

A Justice Framework for Population and Environment Issues

Excerpted from Laurie Mazur's presentation to the Funders Network on Population, Reproductive Health and Rights, October 12, 2007.

A justice framework for population and the environment identifies inequality as a root cause of both rapid population growth and environmental damage. On the population side, it's clear that meeting the "unmet need" for contraception and other reproductive health services will only get us part of the way to the demographic transition. To get the rest of the way there, it is essential to deal with the inequalities – both gender and economic-- that cause people to want large families or prevent women from exercising their reproductive rights.

On the environment side, inequality is also at the heart of the problem. Our consumption cuts a huge swath of destruction across the globe – from Chinese rivers poisoned by factories that supply WalMart, to the rainforests of Cancun, which have been leveled to build hotels. At the other end of the spectrum, extreme poverty forces people to strip mine their resources – by, for example, cutting forests for firewood in Haiti. Both extremes are unsustainable – environmentally, politically and morally.

In other words, as Judith Bruce has put it, "the real unmet need is for justice." If we define the problem as inequality, then justice is the remedy. But what does a justice framework mean, exactly, on population and environment issues? Do we broaden our agenda to the point that it can't be achieved? Does it mean we can't make any progress under the current social and economic order?

I would argue the opposite. I think a justice framework can help us clarify our goals and communicate them in a way that resonates with many people's core values.

In practical terms, a justice framework on population means focusing on interventions that have the greatest impact on inequality -- like girls' education, reproductive health as part of a comprehensive system of primary health care, women's access to land/property, credit and other economic supports, and enforcement of laws that protect women from violence, discrimination, child marriage, and other human rights abuses. Which, of course, sounds a lot like the Cairo agenda. So, I think the justice framework shows that Cairo got it right. But it also reminds us that those "other" parts of the Cairo agenda – the non-family planning, social "software" parts – are absolutely crucial and can't be neglected going forward.

A justice framework could provide a new home for the Cairo agenda – one that connects us to issues of growing importance, like climate change and environmental health. It also connects to a critique of the current development model, which focuses myopically on the GDP and treats human well being and the environment as irrelevant "externalities."

A justice framework encompasses individual human rights -- including the right to bodily integrity and autonomy, to free decisionmaking about sexuality, reproduction and family, and freedom from rape, torture and violence. But it's also bigger than individual rights. Justice addresses our obligations to one another. If our basic rights are secured (and that's a big if for many people in the world) then we have an obligation to ask what impact our choices have on others, including future generations. If we double the carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, if we help ourselves to 90% of the fish in the sea in the span of a few generations, what are we leaving for our children? That's a justice issue, too.

And, finally, a justice framework lets us talk about values. It lets us talk about the world we want. In a debate controlled by ideologues, we will not prevail with facts and figures. We need to connect to people's hopes and fears, and offer a vision of how the world could be.

Because, if there is a silver lining to climate change and the rest of the environmental mess we're in, this is it: It has never been more clear that we are in this together, that our fate is intimately bound up with that of people in China, and Chad and Mexico. It's my hope that that recognition will help mobilize the ingenuity, and the resources, and the compassion needed to create a more sustainable and equitable world for all of us.

This may sound utopian, but the good news is that there is a growing network of young leaders around the world who share this vision. At my meeting a few weeks ago, the justice framework was the contribution of the younger people in the room – mostly young women from the global South. These young leaders are much more adept at border crossing than their elders. They are less stuck in their silos; they tend to recognize the connections among issues like reproductive health and the environment. They understand that human health and well being can't really be disconnected from the health of the natural systems that sustain us.

I want to end by noting that population issues are making something of a comeback in some quarters. For example, the UK Parliament recently released a report called "Return of the Population Growth Factor." And at the annual meeting of the Environmental Grantmakers Association last month, a prominent environmentalist talked about the importance of population growth in a plenary speech, and received a round of applause. More recently, a "population strategy" meeting was held in DC. Attending that meeting were representatives from a host of virulent anti-immigration groups, such as the Federation for American Immigration Reform, Numbers USA and Californians for Population Stabilization.

Indeed, there are many people who believe that it would be better if world population stabilized at nine rather than 12 billion. I think most environmentalists are in that camp. If they can't be in a room with those of us who care about human rights, gender equity and justice, they will go somewhere else.

I recently came across a quote from Milton Friedman, someone I'm not in the habit of quoting, but this makes sense to me. He says, "Only a crisis—actual or perceived—

produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around.”

I fear the future will offer no shortage of actual and perceived crises. And there are plenty of ideas about population lying around, some of which date back to the days before Cairo. We need to make sure the right ideas – about population, the environment, and justice – are the ones that get picked up.