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## World Population: World Responsibility

The United Nations Population Conference, which concluded on 31 August in Bucharest, passed by acclamation a World Plan of Action that dramatized the growing global concern for the planet's plight.

For a decade, a babble of voices (the denunciation of Malthus, the Catholic-Protestant theological cross fire over contraception and abortion, the socialist countries' insistence that socioeconomic justice, aided by technology, could remove all need for family planning and make a limited Earth unlimitedly fruitful) obscured the real issues.

The successful agreement on the new action plan understood how far we have come since the United Nations was founded, and, astoundingly, extended sovereignty to all nations regardless of size or strength.

Then only scattered prophets of doom and a few percipient demographers realized that the world's population was doubling every 25 years and would inevitably outrun its resources. We didn't even have a passable world census.

Now we know that world population has reached over 3 billion and cannot be halted far short of 6 billion by the year 2000. There was talk then of a World Food Bank; this came to nothing as the United States, Canada, and Australia exercised a benevolently phrased monopoly of surplus grain, paralleled at present by the monopoly of the oil-producing states. Then world planners were bemused by ideas of unlimited growth which, in time, would correct economic injustices within affluent societies and between nations. The very idea of universal nationhood was fresh, promising. The affluent expected to remove the economic discrepancies of the newly recognized two-thirds of the world, cheaply, and as part of their own growth. The socialist countries used accusations of genocide to foment discontent.

At Bucharest it was affirmed that continuing, unrestricted worldwide population growth can negate any socioeconomic gains and fatally imperil the environment. The Conference recognized that constructive changes in the consumption patterns of affluent countries are vitally necessary to cope with the limited resources of the planet; that mere access to contraceptives and safe abortion will not reduce growth among those without hope of an improved life, although they are essential in realizing such hopes.

The earlier extreme views—that social and economic justice alone can somehow offset population increase and that the mere provision of contraception can sufficiently reduce population—were defeated. A new view emerges: to the sovereign right of states to determine domestic policies is now added responsibility for the quality of international life; to the human right of individuals and couples to decide on the number and spacing of their children, there is now the responsibility for the well-being of future children and the community. Those governments, for which excessive population growth is detrimental to their national purpose, are given a target date of 1985 to provide information and methods for implementing these goals.

The specter of the possible death by famine of as many as 30 million people in the next few years stood before us all. The Conference approved the negotiated plan by voice vote, followed by formal expressions of dissent. The contrast between the some 30 percent of the budget that the United States puts into military expenditures—which may destroy the planet—and the expenditures on population activities—never exceeding more than 0.1 percent—is arresting.—MARGARET MEAD