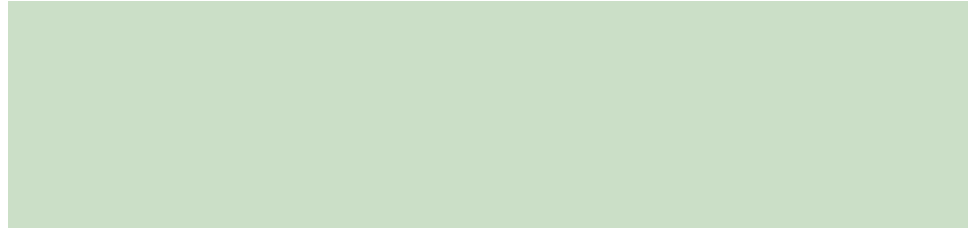


# BURNING THE BRIDGE TO THE 21ST CENTURY: THE END OF THE ERA OF INTEGRATED CONFERENCES?

*By*



After weakening the Kyoto Protocol, the United States, by far the largest greenhouse gas emitter, has essentially walked away from the agreement along with any serious effort to lower U.S. emissions. Average American fuel economy has been worsening in an era when hybrid technology and other advances should point in the other direction. Even William K. Reilly, EPA Administrator under the first Bush Administration, recently chided George W. Bush for not coming back to the table to reshape climate policy and for being “widely seen as unfriendly to the environment” (Reilly, 2003). This impression was reinforced by the Bush Administration’s blatant censorship of climate-change science and analysis in a recent EPA report on the state of the U.S. environment.<sup>2</sup>

The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) is another troubling example. Since the CBD’s birth in Rio, there have been more than fifteen major international meetings under its aegis—but little progress towards either measuring biological diversity declines or slowing down the extinction of species. Again, the United States is one of a tiny handful of countries that have not ratified the CBD; yet it routinely sends large delegations to CBD meetings and tries hard to influence their outcome through direct or indirect means.

At a recent CBD meeting, the United States opposed many aspects of the agreement that would actually protect biodiversity or set standards, apparently out of concern that the CBD might impede the sovereignty and economic free range of America. In fact, it is now often difficult to discern any compass other than economic self-interest guiding U.S. policy towards climate and biodiversity. The State Department under the Bush Administration has exercised increasingly rigid control over U.S. delegations and has reduced the role and independence of scientists on those teams.

### ***The Preemptive Repression of Cairo +10?***

A related paralysis and malaise may now be affecting international population policy. The 1994 Programme of Action at the United Nations International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo set forth bold goals for universal access to reproductive health by 2015. Cairo +10,

originally scheduled for early 2004, was to be a reaffirmation of those goals and assessment of progress to date. Ministerial-level population conferences have been held every ten years since 1974, and prior to that, there were international technical conferences in 1954 and 1965.

However, it now appears that there will be no Cairo +10 in 2004, at least not at the intergovernmental level. The official events are likely to be limited to an informational reaffirmation of the 1994 agreement, with no

**We appear to be moving backwards in terms of the political will for multilateral actions and integrated international conferences.**

**—Frederick A.B. Meyerson**

new actions or pronouncements. International Planned Parenthood Federation and other NGOs are organizing a series of related events, but these meetings will focus on the status of intergovernmental reproductive-health efforts rather than altering or improving the underlying agreement.

Fear of the United States is considered to be one underlying reason that the Cairo document will not be actively reconsidered in 2004. Some family-planning advocates are concerned that, given the opportunity, the United States would pressure the UN into a complete review of the Programme of Action with the goal of severely weakening it. Indeed, statements by U.S. delegations at recent international conferences have been worrisome. For instance, the American delegation to an October 2002 Bangkok population conference suddenly announced that the United States would not reaffirm its support for Cairo unless the terms “reproductive-health services” and “reproductive rights” (which the United States construes as including abortion) were removed from the text (Dao, 2002).

The United States might be chastened by its 32-1 and 33-1 defeats at the December 2002 Pacific and Asian Population Conference, where it unsuccessfully attempted to convince other parties that previously negotiated reproductive-health language in some way promoted abortion and underage sex. However, more observers think that the

United States would pull out all the stops to significantly weaken a reopened Cairo agreement. The United States has already cancelled its contribution to UNFPA on the flimsiest of grounds. Cairo agreement

supporters therefore feel that there might be a lot more to lose than there is to gain by opening this particular Pandora's box.

Proponents of international family-planning programs have consequently adopted a minimalist approach to Cairo +10. In April 2003, the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) released a statement that "any intergovernmental negotiation of previously agreed—and indeed reinforced—commitments to ICPD goals is neither appropriate nor useful at this time" (IPPF, 2003). In the current climate, many international family-planning advocates consider that the best function of any Cairo +10 events will be to analyze and critique successes and failures since 1994. This may be accomplished by "report cards" on the ICPD goals for reproductive and maternal health; HIV/AIDS; unsafe abortion; empowerment of women; adolescent pregnancy; and national financial commitments, ranking both developed and developing countries by relative performance. Population Action International (PAI), Family Care International (FCI), the London School of Tropical Medicine, and other NGOs are also planning activities along those lines.

However pragmatic this minimalist course of action may be, the diminution of Cairo +10 is an unfortunate outcome. While the ICPD agreement is essentially a sound instrument, it undoubtedly could be improved, and even small substantive adjustments could reenergize the global community towards achieving the Cairo goals. If the international community were on track to fulfill these goals, a subdued 2004 conference would not be of great concern and perhaps even appropriate.

nations—are concerned that a shift of focus may divert attention and resources away from still-pressing international family-planning needs that will last for decades. For example, governmental resolve and support for reproductive-health programs appears to be faltering in Peru and the Philippines.

In fact, there is still a great deal of unmet reproductive-health need, not only in many parts of the developing world but also here in the United States. Over one hundred million women in developing countries have little or no access to family planning services. Some progress has been made in reducing that number since Cairo, but not at a pace that will achieve the ICPD goals by 2015. Moreover, there is a growing gap between reproductive-health service needs in developing countries and the international financial resources devoted towards meeting those needs.

Closer to home, while almost all U.S. women have at least theoretical access to reproductive-health services, the United States has an unintended pregnancy rate substantially above that of Canada and most European countries (Belanger & Ouellet,

the



Reilly, William K. (2003, May 23). "The green old party?" *The New York Times*, A25.