

THE NUMBER GAME

How America hijacked the Cairo Conference Population and Development

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Historically the population issue has been viewed quite differently by the South and North. The South, led by India, has always emphasized that development is the best contraceptive (though they may not have been able to put this into practice). The North, spearheaded by the USA, has pedalled the population bomb thesis and has been instrumental in establishing family planning policies and programmes in the South.

This divide primarily exists at the ideological level. But in practise, the North has prevented development from taking place in the South. Unequal exchange between the two blocs is the main responsible for their differential levels of development.

While the North supports per cent of the world's population it consumes 80 per cent of the world resources. So, if population is measured in terms of resource consumption then it is in the North that numbers are unsustainable. Hence, counting population in terms of resource consumption, the USA's population becomes a whopping 25,000 million instead of 50 million because the average US citizen consumes 100 times more than that average world consumer; in the same way, India's population would become about 300 million because the average Indian consumes only one-third of the world average.

Therefore, if our concern is sustainable development, we cannot overlook this aspect of South-North disparity. And it was precisely this, which both the Earth Summit at Rio and the International conference on Population and Development (ICPD) at Cairo failed to address in any significant manner.

The Cairo ICPD turned out to be a Conference which focused a little bit on population (more as a problem of numbers than as a resource), not at all on development and lots on abortion and religion.

The agenda and focus of the ICPD had already been set by the USA Vatican combine. Some Islamic States were also roped in at a later stage to enhance the impact and provide a larger base for dissent against progressive forces.

The pro-lifers in the USA in recent years have been demanding an end to abortion and it is a very strong lobby. To diffuse its own political pressure, the US egged on the Vatican to take the lead and catapult abortion to centre stage at the CPD. The USA itself, to balance the pro-life and pro-abortion lobbies, asked its official delegates and the NGO to go all out on reproductive health issues. With an overwhelming US presence at the ICPD, this strategy helped kill the debate on development.

While the Vatican, supported by a few predominantly Catholic countries (Nicaragua, Guatemala, Argentina etc) and Islamic countries, has taken the lead in diverting the debate from the main issues as laid down in the preamble (Article 1.7)- greater investment in people and a new action agenda to make women full partners with men in the social, economic and political lives of their

communities the USA which really started this ball game sat back and watched the hijack drama. This smooth manoeuvre helped bail out the USA and transferred the entire burden of the blame on the Holy See and a few catholic and Islamic nations. The media had a field day highlighting the Catholic and Islamic points of view, sidelining many of the major concerns of the conference.

While one can understand the official forum getting bogged down with the abortion debate due to procedural wrangles and the inability of even the progressive delegates to be openly critical about the unnecessary involvement of religion in the population and development debate, even the NGO forum which had complete liberty to develop its own focus failed to seize the opportunity to realign the discussions in favour of development and third world-related issues. Nevertheless, one must credit selected progressive NGOs for effectively lobbying to assure that abortion was not condemned outright reproductive rights issues never lost significant in the religious quagmire.

Many women delegated from Latin America were ashamed of their governments stands. The latin American Women's Health Network meeting emphasised that the ICPD Action Plan must respond to the reality in Latin America so that abortions are not done in risky conditions. The ICPD was requested to endorse safe-abortion and contraception as a right, and to provide se education to adolescents.

The NGO forum was only partly affected by the official forum's obsession with abortion. This was largely because of the wide-ranging themes which were being discussed at the NGO forum. The NGO forum had slated about 600 meetings over eight days, with 10-15 meetings taking place simultaneously during each time slot. However, a number of scheduled sessions on environment and development issues did not take place because speakers/panelists failed to turn up. The environment caucus was poorly organised and failed to make any significant impact. Similar was the fate of the South-South caucus, which was to focus on development issues of the issues of the south.

Nevertheless, the NGO forum played a useful role. On the one hand it provided opportunities for those who didn't have accreditation to attend the official forum to get information on what was happening there, and on the other it enabled NGOs armed with this information, to lobby the official forum both through accredited NGOs as well as through official delegates.

India was perhaps the only major country which did not have NGO representatives as part of the official delegation. This was not only taken as unkind by the Indian NGOs but many of the official delegates and NGOs from other countries were surprised. However, the Indian official delegation compensated by holding daily briefings and dialogue with Indian NGOs. It surprised many that this turned out to be one of the best open forums during the ICPD. The Secretary, - Family Welfare, Mr. Shunglu briefed the NGOs on daily happenings and carried a fruitful dialogue with NGOs on tackling various sticky issues. This became a fairly effective lobby. The consequence was that India's stand on the development and women's health issues turned out to be by far the most progressive. For instance, India took the lead in emphasising that reproductive health, family planning abortion etc should be the right of an individual and not necessary delimited to married couples against stiff opposition from many Islamic and Catholic countries. Similarly, India played a crucial role in unbracketing chapter III clauses on sustainable development which the USA and some other developed countries had objected to.

On the whole, India kept a low profile tight through the conference. In fact, Salman Khursheed, our foreign affairs minister, was at the conference to ensure precisely this. India, for instance, did not react to Benair Bhutto's remarks on Kashmir and here begging o farms from the USA in her speech during the inaugural ceremony. India did not participate very actively in the abortion

debate and stayed away from all controversies. However, India made it clear that it stands by the laws of its country and all rights had to be for individuals and could not be linked with marital unions alone. On the development front India led the Group of 77 and was successful in removing all the brackets from clauses which many developed countries had objected to in Chapter III - Interrelationships between Population, sustained Economic Growth and Sustainable Development - but apart from this no new discussions could be initiated to broaden the base of this chapter in favour of the third world. For instance, the incorporation in this chapter of the polluter-pays-principle mooted by Switzerland and seconded by India was not allowed on the pretext that it was a new item unrelated to the existing clauses of the draft.

Apart from this the issue of development was not given much attention. Discussions at either forum failed to focus on the quality of life and viewed development only as a ration of resource availability and the numbers it could support. Given this lack of concern for development - defined as quality of life and social justice - some of us decided to hold an open discussion to highlight such issues. It was generally felt that if people were given an opportunity to share a decent quality of life only then would they develop a stake in the system and consequently express a concern for the control of population.

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