

# **SEIZING AN ALTERNATIVE**

## **Toward an Ecological Civilization**

### **June 4-7, 2015**

**Section V: Ecological Civilization**  
**Track 3: Population and Women**  
**Marilyn Hempel, organizer**



#### **INTRODUCTION**

Without population stabilization and lowering consumption there is no hope for a sustainable future. No blueprint for a sustainable society that excludes population stabilization will succeed.

FACT: It took all of human history until about 1800 for the world to have 1 BILLION people. More than two hundred thousand years to reach one billion people. In 1920 there were 2 BILLION. By 1999 there were 6 BILLION. Now there are more than 7.3 BILLION with no stopping point in sight. By far the most extraordinary event in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (continuing into the 21<sup>st</sup> century) was the reality of exponential human population growth. Population *will* stop growing, because, on a finite planet, nothing grows forever. The only question is: will it stop because we provided free voluntary family planning services to all people, or because we let war, famine, failed states, plagues and other nasty events take their toll.

FACT: It's not just about the numbers. Increasing consumption is not sustainable. Since 1940, Americans have consumed more goods, services and therefore natural resources than all other people in all of human history combined. **If everyone consumed the way Americans do, we would need at least 4 more planet Earths to support us.**

Add to that the highly successful export of the American consumptive lifestyle around the world, including to China and India. China and India between them host more than 2.5 BILLION people – about 1/3 of the world's total population. Unfortunately for the planet, India and China are rapidly adding new consumers, as many as 500 million new consumers. Scientific studies show that at a modest European consumption level (about half the consumption of Americans) the Earth could sustainably support some 2--3 billion people.

**We now know that the extractive industrial capitalist society is unsustainable. Growth is not God, but many people and governments worship growth. The planet is in crisis.**

It is exactly in that crisis that we most need to have a clear idea of what kind of society we want to have at the end of the crisis. Don't wait until the crisis is over to decide.

It is NOW that we should use the opportunity of the crisis to think and plan creatively for the future of civilization. Not a civilization as we know it. A new resolve, keeping in mind that old habits will die hard.

It is NOW that we need clear ideas and plans and actions for what a sustainable world could be – and most importantly – how to get from here to there.

Part of that action involves changing ourselves internally, our mindsets and how we perceive our place in, and relationship with, nature. Part of the action involves changing the structure and practices of society: education, economy, agriculture, and – importantly – family planning.

World leaders like to ignore the population factor, but we do so at our peril. The United Nations estimates that some 400 million women want family planning services but have no access. To provide free contraceptives to all people, the cost is estimated at 7 billion dollars a year. Considering the amount of money the world spends on wars – for example, the US government has spent over 2 TRILLION Dollars on the Iraq war alone – no one can say reproductive health care for women is unaffordable, yet I have heard some national and world leaders argue just that.

The war tragedies in Syria and Iraq as well as Africa and Asia have resulted in thousands of killings and torture of women and girls, young and old. As we investigate methods of reducing population, we must not forget victims of the needless carnage of women as they so often get trapped between governmental and opposing military forces. And we must remember how difficult life is for the millions of women who live in refugee camps and are dislocated from their homes and support members as they try to protect their children and the elderly.

We who work in the population/environment/family planning fields, as we see states fail, women suffer and death rates rise, are haunted by the words from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: “We are faced with the fact, my friends, that tomorrow is today. Over the bleached bones and jumbled residues of numerous civilizations are written the pathetic words ‘Too Late’.”

We were most fortunate to have experts at this conference who have spent their lives working on population, family planning, women’s rights, and sustainability. Roadmaps already exist to guide us. We need to follow them. We need especially to embrace the actions that will get us onto the road to a better, NOT BIGGER future.

Sir David Attenborough, world-renowned naturalist, when asked why he is so willing to talk about the direct relationship between population growth and the death of other species – even though that subject is taboo – stated, “It has all become way too serious for fastidious niceties.”

And yet people generally don't talk about population growth. Why? One reason is because from 1992 to 1994 leaders of women's groups from around the world decided to focus on ‘women’s empowerment’ rather than reproductive rights. They taught women that the population subject would cause women to be coerced to have contraception even if they didn't want it. This plan was incorrect, but had huge impact. Even now many feminist and environmental organizations still cease to talk about

population.

### **ACTIONS NEEDED to move toward an Ecological Civilization.**

#### **Experts and the audience agreed upon the following actions:**

- Incorporate population, consumption and women's autonomy as central issues in every conference or forum on Ecological Civilization.
- Educate people everywhere that population stabilization is not just a matter of family planning, empowering women, and creating sustainable communities; it is crucially also a way to protect natural beauty and nature's sources of inspiration, and thereby nurture the human spirit and imagination. In a world that is almost completely a product of human thought and design, the need for wildlife and wilderness has never been more important, even as its very existence is increasingly threatened by human population growth.

(see *The Art Of Living* by John Stuart Mill, in the reading list at the end of this document)

#### **POPULATION**

- Recognize that rapid population growth is an unavoidable variable in global sustainability.
- Put voluntary family planning and population numbers high on the international agenda.
- Recognize as fact that there is a large unmet need for family planning, and voluntary ways to meet that unmet need are well understood.
- Access to birth control is the key; make contraceptive choices and information easily available to all women in every continent.
- Abortion rights must be uncoupled from politics. Abortions should be legal and safe. Let us be clear, we are talking about helping poor women, so this is a poverty and human rights issue – rich women can get what they want.
- Recognize that the \$7 billion per year needed to provide family planning services to all people is the best investment the world can make towards a more stable and secure world.
- Recognize that family planning is the cheapest way to prevent more carbon emissions.

#### **CONSUMPTION**

- Subvert the Growth Paradigm (the Dominant Paradigm).
- Progress must be based on genuine well---being, not increasing consumption.
- The growing gap between rich and poor must be narrowed, not widened.
- The wealthy and “new consumers” must lower their consumption – consumption must come into balance with the planet's ability to provide resources.
- Adopt “True Cost Pricing” in order to know the true cost of what we buy.
- End perverse subsidies to the fossil fuel industry.
- Unless the elite understand their security is tied to all the rest of us, civilization will fail.
- Subsidizing smaller families is cheaper than providing food, water, housing, clothing, education, health care and jobs for more children.

#### **WOMEN**

- Patriarchal domination is still a serious problem. Many men insist upon controlling women's reproductive rights.
- Women are often the first casualties of war. Work to provide extra care and protection

for the women and girls who are victims of failed states and wars.

- Success with women is about making connections. Men have a tendency to think vertically, to create power ladders. Women have a tendency to think laterally, to *empower*, to be more community oriented.
- Family Planning is not just a women's issue – men need to become more responsible for their behavior. Lack of family planning is more likely to be about Male Dominance: In many cultures men still think they should make all sex and contraceptive decisions.
- Women's rights organizations need to recognize that if women do not have reproductive rights, they do not have rights.
- A focus on educating women and girls is not an excuse for failing to provide access to family planning. Education is important, but field experience shows that women will choose to use contraceptives whether or not they have formal education.
- That said, keep girls in school, unmarried and child---free through secondary school.
- Abolish child marriage.
- In most places, village kiosks or door---to---door health care services work best.
- Development is not the best contraceptive (as preached by the IMF and World Bank).

#### **READING LIST and SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS**

1. Potts, Malcolm and Hayden, Thomas: **SEX AND WAR**. Benbella Books, 2008.
2. Brown, Lester R.: **PLAN B: MOBILIZING TO SAVE CIVILIZATION**. W.W Norton & Co, 2008.
3. Hempel, Marilyn, editor: **FACING THE POPULATION CHALLENGE: WISDOM FROM THE ELDERS**. Blue Planet United, 2014.
4. Aswad, Barbara, editor: **FAMILY AND GENDER AMONG AMERICAN MUSLIMS**. Temple University Press, 1996.
5. Hempel, Lamont C.: **ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE: THE GLOBAL CHALLENGE**. Island Press, 1996.
6. **World Leaders' Statement on Population Stabilization**. See [http://www.populationcommunication.com/Popcomm/World\\_leaders.html](http://www.populationcommunication.com/Popcomm/World_leaders.html)
7. **The Art of Living** by John Stuart Mill, 1848. See <http://populationpress.org/population---essays/the---art---of---living/>