



Nate Heard, former Population Connection Fellow reports for us directly from the "Bullpen" at the Press Center in Johannesburg.

The World Summit on Sustainable Development:

Where did all the people go?

by Nate Heard, Special to The Reporter

In 1992, the world's leaders met at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro to sign Agenda 21, a declaration of their intention to seek a balance between the Earth's present human population needs and the needs of future generations. Ten years later, heads of state gathered in Johannesburg to review progress, renew commitments to Agenda 21, and forge new goals.

Yet, as the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) unfolded, it became clear that one crucial piece of the sustainable development puzzle would be largely ignored: population.

While the world's population had increased by nearly three-quarters of a billion people in the ten years between the two meetings, the summit's main document, the Plan of Implementation, shockingly omitted almost any mention of population.

Agenda 21 had devoted an entire chapter to the ways in which population dynamics affect the environment and influence economic growth, urging policy makers to combine environmental concerns and population issues within a holistic view of development. Two years later in Cairo, the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) greatly expanded upon this view and emphasized the centrality of population policy to sustainable development. Yet such goals and pledges were suspiciously absent from Johannesburg.

Despite their absence from formal negotiations, population issues were consistently abuzz at press briefings, side events, and parallel proceedings. Scientists presenting preliminary results from the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment discussed population's role as a powerful driver of environmental change. Rapid population growth surfaced again at the World Bank's review of water scarcity as a source of interstate conflict. During a high profile panel discussion, UNAIDS Ambassador

Mechai Viravaidya openly lamented the low priority population had been accorded at the summit.

As well, The Global Science Panel on Population and Environment's panel coordinator, Mahendra Shah, reminded reporters that "the road from Rio to Johannesburg runs through Cairo," saying that "if we do not put the human population at the core of the sustainable development agenda, our efforts to improve human well-being and preserve the quality of the environment will fail."

The panel declined to speculate on reasons population might have been left off the agenda despite the continuity on population and sustainability issues that had been painstakingly cultivated at UN conferences over previous decades. Mari Simonen of the Technical Support Division of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) awkwardly sidestepped questions about whether the Bush administration had lobbied behind the scenes to interfere with population's placement on the summit's agenda. While heads of state and UN officials were diplomatic, President Bush's policies and absence from the conference were roundly criticized.

In fact, at an UNFPA cosponsored event, pointed criticism of the Bush administration emerged. Timothy Wirth, President of the United Nations Foundation and Better World Fund, lambasted the Bush administration for waging a profound war on women that is being orchestrated by a small group of cloistered men that do not understand healthy sexuality. The audience resoundingly responded with applause of agreement. Such disappointment with many leaders of the world's governments and non-governmental organizations was a continuing theme



Former U.S. Senator Timothy Wirth



A scene supplying two very different attitudes toward sexuality in South Africa. Photo: Nate Heard

throughout the summit. "Population policy has become a story of timidity, failure, and ignorance," he said. The failure is to live up to the commitments of Cairo.

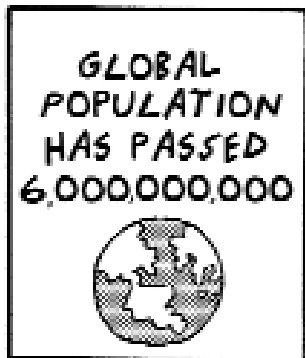
Such displeasure with failed leadership was evident when Secretary of State Colin Powell addressed NGO and government representatives. In light of the merciless heckling Powell endured during his address to the plenary, it was unclear whether Bush would have been able to deliver a complete address even if he had come to Johannesburg.

Amazingly, although heads of many UN agencies were highly visible at the summit, Thoraya Obaid, UNFPA Executive Director, was absent. Instead, UNFPA Deputy Executive Director Kunio Waki represented the world's largest multilateral source of population assistance. Given the UNFPA's role in cultivating

the multifaceted development framework, Director Obaid's absence was as conspicuous and unfortunate as President Bush's.

In the end, the summit produced a political declaration and a plan of implementation. Disappointingly, apart from an isolated reference in the Plan of Implementation to connections between growing population and future demands on agriculture, neither document explicitly addressed population growth or its effect on development or the environment.

While the commitments and outcomes of the ICPD and ICPD + 5 were reaffirmed at Johannesburg, WSSD's silence on population is unmistakable. When compared to the substantial attention given to population in Agenda 21, Johannesburg represents a major step back.



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Above: Yet one more (humorous) reason for our name change from Zero Population Growth to Population Connection!