reaffirmed at Mexico City in 1984 has been labeled as “identical” or “almost identical” with the Program of Action passed at Cairo. However, the passage on “sustainable development” in the Cairo document is new, but brief, and very general. See the cross-referencing document: ICPD Secretariat (1994).

3 One example of this behavior arose during the debate on Chapter VII on “Reproductive Rights and Reproductive Health,” in which a substantial number of developing countries stated that they preferred to retain “family planning” in the text rather than “reproductive health” but would not hold up debate on that point. (Authors’ notes on the relevant debate in the MainCommit-
tee on 9 September, which include some of the comments of Ambassador Nicolaas Biegman, who chaired the session during the debate.) Likewise, the Holy See decided to focus on abortion and not to contest the language on artificial contraception, in the knowledge that the Vatican’s position on contraception is well known to the global community (interview with Bishop James T. McHugh, member of the delegation of the Holy See, 21 October 1994). See also the Statement of the Holy See, in which it entered its reservations (United Nations 1994: 146–149).

4 As seems to have happened to the development sections of the Bucharest and Mexico City documents. See note 2.

5 For two excellent analyses of the shifts in demographic theory and, more generally, of the parallels and discontinuities between demography as social science and as policy science, see Hodgson (1983, 1988).

6 The 1968 Teheran Conference on Human Rights referred to the couples’, not women’s, right to choose the number and timing of their children. At Bucharest the terms became couples and individuals. The change to women’s right, which was ultimately adopted, was strongly resisted at Cairo by the Holy See and many Islamic countries.

7 This “model” is not explicitly stated in the Program of Action, which lacks a coherent theoretical perspective, but its outlines can be discerned in the focus on women and their empowerment throughout the document. The volumes edited by Sen, Germain, and Chen (1994), and Laurie Ann Mazur (1994) incorporate many of the ideas contained in what we refer to as the new model. Important expositions of parts of this model are contained in Sen and Grown (1987) and Dixon-Mueller (1993). A succinct outline of the model was conveyed verbally to the present authors by Susan Davis, Executive Director, Women’s Environment and Development Organization, 14 September 1994. Critical reviews of the Mazur and the Sen, Germain, and Chen volumes are provided by McNicoll (1994) and McIntosh (1994) respectively. Mason (1994) presents a well-argued critique of the assertion that traditional family planning programs violate women’s human rights.

8 We realize that the international women’s movement is far from monolithic and that women’s advocacy groups embrace a multitude of interests and positions. In keeping with the focus of this article, we use the terms “women’s movement,” “feminist agenda,” “women’s perspectives,” and the like, as shorthand terms to denote those groups and points of view that were most influential in shaping the conference document. For the most part these groups, both domestic and international, were associated with the International Women’s Health Coalition and the Women’s Environment and Development Organization. Of course, many other women’s organizations have played or are playing larger roles at the Earth Summit, in the preparations for the 1995 Beijing conference on women, and in other settings. Many feminist spokespersons also employ these shorthand terms when the repetition of precisely who is and who is not referred to would become tedious. See, for example, the many references to “international women’s movement,” “women’s perspectives,” and similar terms in Sen, Germain, and Chen (1994).

9 The process of establishing the conference structure and its formal committees is recorded in a number of resolutions of UN organs: General Assembly Resolution 1989/91 deciding to hold a population conference in Cairo; and 1992/93 dealing with procedural and organizational matters and approving the participation of NGOs; Resolutions 1991/93 and 1992/37 of the Department of Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) deciding on the name of the conference and accepting Egypt’s offer to host it. Summary accounts of these and other resolutions and actions taken throughout the preparatory process are recorded in ICPD ’94, the newsletter of the conference published bimonthly, from April 1992, by the ICPD Secretariat.

10 A synthesis of the regional population conferences together with the recommendations emanating from each of the five meetings is presented in Population Bulletin of the United Nations (1994). The recommendations are also reprinted in successive issues of Population and Development Review from December 1992 through December 1993. A Report of the Meeting of Eminent Persons on Population and Development was pub-
lished by the Secretariat. Reports of Roundtables were also published by the ICPD Secretariat, two of which are of special relevance to the topics here: the Roundtable on Women’s Perspectives on Family Planning, Reproductive Health and Reproductive Rights, held in Ottawa, 26–27 August 1993, and the Roundtable on Ethics, Population and Reproductive Health, held in New York City, 8–10 March 1994. All of these reports were published in the ICPD ‘94 series without publication dates.

11 The materials discussed in this section are drawn from lengthy conversations with members of the Secretariat and of UNFPA during a three-year period before and after the conference.

12 See, for example, Associated Press (1994d); Reuters (1994f).

13 See, for example, Chami (1994), which draws on United Nations Monitoring Reports 1977–89 and related documents. See also the reports of the five regional population conferences convened as part of the substantive preparations for ICPD, cited in note 10. It is noteworthy that in two regions—Africa, and Asia and the Pacific—the closing documents of these conferences called for the setting of strict demographic growth targets.

14 Allen Kelley, a long-time academic skeptic, has recently found evidence that during the 1980s population growth and economic development were inversely related (see Kelley and Schmidt 1994; see also Coale 1986).

15 We use the term “populationist” to refer to those individuals, theories, and activities that underscore the importance of the fertility-reduction component of population policies and programs.

16 For a brief account of this critique see Dixon-Mueller (1993). Several feminist criticisms of family planning programs, for example the “medicalization” of reproductive services and the hierarchical administration of programs, seem to refer to the very earliest programs and are much less apposite today.


18 Susan Davis, Executive Director, Women’s Environment and Development Organization (personal communication, 14 September 1994.) In addition to Rio and Cairo, women planned to carry the agenda forward to the Social Summit held in Copenhagen in March 1995 and to the Women’s Conference in Beijing in September 1995.

19 Such appointments include Carmen Barroso as head of the population program at the MacArthur Foundation; Margaret Catley-Carlson as president of the Population Council; Susan Sechler as executive director of Pew Global Stewardship Initiative; and Sally Shelton as assistant administrator in charge of USAID’s Bureau for Global Programs, Field Support and Research. Moreover, the appointment of Nafis Sadik as Secretary-General of the ICPD created a different climate within the Secretariat than if the incumbent had been a man.


21 See the “Wrap-up cable” on Prepcom II: US Department of State (1993b: paragraph 2).

22 The number of chapters was later increased again and the titles underwent transformations. The language on the family provoked heated debate at Cairo and was changed to “various forms of the family,” which was perceived as less controversial than the original (United Nations 1994: paragraph 5.1, p. 32).

23 During this period feminists gradually started to pay lip service to the idea that population growth rates should be lowered and that their differences with other groups were over means, not ends. For example, in addressing meetings, feminist leaders often made a ritual bow in the direction of reducing population growth before outlining a course of action that would address the goal marginally and indirectly if at all.


25 By Prepcom II these issues had been defined as: Integrating population concerns into development; The role and status of
women; Population growth and structure; Reproductive rights, reproductive health, and family planning; Health and mortality; International migration; Population distribution and internal migration; Information, education, and communication; The ability to manage population programs; Technology and research; National and international action; Supporting a workable partnership; and Follow-up to the conference (United Nations 1993).

26 See speech by former Deputy Secretary Clifford Wharton: US Department of State (1993a).

27 Wirth's office has much wider responsibility than population. As Under Secretary for Global Affairs, Wirth's portfolio includes four broad areas: Oceans, environment, and science; Population, refugees, and migration; Democracy, human rights, and labor; and Narcotics, terrorism, and crime. See speech by Timothy E. Wirth (1994).

28 Unless otherwise stated, the information presented in this section is based on interviews with officials of the State Department, USAID, and the ICPD Secretariat.

29 This meeting, jointly convened by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, the Council of Europe, and UNFPA, was the ICPD regional intergovernmental meeting at which the United States presented its views on the conference agenda. For this purpose, the United States is considered a member of the European region.

30 USAID's new reproductive health program has been elaborated in a series of documents. See, for example, the address by Elizabeth Maguire, Acting Director, Office of Population: Maguire (1993). See also Maguire (1994a and 1994b). A more official statement was "Strategies for Sustainable Development" (see Population and Development Review 20, no. 2: 483–487).

31 See the formal statement of the US position: US Department of State (1994b).

32 Although we have not conducted a systematic survey of academic demographers, none of those we did ask told us that they were consulted. The one exception to this stricture was John Bongaarts of the Population Council, who was freely consulted and whose article in Science (Bongaarts 1994) was widely circulated in Washington. By contrast, an article by Charles Westoff, printed in the New York Times Magazine, was ignored (Westoff 1994). A later article sent directly to Under Secretary Wirth prior to publication (Westoff 1995) did not receive an acknowledgment.

33 See the cross-referencing document: ICPD Secretariat (1994: 40).

34 The Catholic Church's official teachings on social concerns date back to Pope Leo XIII in his encyclical Rerum novarum (1891). This subject was revisited 40 years later by Pius XI in Quadragesimo anno (1931) and by John Paul II in his encyclical Centesimus annus (1991), which commemorated the centennial of Rerum novarum. Two additional social encyclicals include Paul VI's Populorum progressio (1967) and John Paul II's Sollicitudo rei socialis (1987).

35 Cable to all diplomatic and consular posts: US Department of State (1994a).

36 This is the judgment of one diplomat who visited the Vatican during the summer of 1994 to discuss the abortion issue. Interview with Nicolaas Biegman, Netherlands ambassador to the United Nations and a Vice-Chairman of the conference Main Committee, 13 September 1994.

37 A copy of this report was given to the authors by a member of one of the governments involved (Vatican 1994c).

38 The Guardian (1994a). The Guardian also reported on the alliance between Islamic fundamentalists and the Vatican that was reached on 9 August 1994. The alliance was announced by the Iranian newspaper Abrar on, quoting Mohammad Hashemi Rafaanjani, the deputy foreign minister and brother of the prime minister, as saying "there [are] many avenues for cooperation between religious states which [are] not confined to abortion. . . . [T]he future war is between the religious and the materialists." See New York Times (1994a). See also Washington Post (1994a) and Associated Press (1994c).


40 Vice President Gore had been invited much earlier to lead the US delegation; how-
ever, he did not formally accept until this time. The Vice President participated in the opening ceremonies in Cairo and left after approximately 48 hours. Wirth continued as de facto leader throughout the conference.

41 Interviews with officials in Under Secretary Wirth’s office and in the White House, 3–4 November 1994. See also Reuters (1994d).


43 Interview with Nicolaas Biegem, Netherlands ambassador to the United Nations and a Vice-Chairman of the conference Main Committee, 13 September 1994.

44 There is debate among international lawyers about the legality of the Church’s status as a “permanent observer” to the United Nations. Some believe that the grounds for this status are flimsy; others believe that, if such status is accorded to the Catholic Church, other religions should also have privileged status. The issues are extremely difficult. For a brief account see Center for Reproductive Law and Policy (1994).

45 This estimate was in 1980 dollars; translated into 1990 dollars it would have been $5.5 billion. Estimates of the cost of family planning in the year 2000 made in the mid to late 1980s varied from $2.26 to $5.3 billion depending on the methodologies used. For a discussion see “Background note on the resource requirements for population programs in the years 1995–2015” (1994).

46 Sally Shelton, Assistant Administrator for Global Programs, USAID, reporting on a meeting of the DAC countries. DAC countries are members of the Development Assistance Committee of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). See Earth Times (1994).

47 For a trenchant comment about the recommendations of UN conferences, see Demeny (1994).

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CAIRO CONFERENCE ON POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT


