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## World Population Conference in Perspective

Summing up the tangled opinions on population growth and environmental quality, a cartoon caption reads, "Eventually we will run out of food to feed ourselves, fuel to warm ourselves, and air to breathe. . . . This is something we must learn to live with." The United Nations Conference on World Population, held in Bucharest in August 1974, had stronger answers than "wait and see." Delegates from 135 nations adopted by acclamation (only the Holy See reserving) a World Population Plan of Action. The Plan of Action is not ideal, but the extent to which it succeeds should not be underestimated. Hesitant in tone, the plan lacks quantitative goals, but it does make all the necessary provisions for countries wishing to reduce population growth. Specific implications for population growth rate and quality of life of all countries are especially apparent in three areas: the status of women, control of reproduction by individuals, and the use of the environment.

At the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women in January 1974, a resolution calling for equal representation of men and women to the Conference on World Population was adopted. Women were not equally represented at Bucharest, but 13 delegations were headed by women. As a result of vigorous lobbying efforts by women participants, the Plan of Action mentions the elimination of discrimination against women and expansion of the role of women no less than seven times, while the subject was mentioned only once, under a subheading, in the draft plan. It is indicative of the increasing awareness of the necessity to fully integrate women into society that the amendments on the status of women were adopted with virtually no opposition.

Although the plan is careful to acknowledge national sovereignty, basic individual rights to control reproduction are delineated. Furthermore, the plan recognizes "that couples and individuals in the exercise of this right take into account the needs of their living and future children, and their responsibilities towards the community." This is the first time that a U.N. document asks individuals to assess the cost of a child to the family as well as to society at large. The quality of life for an individual and society, therefore, becomes a factor in determining the number of children an individual or couple bears.

Recognition of environmental constraints on the use of resources appears as one of the principles and objectives of the plan. Population goals, the plan indicates, should consider supplies and characteristics of natural resources as well as the quality of the environment. Cognizant of the relationship between resources and increasing population, the plan directs attention to minimizing waste and distributing resources more equitably.

In a regional post-world population conference consultation, held in Bangkok in January 1975, national goals and timetables for making family planning services available and for reducing birthrates to the replacement level were adopted by 26 countries. The rhetoric of governments suggests that population problems and the World Plan of Action will be receiving high priority.

The extent to which governments are committed to population and quality of life issues will be indicated by the results of the U.N. World Conference of the International Women's Year to be held in June in Mexico City. This world conference may recognize the interrelationship of the status of women and family planning. Unless individuals and governments recognize the role of women in population increase and take action to integrate women in all facets of development, population growth may continue as women define themselves solely in terms of their child-bearing and child-rearing capacities.—DEE BOERSMA, *Institute for Environmental Studies, University of Washington, Seattle 98195*