

THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT
& THE NGO FORUM '94: VIEW FROM THE MEDIA CENTRE

I've been asked to say a few words about the media and the ICPD and NGO Forum 1994. I guess the most significant fact in this context is that there were almost as many media professionals covering the events in Cairo as there were delegates participating in the official conference -- approximately 4000! From all accounts this was an unprecedented ratio.

The question is what all the journalists were doing there and whether their presence in such large numbers ensured a reasonably holistic coverage of the ICPD, the Forum and/or the wide range of issues relevant to any current discussion of population and development.

In my opinion, the ICPD attracted such a lot of media attention -- particularly in the West and, within that, the U.S. -- largely because of the unfortunate controversy over abortion, which was generated primarily by the Holy See in collaboration with some Catholic countries, and fuelled rather late in the day by a few Islamic nations.

It is well-known that abortion is a political hot potato in the U.S. In addition, of course, population growth in Third World or Southern countries has been a major obsession in the North for a long time, with the U.S., particularly, concerned about the impact of such growth on its own economic and strategic interests.

As most of us know, the ICPD was the fifth in a series of decadal international conferences on population, which began in Rome in 1954. After all these years of focussing almost exclusively on family planning programmes and contraceptives as the means of reducing population growth, this time the mandate was considerably broader:

For the first time there was to be a serious attempt to place the issue firmly within the context of development -- with development, too, seen rather differently from the way it was understood when India made its dramatic statement at the 1974 conference: "Development is the best contraceptive."

However, by the time the ICPD rolled around, the world's attention was almost exclusively focussed on the abortion conundrum.

The fact is, of course, that 90 per cent of the 113-page Programme of Action, with its 16 chapters on different aspects of

the issue, including one on "The Inter-relationships between Population, Sustained Economic Growth and Sustainable Development," had been agreed upon by the end of the third meeting of the preparatory committee, which had taken place in New York in April this year.

Only the sections on which there was no consensus in New York -- including the concepts of reproductive and sexual health and rights (in which were subsumed matters like fertility regulation and, within that, abortion) -- were on the agenda for discussion in Cairo. This is one reason why it seemed as if the Cairo conference was about abortion, rather than population and development.

It is true that an inordinate amount of time was spent in attempting to get consensus on the contentious passages in which the Holy See detected acceptance of the right to abortion. But, while reporting on the daily proceedings, the media could and should have paid some attention to the rest of the document and informed the world of the other issues which it dealt or did not deal with.

For example, the media hardly highlighted the tussle in Cairo between labour importing and exporting countries on the question of the right to family reunification of international migrants.

Also, a Swiss proposal to outline certain practical measures to curb unsustainable patterns of production and consumption sank almost without a trace in the media centre.

Similarly, not much media attention was paid to the financial arrangements which are crucial for the implementation of the Programme of Action.

Instead, all eyes were on the spokespersons of the Vatican and its most organised and effective counterpoint, an organisation called Catholics for Free Choice. The other person who could command a packed press briefing room was the spokesperson for the Iranian delegation.

Even pre-Cairo, the media was preoccupied with the Holy See until opposition from certain Islamic quarters became public somewhat late in the day. The threats of violence issued by a militant Islamic group just prior to the opening of the ICPD were also predictably played up by the media.

The media found another typical darling during the conference: a male anti-abortion activist who stationed himself outside the official conference halls, daily accosting delegates with his box

of plastic fetuses in different stages of maturity.

Both in Cairo and back home, there was a tendency among some journalists to resort to simplistic stereotypes of people, especially those they did not agree or feel comfortable with. For instance, one Indian male journalist has described women lobbying for the retention of language about reproductive and sexual health and rights as "RRs" or "reproductive rightists." An even more offensive term was coined by another Indian male journalist who never went to Cairo but wrote a piece entitled: "Inanity in Cairo: Feminazis and NGOs."

For me, all these patterns of behaviour only helped to confirm my long-held conviction that something is very wrong with the way the media defines news, perceives issues and purveys information.

Apart from this, all that remains to be said about the media in Cairo is that the media centre was maddeningly chaotic, partly because of the unexpected explosion in the population of media professionals in Cairo, but also because of extremely poor infrastructural arrangements.

In spite of this, there were three daily newspapers reporting on the conference and the NGO Forum -- Terra Viva (brought out by Inter Press Service), The Earth Times (published by the Earth Times Foundation) and ICPD Watch (produced by Women's Features Service). In addition, there was the Earth Negotiations Bulletin, which provided daily summaries of the debates in the official conference.

In fact, the latter was the only source of written information about the proceedings in the Main Committee (where the crucial negotiations went on while formal speeches were delivered in the plenaries held in the main conference hall). The lack of access to journalists of the sessions of the Main Committee hampered accurate coverage and caused considerable frustration among press persons.

The last point I would like to make is that there was an obvious lack of preparedness on the part of Indian NGO (and official) delegations when it came to presenting their issues, concerns and viewpoints -- particularly to the media. In this context, it is important to remember that press statements/conferences/encounters/kits must be planned with care, keeping in mind the compulsions under which even the most concerned and sympathetic journalists have to function.

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