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Our Planet

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Our Planet, the magazine of the **United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)**
PO Box 30552, Nairobi, Kenya
Tel (254 20) 621 234; fax 623 927;
telex 22068 UNEP KE
e-mail: cpinfo@unep.org
www.unep.org
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Director of Publication: Eric Falt
Editor: Geoffrey Lean
Coordinator: Naomi Poulton
Special Contributor: Nick Nuttall
Circulation Manager: Manyahlesha Kebede
Design: Roger Whisker
Web Editor: Chris Cypert
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UNEP

From the desk of

KLAUS TOEPFER

United Nations
Under-Secretary-General
and Executive Director,
UNEP

This edition of *Our Planet* celebrates women, and underlines their unique vulnerability to environment-related health problems, from water and sanitation issues to ones of indoor air pollution.

The special role that women play in the lives of their communities is highlighted in the new UNEP book *Women and the Environment*, which underlines how they are the unsung heroes of conservation, often outpacing men in their knowledge, and nurturing, of domestic and wild plants and animals. Largely thanks to them many species, some with important drought or pest resistant properties, survive and remain in cultivation.

Intimate understanding

Women, especially in developing countries, are the farmers, feeders and carers in their communities, relying on an intimate understanding of nature. They are also the primary providers of water. In the mountain areas of East Africa, they may expend

close to a third of their calorie intake collecting and supplying it.

They often bear the brunt of a natural disaster, such as famine or drought, and shoulder the responsibility for keeping offspring alive. In pastoral societies, men migrate to new pastures when cattle die, or move away to pursue other activities. Women and children may also leave, but generally as a group to hunt famine foods, pods and other tree products to sell in distant markets, says the book. It is published in association with the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) – with financial support from the United Nations Foundation, whose sister body the Better World Fund has generously sponsored this issue of *Our Planet*.

Front line

Women are often in the front line in terms of overcoming poverty, managing land and waterways, and sustaining communities. During times of stress and insecurity, they must forage further and further for food, water and fuel. During times of plenty, the fields and kitchen gardens they tend are mini-laboratories where domesticated and wild plants and animals are selected and tested for their agricultural and medicinal value.

Studies of 60 kitchen gardens managed by women in Thailand chronicled 230 different vegetable and other species, many rescued from a neighbouring forest before it was cleared. Village women in the Kanak Valley in the Province of Baluchistan, Pakistan, can readily identify 35 medicinal plants they commonly use. They say that the plants 'grow up with no masters' – meaning that they have no husbands to boss them around.

Traditional knowledge

A study in Sierra Leone found that women could name 31 uses of trees on fallow land and in forests while men could only name eight. Here men's traditional knowledge is declining with formal schooling and emigration whereas women are retaining theirs – and often acquiring the men's.

In Yazd, the 'desert capital' of Iran, it

is women who have devised novel agricultural methods including producing food in underground tunnels. In southeast Mexico, women keep as many as nine breeds of local hens – as well as ducks and turkeys – in their back gardens, selecting the best to suit local environmental conditions. Thus they are actively conserving genetic diversity and contributing to conservation.

Desertification afflicts up to half of China's population. In a dry and degraded area 1,000 kilometres west of Beijing women have mobilized communities to plant willows and poplars to halt the deserts and create fertile land for vegetable production.

The role of women and their 'know-how' is often undervalued and ignored. All too often they are treated as second-class citizens with fewer rights and lower status than men. It is high time that national and international policies reflected gender differences and gave far greater weight to the empowerment of women.

Gender dimensions

So we must breathe life into the gender dimensions enshrined in the United Nations Millennium Development Goals. We must build on the outcomes of the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), the 1995 World Conference on Women and the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development, and cement them at this tenth anniversary of ICPD.

For if we ignore the role of women, all our hopes and aspirations for a better and more stable world will be harder to achieve ■

YOUR VIEWS

*We would really like to receive your feedback on the issues raised in this edition of **Our Planet**. Please either e-mail feedback@ourplanet.com or write to:*

*Feedback, Our Planet
27 Devonshire Road
Cambridge CB1 2BH
United Kingdom*

MILES TO GO

before we relax

THORAYA AHMED OBAID assesses progress over ten years of action on poverty reduction and development, and sets out priorities for the decade ahead

As we mark the tenth anniversary of a historic consensus, we should take stock of what it has produced, and reflect on what we must do to fully achieve its aims. Its outcome – the Programme of Action of the 1994 Cairo International Conference on Population and Development – is a blueprint for a balance between population and a nation's resources. It is meant to tilt the scales in favour of people, the environment and human rights, including those of women.

Regions, nations and communities have concluded that only by addressing population and women's rights can we achieve humanity's development goals, specifically those in the Millennium Declaration adopted by the world's leaders in September 2000. Africa's development ministers reiterated this in June 2004, declaring gender equality 'key to breaking the cycle of poverty and improving the quality of life of the people of the continent'. **This is my first message for our collective work for the next ten years of the Cairo Programme, to 2015.**

I have five more.

If we look around, we see a world out of balance. Twenty per cent of people in wealthy countries consume 80 per cent of the world's resources. At the same time, over 1 billion people in poor countries live on less than \$1 a day. In wealthy countries, maternal death is rare. Yet in poor nations complications of childbirth remain a leading cause of death for women, snatching a woman's life each minute.

While wealth has increased tremendously during the past quarter century, the proportion of money devoted to international development assistance has declined. This does not bode well for global peace and

security. We will have neither unless we eradicate poverty. So we must tilt the scales in favour of social justice and development. We must invest in population, women and reproductive health, including family planning, to make greater inroads into poverty reduction. **That is my second message.**

Economic growth

There is concrete evidence that investments in population reduce poverty. Slower national population growth supports overall economic growth. Research shows that about a fifth of economic growth between 1960 and 1995 was due to reductions in mortality and another fifth to reductions in fertility. This demographic transition, from large to smaller families and from high to low death rates, is happening in all countries to varying degrees. As women choose smaller families, they acquire more social and economic opportunities. And parents are able to invest more in each child, leading to healthier, better-educated children and more prosperous families.

Because women are having fewer children, population growth is slowing. Today, 77 million people are being added to our planet every year, compared to 81 million a decade ago.

Family planning has also saved the lives of millions of mothers and children. A recent study in Africa showed that it could reduce maternal death by 20 per cent – and that spacing births by three years or more could cut infant death in half.

Overall, the story of population is a success for humanity. It will remain so, if we stay committed to population and



reproductive health programmes and provide the necessary resources.

It is heartening that, all over the world, the Cairo blueprint is guiding policy making to secure better health, human rights and gender equality. There is broad consensus in all regions that the Cairo Programme of Action will help the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. Conversely, we cannot reduce poverty, hunger and disease, especially HIV/AIDS, unless we make greater investments in education and health, including reproductive health. Given the desperate situation in many poor countries, our actions must be swift, effective and scaled up. **This is my third message for the next decade.**

Since the 1994 Cairo consensus, the proportion of developing world couples that can choose and use contraception has grown from 55 to 60 per cent. Infant mortality has dropped from 71 to 61 of every 1,000 babies born. Life expectancy in developing countries has risen from 61 years to 63. Fewer women die during childbirth



Stephen Dolner/UNEP/Topham

We cannot reduce poverty, hunger and disease, especially HIV/AIDS, unless we make greater investments in education and health, including reproductive health

ning. Our first line of defence is prevention, but we must also pay attention to care and treatment. Family planning and maternal health facilities are key entry points for treatment, so the link between reproductive health and HIV infection – mostly a reproductive health problem, after all – must be underlined. As we scale up treatment, we must also boost HIV prevention. **This is my fourth message.**

Strategic interventions

HIV prevention is a top priority at the United Nations Population Fund. We focus on three strategic interventions: ensuring that information and services reach and involve the young, especially girls; helping pregnant women and their children remain HIV free; and helping to make condoms accessible.

Policy makers must stop underestimating the contributions of reproductive health and family planning to economic and social development. We also must pay greater attention to population and deal with demographic trends. The population of the least developed countries is projected to triple in the next 50 years – a serious matter since these countries already face difficulties in providing basic education, health and housing to their citizens. Over the next half century, the population of developed countries will remain at about 1.2 billion, while the less developed regions will see their numbers rise from 5.2 billion to 7.7 billion.

Meanwhile, population ageing and the emergence of the largest youth generation in history pose great challenges. Greater investments must be made for both. **That is my fifth message.**

While Europe focuses on population ageing, concern in much of the devel-

oping world centres on youth. There are more than 1 billion young people between the ages of 15 and 24. Too many of them are growing up in poverty, in conflict or in environments devoid of opportunity or hope. This must not continue.

This young generation sees a better life, not around the corner but through television screens that whet their appetites. But their expectations are not always matched with opportunities. We must invest heavily in education, health (including reproductive health) and employment to harness their idealism and energy.

As we look to the future, we must remain focused on the Cairo Programme of Action and stay committed to its goals of universal access to education, reproductive health, gender equality, poverty reduction and development. We need to create stronger partnerships – both North-South and South-South – among governments, non-profit organizations, the private sector, parliamentarians and the media, if we are to forge ahead. **This is my sixth message at this mid-point of Cairo's 20-year programme.**

Developing nations are close to keeping their side of the bargain to invest \$12.4 billion annually on population and reproductive health. But the donor countries meet only half of their Cairo commitment of \$6.1 billion, contributing \$3.1 billion. The \$3 billion gap – worth less than two days of global military spending – is the main reason why we are not making faster progress.

We cannot afford more delay. As United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan recently warned Africa's development ministers, the cost of inaction is too horrendous to contemplate. In maternal health terms alone, it could cause roughly 2.5 million maternal deaths, 7.5 million child deaths and 49 million maternal injuries in the next ten years.

We have miles to go before we can relax ■

Thoraya Ahmed Obaid is United Nations Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund.

in many countries, but much more still needs to be done to ensure safe motherhood. We must provide three services that save women's lives: family planning, skilled attendance at birth and emergency obstetric care.

We should offer these services to all as an urgent priority because more than half a million women die each year from complications of pregnancy and childbirth. The absence of services often results in obstetric fistula. This little-known condition, which disappeared from rich countries over a century ago, continues to afflict tens of thousands of poor girls and women in developing countries. It can be prevented and treated: surgery is 90 per cent effective and costs about \$300 per patient. With 2 million girls and women awaiting treatment, there is a huge task ahead. Last year UNFPA started the first global campaign to end fistula, providing assistance in many African and Asian countries.

Halting the spread of HIV/AIDS is one of the most vital reasons for increasing investments in family plan-

The great achievement of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in 1994 was to reconcile development policy makers, the women's movement and demographers. The Cairo consensus recognized that demographic outcomes cannot be dictated. Women and men have the right to choose their own future and, when they do, everyone is better off.

If women can choose the size and spacing of their families, they have fewer children than their mothers did. Families are smaller and population growth is slower. We are already seeing the results. Families are half the size they were in 1960. Countries like Mexico, the Republic of Korea and Thailand have seen plummeting fertility and rocketing economic growth. And women – able to make choices in one area, fertility – are beginning to assert themselves in others, such as in improving education and ending gender violence.

The Cairo conference gave a huge boost to this process. The consensus enunciated the right to reproductive health as part of people's right to health. This is especially important for women and girls, who are uniquely vulnerable in all societies, for a variety of reasons. The Cairo consensus says that health and education systems must recognize this, and give girls and women the strength, the information, the services and above all the confidence they need to navigate their way through life. The goal of the Cairo Programme of Action is that reproductive health care should be available to all who need it by 2015.

Shocking statistic

One woman dies every minute as a consequence of pregnancy – almost all of them in developing countries. This shocking statistic is the result of inadequate health systems, but it also stems from ignorance and neglect of women's needs. One of the Cairo goals – now one of the Millennium Development Goals – is to reduce this toll by three quarters by 2015.

The Cairo consensus recognized that gender violence in all its aspects is a threat to reproductive health. Gender violence comes from one single source – the subjection and oppression of women. Fistula and female genital cutting, honour killings and violence in the home will end if men recognize women as equals – with

equal rights to education and health, reproductive health first and foremost; with choices in marriage and childbearing; and with the right to involve themselves in the economy and the wider society.

Women's empowerment and gender equality are absolutely vital if countries are to confront and defeat the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Countries where infection rates are rising – including most

countries in Asia-Pacific and Africa, and many in Latin America and Europe – can learn many lessons from the most seriously affected countries in Africa; but the most important one is to support and empower women. If women could make their own choices and decisions about sexual contact they could stop the pandemic in its tracks. And men who support and empower women are vital partners.

Universal goal

Half of all new HIV infections are among young people. The overwhelming majority are infected through sexual contact. Some extremists pretend that young people will be safer if they are ignorant about sex: but the evidence is all the other way, in favour of trusting young people with the information and the means to protect their lives and health. The Programme of Action states that young people should have the information and services they need, as they prepare for adult responsibilities. That should be the universal goal.

The great virtue of the Cairo consensus is that it is practical. It emerged from countries' own experiences – and ten years of implementing the Programme of Action has only confirmed its relevance. In the last 12 months, regional conferences in Asia and Latin America have resisted extremist pressure and confirmed their commitment to the consensus. The Cairo Programme of Action is the road map to gender equality, better reproductive health and balanced population growth in the 21st century ■

Dr Nafis Sadik is Special Envoy of the UN Secretary-General for HIV/AIDS in Asia and was formerly Executive Director of UNFPA and Secretary-General of the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development. She is a board member of the United Nations Foundation.

Practical consensus

NAFIS SADIK
describes progress and setbacks
since the International
Conference on Population and
Development
in Cairo ten years ago



POWER SHIFT

LENA SOMMESTAD and **REJOICE MABUDAFHASI** describe how empowering women is vital for improving health and the environment through the provision of adequate water and sanitation

Water is essential for all life. But even though it is precious to us, we do not always treat it as a precious resource. It is usually used and managed in a fragmented and unsustainable way: water scarcity and degradation frequently result. Our way of living has created a situation where freshwater resources are under tremendous pressure and more than 1 billion people lack acceptable water to drink.

Changing this situation, and creating a sustainable future for everyone, is a demanding and crucial task for us all. It is our responsibility – as politicians, water experts, representatives of public and private sectors, and citizens – to make concentrated efforts to reach the Millennium Declaration Goals related to water, the targets set in the Plan of Implementation from the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg and other internationally agreed targets on water.

Water issues played an important role at the World Summit in Johannesburg two years ago. An ambitious target was set: to halve the proportion of people without access to clean drinking water and basic sanitation by the year 2015. Another was set to develop national integrated water resources management and water efficiency plans by 2005.

We recognize water as a key factor for economic growth. Enhanced water and sanitation services represent a fundamental step towards improved livelihoods for poor people. A paradigm shift is needed towards sustainable sanitation systems if we are to achieve the Millennium Development Goals and the Johannesburg commitments on sanitation.

Holistic alternative

Ecological sanitation provides one such alternative. Based on an ecosystem approach, and not a specific technology, it offers a conceptual shift in the relationship between people and the environment. Ecological sanitation is holistic: it saves water, prevents water pollution, and sanitizes and recycles nutrients and organics to restore soil and soil fertility – and often at a much lower cost than conventional sanitation. Besides providing a basic service, it can contribute to improved health and food security and income-generating activities, especially if combined with rainwater harvesting.

Ecological sanitation cannot be scaled up unless it is socially and culturally acceptable. The needs and priorities of the people themselves must always be in focus in all water and sanitation interventions. The users should play a leading role in putting their ideas into practice. Involving households and communities in planning, implementing and main-

taining services and the use of suitable technology is most important for achieving success, as are long-term ecological and financial sustainability.

It is important to acknowledge the gender dimension in such projects. There is no reason why women should not have the same benefits and opportunities as men. It is also vital that changes in roles and responsibilities do not mean that women have to take on additional duties and workload.

Indeed, there is an urgent need further to mainstream a gender perspective in all water resource management, not just in water supply and sanitation projects. This implies giving adequate consideration to both women's and men's roles, needs, access, responsibility, and control of land and water rights. Poor women and men, in particular, depend on the ecosystems of wetlands, coastal zones, etc., for their livelihoods. But women and men have different interests and needs in relation to different water and sanitation issues. In order to succeed, all these aspects must be taken into account.

Main responsibility

Women worldwide are directly affected by poverty and directly involved in the day-to-day work of putting food on the table and ensuring there is fresh water to drink. In many parts of the globe, they find themselves dividing their time between domestic duties, cultural activities and community projects. In some places, cultural norms restrict them from asserting themselves or taking the lead in development processes and programmes.

Women are generally the most affected by investments in sanitation since they often tend to take the main responsibility for domestic activities. The importance of involving them in decision making and in implementing development programmes – particularly in the areas of water, sanitation and human settlement – is now widely recognized. Crucially, it is easier to involve women in ecological sanitation projects as they place less emphasis on high technology solutions. The challenge, however, remains to define effective interventions that will enable and empower women to play a more direct role in development processes and decisions. ▶

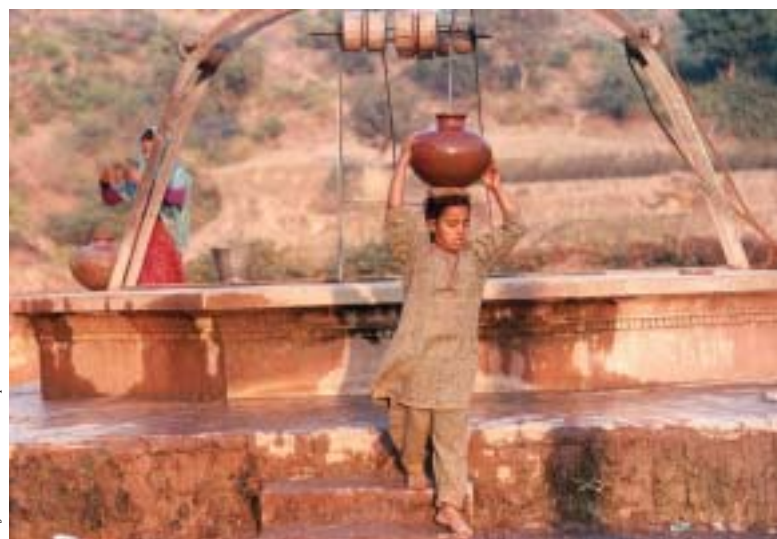


Photo: Thakur/UNEP/Topham

Unless we empower women, we will not be able to eradicate poverty – or fight poverty-related environmental degradation. International institutions and national and local governments need to enhance the role of women through legal provisions, institutional frameworks and incentives; through capacity development and empowerment; and through monitoring, information and evaluation.

We consider it fundamental to secure women's rights to land tenure and water and to ensure adequate public sanitation facilities for women and girls. It is important to strengthen implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, including its call for measures to ensure women's rights to adequate sanitation and water supply.

It is also necessary to enhance stakeholder consultation in policy making, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Equitable participation by women in decision making should be facilitated, both in local supply schemes and in resource allocation within catchment areas.

Power needs to be shifted from technocrats to end-users. Both men and women must be involved in determining technology options and service levels for sanitation and water services. The gender impacts of implementation must be monitored and evaluated. And men must be engaged in supporting the empowerment of women as water managers. We must unpack the different roles and relationships of men and women, so as to facilitate understanding of when and how these need to change.

Many challenges have to be addressed, especially over ecological sanitation. Implementing ecological sanitation solutions is not just a matter of the proper technology and knowledge: it is equally critical to recognize cultural, social and institutional dimensions.

As women ministers, we have taken it upon ourselves to cooperate across borders to promote relevant goals and targets. In 2002, a Network of Women Ministers of the Environment was established to exchange ideas and to work toward solutions to critical environmental issues. Some 30 women ministers from all continents participate in its work to promote excellence in environmental governance and develop recommendations for practical solutions to environmental problems confronting nations and the world.

Equally

EFFECTIVE

MARY ROBINSON explains that gender equality must be the core of any successful approach to combating HIV/AIDS

In the immediate aftermath of this summer's International AIDS Conference in Bangkok, where we emphasized the central role of leadership in tackling HIV/AIDS, I believe the real challenge is to make AIDS a priority issue of the women's movement worldwide.

We need women leaders at every level, from grassroots to head of government, from business to trade unions, from faith to academia, to unite around the seven action areas of the Global Coalition on Women and AIDS which call for:

- preventing HIV infection in adolescent girls, focusing on better reproductive health care
- reducing violence against women
- protecting property and inheritance rights of women and girls
- ensuring equal access to care, treatment and support
- supporting improved community-based care, focusing on women and girls
- promoting access to prevention options for women, including female condoms and microbicides
- supporting ongoing efforts towards universal education for girls.

HIV/AIDS is one of the most serious human rights issues of this century, and must be tackled with human rights values and a gender-sensitive approach. Those living with it know the extent of the discrimination. I heard it from so many of them during my term as United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and since, including from women in rural areas in Africa who feared losing their homes and being rejected by their families. I heard it over and over again from women living with AIDS during the Bangkok conference.

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