

Berlin Dialogue

- (1) The 1994 ICPD signalled a shift from a demographic/economic rationale for family planning (FP) to a broader agenda of reproductive health and rights. This weakening of the link between FP and poverty-reduction proved to be a disaster for FP. International funding fell by over 50% and international discourse about the dangers of rapid population increase almost stopped. One consequence is that the governments of poor countries (mainly in Africa) have received very little international encouragement over the past 15 years to promote FP or to express concern about population growth. This lack of attention is one reason why fertility declines that started in Africa in the 1980s have slowed down in many countries. Poverty and hunger reduction as well as other MDGs will be much more difficult to achieve because of continued high fertility and population growth.**
- (2) Real political power to decide priorities and allocate funds are held by Ministers of Finance. They are most unlikely to be swayed by a human rights approach and are often baffled by the complex concept of SRHR. To re-invigorate family planning, it will be necessary to return to the pre- ICPD rationale of linking FP to social and economic progress.**
- (3) Related to point 2 above a rights approach is hopeless for setting priorities. For instance Niger's population is expected to grow from about 17 million to over 50 million by mid-century and as a result faces a demographic disaster with dim prospects of escaping from poverty and famines. Yet according to a World Bank report of 2005 there had been more meetings in that country on sexuality in old age and infertility than on FP or population. This is a grotesque distortion of priorities. Priorities have to be based on economic or public health considerations not on rights.**
- (4) Part of the problem with rights is that they proliferate in number and now embrace an extensive wish list---education, employment, clean water etc etc etc. The greater the number, the less value they have. It's rather like a central bank increasing the money supply---sooner or later the value of the currency drops.**
- (5) Some countries in Africa, such as Niger, not only have high fertility but have high desired fertility and low unmet need for FP. The instinct of a rights devotee is to proclaim "no problem". But this stance is very dangerous and short sighted. A more beneficial approach would be to challenge people's reproductive desires and point out that, while they may have been reasonable 100 years ago when life expectancy was 25-30 years, they now spell disaster in the long term.**
- (6) No poor and poorly educated country has achieved high levels of FP use and a sustained reduction in fertility and population growth without a high profile FP programme, backed by political support at the top and adequate international funding. A rights approach is most unlikely to lead to such a desirable combination because of unjustified fears that pressure will be exerted on couples to change their reproductive behaviour.**
- (7) Rights and concerns about population problems can be reconciled. The latter determines priorities and the former constrains actions and ensures that customers or clients are given correct information and are treated with respect etc etc. This emphasis on quality has been part of FP programmes for many years and much of the rights rhetoric is no more than old wine in new bottles.**