

STATEMENT ON POPULATION AND THE ENVIRONMENT

The current macro debate which portrays population growth as the central variable in environmental degradation is not supported by research findings. Extremes of wealth and poverty, leading to overconsumption by some and the erosion of livelihoods for others, skewed distribution and use of resources, and patterns of human settlement (including urbanization) have a stronger demonstrable relationship to environmental degradation than population size per se. In addition, macro/global economic strategies and policy decisions are increasingly affecting both people and the natural environment. These findings are supported in study after study, across a wide range of social and environmental conditions.

There has been a long tradition of people adapting to and shaping the natural environment through the accumulation of local knowledge and experience. This relationship has been increasingly disrupted as a result of external global forces, notably the globalization of capital, large-scale technology and communications, subordination within world

markets, and rising levels of consumption by the rich, particularly concentrated in industrialized countries. These processes have eroded livelihoods, the natural environment, and the interaction between people and their environment. The focus on population growth as the key factor in degrading the environment is thus misplaced.

Because poor women and children are the poorest of the poor, and because of the central role that women play in household and natural resource management, they are particularly affected by the erosion of livelihoods. It has been repeatedly demonstrated that fertility is determined by cultural and socio-economic factors such as women's economic autonomy, legal and political rights, education, and access to reproductive health services and health. Fertility decline is also related to the improved survival chances of offspring. However, general erosion of livelihoods as a result of global economic and political forces, and resulting national policies, are increasingly undermining women's access to health services (including family planning services) and education.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

★ Despite current ideologies and policies favoring trade liberalization free of state regulation, market forces cannot be relied upon to protect the livelihoods of people or the health of the environment.

★ The global community (including NGOs and international institutions), national and local governments have an obligation to protect the environment and to help to ensure the sustainable livelihoods of present and future generations.

★ The extractive industries including mining, logging and petroleum tend to disrupt both the physical and social environment. It is therefore recommended that:

- ❖ an international database of the social, economic and environmental effects of these traded resources be established;
- ❖ information drawn from the database be made available to local communities;
- ❖ social and environmental impact studies be commissioned by governments; and

❖ an international code of ethics for extractive companies be incorporated into all concessions and contracts.

★ Intensive agriculture, transformative industries and military activities that may produce waste and pollution as well as severe social and economic dislocation adversely affect the environment and the health of people. Critical assessment of the environmental and human effects of these processes is urgently needed.

★ In order to promote the sustainability of agriculture, international organizations, national governments, and producers' associations must develop and disseminate more careful guidelines and regulations. This would help to ensure that the use of modern agricultural technology such as fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides, irrigation and machinery have the least deleterious impact on the environment and people.

★ There must be a reassessment of macro-economic forces such as debt, resulting structural adjustment programs, financial and trade flows and agreements, and national government interventions, to mitigate their dramatic and damaging effects on the natural environment and livelihoods of the poor.

★ In order to promote sustainable development in general and livelihoods in particular:

❖ Management of local resources and the definition of "environmental problems", must be democratized so that local communities can influence and invoke state regulations and policies which protect their access to resources.



❖ Women's entitlements and access to key services must increase, e.g.

- ✓ education
- ✓ employment/child care
- ✓ health care for themselves and their families
- ✓ adequate reproductive health services
- ✓ equal property and legal rights.

❖ Women must have a stronger role in decision making.

❖ Women and men must have increased access to information on the environmental damage of the industrialized products and processes which they encounter in every day life.

★ Governments, corporations, academic institutions and society must promote more environmentally-sound and sustainable forms of development and technology, including the transfer of environmentally-appropriate technology. To this end, innovative measures must be developed and implemented with respect to national income accounting systems, taxation and legislation.

★ There must be a concerted effort on the part of the local, national, and global communities to change values that have led to overconsumption, so as to promote a new ethic which attaches primacy to caring for people in harmony with the environment.

Concerned scholars participating in a SSRC/ISSC/DAWN workshop on population and the environment, Mexico, Jan/Feb 1992