

TO THE ORGANISERS OF THE JOHANNESBURG WORLD
SUMMIT
ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
Johannesburg 2002

This appeal reflects the preoccupation for the most tragic issue of our time, strangely ignored by the media, politicians and , significantly, by most environmental organisations, which prefer to concentrate their efforts of attention on these problems which are its consequence : the demographic explosion.

Aware that we are on a limited world , with limited resources, of which the most limiting is space; and that the most important issues of the coming Summit is (ironically) the sustainable human development together with the preservation of a healthy and stable environment, that ignores significant scientific data , that , deforestation, ill health, loss of topsoil, ethnic wars, are linked to population growth, which also is an obstacle to economic development;

We ask you in all truth to consider that an in depth examen of such problem , which was missing in the drafting of the Earth Charter document, is now too urgent to be delayed.

The whole Earth Charter community must be relevant in trying to find a solution which can be accetable to religious or traditional sensitivities.

The ASSISI NATURE COUNCIL

AN APPEAL THE WORLD LEADERS

FOR A DIALOGUE ON POPULATION

It is known that limits exist to the carrying capacity of the earth ecosystems, and to the impacts which the biosphere in its entity can support without dangerous and irreversible deterioration.

Limits vary from regions to regions , but the impacts depend from two main factors:

- 1) population density
- 2) lifestyles, which reflect the quantity of food, water, energy, space and essential goods that every person uses and wastes.

To match the number of human beings and their lifestyle with the earth's carrying capacity is the priority objective we should strive to achieve.

Objective so far "theoretical", because if such final target is desirable and necessary, we are faced in the field of real actions with a wall of incomprehension and denial born from the strength of short-term vested interests and the concept of individual rights, which leave out intergenerational and intergenerational duties.

If a strategy for a sustainable future suggests that the beneficial use of resources and the conservation of nature should be equally shared between the world communities, between rich and poor, between the present and the future generations, on the other hand the political reality after Rio , save some few exceptions, has not really satisfied the promises made 10 years ago in that direction.

Instead, still 10 years after Rio, though the media and society at large are debating how to adapt lifestyles to

the carrying capacity of the Planet, the issue of population growth has not received the due attention. As this new Summit is concerned with the destiny of the poor, which multiply in parts of the Planet with the scarcest resources, we want to attract attention to the urgent task of initiating a serious and prudent management of demographic policies,. in the respect of the religious and cultural traditions of every community, which must be made aware of their worsening and unsustainable situation.

We ask that this Summit will consider to issue a written document , that will urge political and religious leaders to initiate a dialogue on the most effective and adequate demographic strategies, without remoras and fear to confront their respective differences, in a spirit of cooperation, to avoid humanity an irreversible tragedy .

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On the Upcoming Event of
THE JOHANNESBURG SUMMIT 2002 (RIO +10) WORLD SUMMIT
ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

By Maria Luisa Cohen

This much advertised Summit will take place in Johannesburg in September (v. Calendar of Events). In spite of the amount of work

and preparation which has gone into it, one big issue is missing and all the efforts seems to have been made to obfuscate it:

Overpopulation.

One of the first results of this World Summit may be the production of more hot air to advance the cause for a further reduction of greenhouse gases and improve the rhetoric about global warming. Plus the destruction of yet more trees to print the various ineffectual recommendations. Plus a lot of money going around the usual places usually to the wrong people for the wrong reasons .

Sustainable Development (SD) is a word that covers many sins, but most worrying of all, the long Agenda of the Summit ignores the fact that the real problem is not sustainable development or greenhouse gases but the fact that current world population makes a mockery of the objectives of the Summit, which are :

Implementation of agenda 21 in areas requiring urgent action.
Of which the most pressing issue is :
Eradicating poverty

According to the Agenda of the Summit,
"... the five years since the Rio Conference have witnessed an increase in the number of people living in absolute poverty, particularly in developing countries."
GNP in developing countries, especially with liberal trade policy, has been increasing steadily, while rise of poverty is due to the birth rate.

The International Data Base US Census Bureau reports that by the year 2050 world Population will reach 9 billion, even considering the Growth Rate going down by 0.5%.

What is really astounding is the fact that in the history of our Planet there has never been a mammal of our size that numbered 6 billions at once ! Our biological success has to do with our culture more than our nature, because by nature we would have already , as in the past, adapted our size to the ecosystem's capacity, by early death, infanticide, famine and epidemics.

The Agenda is a long enunciation of the wrongs which afflict our present situation , scanning the whole world:

Consumption and production patterns, Health, Sustainable human settlements, Fresh water, Oceans and seas, Energy, Land and Sustainable agriculture, Forests, Desertification and drought, Biodiversity,- all of them should constitute a Footnote to the

origin of most of these problems : too many people in too limited a space.

Just as Garret Harding warns: "Space is no escape."

In the said Report , the Population issue merits just 12 lines, the shortest paragraph of all.

Therefore, the whole document is an exercise in wishful thinking and good intentions, which , as one knows, pave the road to Hell.

Take Energy, for example.

There's no awareness of the fact that "Petroleum geologists have known for 50 years that global oil production would "peak"and begin its inevitable decline . Such

awareness is present in current affairs magazines such as Newsweek ! Moreover, no renewable energy systems have the potential to generate more than a tiny fraction of the power now being generated by fossil fuels." Regarding the alternative sources: " In order to be "renewable", an energy system must produce enough net energy to reproduce itself.

The fact that our society can not survive on alternative energy should come as no surprise, because only an idiot would believe that windmills and solar panels can run bulldozers,elevators, steel mills, glass factories, electric heat, air conditioning, aircraft,automobiles,etc...."

"(<http://dieoff.com> and <http://www.ihsenergy.com> .)

On Forests, the Report says: " Since the adoption of the Forest Principles at the Rio Conference, tangible progress has been made in sustainable forest management at the national, subregional, regional and international levels and in the promotion of international cooperation on forests." All this is contradicted by the by the World Resources Institute WASHINGTON, DC, April 3, 2002 -- A series of reports based on new maps covering nearly half of the world's forests concludes that vast areas of remaining intact or old-growth and primary forests are being degraded as the result of unsustainable development practices.

(In Indonesia)Sixty four million hectares of forest have been cut down over the past 50 years. There is no economic or ethical justification for another 64 million hectares to be lost over the next 50 years. "

It may not be ethical, but there's some economic rationality, because someone is gaining from this kind of activity: foresters, loggers, industries, commerce, furniture makers, and , yes, local farmers, who will get some benefit from the clearing of the forests.

But nowhere are there signs of a realistic approach to the world situation.

Poverty is related to unemployment, unemployment is related to a growing number of the world's labour force which has expanded from 1.2 billion people in 1950 to nearly 3 billion in 1999. Over the same period, the world's total population surged from 2.5 to 6 billion. . Governments in developing countries must find employment for the growing number of young job seekers.

"If population increases remain on the current trajectory, the global work force will swell from 3 billion to nearly 4.5 billion by 2050. Of these 1. billion new job seekers, almost all will live in developing nations, where rapid population growth translates into intense pressure on job markets.

Already struggling to satisfy basic needs, such as access to clean water and sanitation, many of these countries will be hard-pressed to create the required jobs. In the world's 50 poorest nations, the work force will surge some 235 percent by 2050."
(Worldwatch Institute)

As for the conservation of Biological diversity, if the objective is " ...to consider means to enhance developing countries' capabilities to compete in the emerging market for biological resources, while improving the functioning of that market.", this sounds like a blank cheque for exploitation and, ultimately, for destruction: because we know from historical evidence, that when local people have been in charge of their resources, sooner or later they have succeeded in depleting them. (see for ex. THE ECOLOGICAL INDIAN: Myth and History, by Shepard 1999; <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0393321002>

We have plenty to learn from the past:

"What becomes of the surplus of human life? It is either, 1st. destroyed by infanticide, as among the Chinese and Lacedemonians; or 2d. it is stifled or starved, as among other nations whose population is commensurate to its food; or 3d. it is consumed by wars and endemic diseases; or 4th. it overflows, by emigration, to places where a surplus of food is attainable." (James Madison, 1791)

Or better:

"The North can gain much by recolonizing. But we do have the ultimate weapon. People are more mobile now. They can go anywhere. In a borderless world we can go anywhere. If we are not allowed a good life in our countries, if we are going to be global citizens, then we should migrate North. We should migrate North in our millions, legally or illegally. Masses of Asians and Africans should inundate Europe and America. If there is any strength that we have, it is in the

numbers. .." (Malaysian Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Bin Mohamad, at the First Southern Africa International Dialogue at Kasane, Botswana . May 5, 1997, (reported by Ross McCluney, Ph.D.Florida)

This statement doesn't take into account that if enough migrants from the poorest parts of the world came to the rich North looking for the good life, they will contribute by their sheer numbers and cultural and environmental impact to destroy the goose that lays the golden egg. Some of the megalopolis's outskirts of the North are already starting to look and feel and smell like Third World slums. Wealth can not be taken for granted and we can collapse too, together locked in a deadly embrace.

So: what is the answer to reducing poverty and obtain SD ? There's no hope of achieving any Sustainability, when demographic growth continues at this pace. Rather than just stop the growth, we should think of reducing it to the level of the Earth's long-term carrying capacity .

Unfortunately, if not controlled by blitz-style legislation, we seem to be predisposed to overshoot the carrying capacity of our environment. (see Rees & company has done a good first numerical approximation of carrying capacity. " Revisiting Carrying Capacity: Area-Based Indicators of Sustainability" by William E. Rees, The University of British Columbia)

The more the numbers, the more the need for food, water, energy, major extension of cultivated land, the spread of the dreaded (by ecologists) GMOs, soil erosion, pollution, loss of biodiversity , realisation of costly public works (habitations, roads, hospitals, schools) which will concrete over the little that s left over from agricultural land, social problems already unmanageable and a lower life quality for all. We have already surpassed our carrying capacity by a long chalk.

We have entered the Global Era and the increase in population in one region affects in a devastating way the rest of the world. Poverty, which we are supposed to fight, gets out of hand when the poor people multiply , multiplyin their own poverty. Here a tragic struggle for unfertile or inhospitable territory is being played out.

Desertification, urban disintegration and proliferation of crime, destruction of natural capital, toxic waste, pollution of unregulated new megalopolis, competition with other species for survival, destruction of forests, are all consequences of poverty, not mitigated by technological fixes.

Totally human-centred ethics with its emphasis on human rights as distinct from duties, will always favour population increase and consumption of resources, which are following and fuelling at the same time economic growth . The irony is that this growth which sustains civilisation, if not checked, will in the end destroy the ecosystems which sustains it.

This in turn will elicit raucous demands for economic growth . Economic growth will fuel increased consumption of available resources. Furthermore, redistribution of wealth will encourage more population expansion and as natural resources are not inexhaustible, without population control no development can be sustainable.