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A Fraught History

Contribution to GTI Forum [The Population Debate Revisited](#)

Gus Speth

Ian Lowe has written an appropriate and thoughtful [call](#) for more attention to the need for an environmentally responsible demographic transition. I have a few points to make that may be helpful.

1. When I joined the UN in 1993 as head of the UN Development Programme, the famous 1994 Cairo Conference was just around the corner. I attended and was excited by the event. In retrospect, it still seems admirable to me, but it did turn out to be one of several major UN events where high hopes and strong pledges were not realized subsequently. On this list one must include the Rio Earth Summit of 1992.

Lowe seems to place the Cairo Conference on his list of unfortunate developments that have contributed to a loss of focus on family planning. He writes that the conference “shifted discussions from family planning to reproductive health (an important but distinct goal)” and that, after the conference, international underfunding became “dramatically worse.” That does not seem right to me. In its ten-year retrospective on Cairo in 2004, the UN Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA) wrote the following about the conference, accurately I believe: “At Cairo, the international community reached consensus on three quantitative goals to be achieved by 2015: the reduction of infant, child and maternal mortality; the provision of universal access to education, particularly for girls; and the provision of universal access to a full range of reproductive health services, including family planning.” Cairo’s shift from “population control” to reproductive health was part of a welcomed and overdue broadening. Indeed, even if one’s goal were merely to reduce fertility rates and slow population growth, the package of policies needed

would include securing the rights, empowerment, and opportunities, including employment opportunities, of women; the education of girls and young women; the availability of maternal and child health care; and access to non-coercive family planning services. Though its goals were broader, this was the approach adopted at Cairo. Though I am guessing here, I think it is the whole Cairo package that has been badly underfunded, not just family planning.

2. Lowe is very helpful in trying to understand the headwinds that have faced international support in these areas. He may not be giving sufficient attention to the way that the battles about abortion access and contraception in the United States have bedeviled support for international family planning organizations as well as the UNFPA. I will leave to others to describe the sorry history of the Mexico City Policy. The United States is expected to be a major funder of a wide variety of international activities. When the US takes a hike, as it did with Mexico City, that not only generates a shortfall; it can also encourage some other countries to cut support as well.

3. Lowe uses the IPAT equation, a favorite of mine. In this identity, the P term is indeed important, but it is especially important when A and T are large, as they are in the United States. The US population has grown by almost 50 percent since 1980: about 100 million people. Meanwhile, far from facing up to the environmental and other downsides of this growth, loud voices in business, government, and the economics profession are shouting alarm that US population growth is stalling. A business newsletter explains the slowdown as the result of increased mortality rates, decreased birth rates, and lessened international migration during the COVID-19 pandemic.

On the topic of restarting US population growth, there has been silence from the normal protectors of the environment. There was a time, way back in the 1970s, when Zero Population Growth and (even) Negative Population Growth were going strong, and mainline environmentalists had some focus on population issues. But those days are gone. Foreign-born Americans and their children have been the main drivers of US population growth. For good reasons, progressives, including those in environmental ranks, are deeply distressed by the way recent immigrants have been treated inside our country, at the border, and back in or near their home countries. When support for any sort of rational immigration policy remains elusive, bringing environmental policy into that picture is not something progressive politicians are rushing to do. When it comes to immigration, those who have occasionally

cited the environmental issue are the MAGA folks and the so-called eco-fascists, who can never bring themselves to care about actual environmental policy itself. Forging a constructive, environmentally aware approach to population in the United States will require forging a constructive approach to immigration, and that in turn would seem to require transcending the culture wars.

About the Author



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