

The United Nations World Summit on Sustainable Development – A Counter-Productive Exercise in Futility

by Donald Mann, NPG President

The World Summit on Sustainable Development concluded its 10 days of deliberations at Johannesburg on September 4th. If the purpose of the conference was to define the problem and then advocate an adequate solution to it the conference was a disappointing – although not an unexpected – failure. Based on newspaper reports, the delegates spent their time puttering about the perimeters of the central problem that they were never capable of defining. With regard to sustainability, the central problem is surely overpopulation – too many people. Sustainability is not even remotely possible with the world's present over six billion inhabitants.

If impossibility admits of degrees, how much more impossible will it be to create a sustainable world economy with further population growth and a world population which is projected to reach, in this century, nine or ten billion (in the unlikely event that the world's resources will allow such growth to be achieved)? What is desperately needed is an interim period of negative population growth so that world population growth can be halted, then reversed, and eventually stabilized at a sustainable level, far lower than it is today. An impossible goal? No, not impossible. Difficult to be sure, but certainly not impossible, whereas to create a sustainable economy with a world of six billion people would be.

The delegates at the World Summit completely ignored the root cause – overpopulation — of the ills they were trying to cure. For example, much was made of the agreement between Israel and Jordan to save the Dead Sea by building a 186-mile pipeline to pump water from the Red Sea into the

dying Dead Sea. What in the world does that have to do with sustainability?

As another example, developing countries wanted the world to agree to halve the number of people without sanitation by 2015. A worthy goal to be sure but one impossible to achieve if population growth is allowed to continue. What practical importance could such an agreement possibly have?

In an editorial on September 6th, *The New York Times* had this to say, "It's not as if the issues addressed by the conference were marginal ones. The delegates grappled with such basic problems as the fact that more than 13,000 people die each day from water-related diseases, more than 80 countries have per capita incomes lower than they were a decade ago, and some 2.4 billion people live without sanitation. Also on the agenda was the grim reality that land degradation from deforestation, waste disposal and overuse of fertilizers has rendered a third of the earth's soil unfit for growing food."

The issues addressed by the conference were certainly not marginal ones, but the recommendations by the delegates to remedy the ills cited were. The delegates carefully avoided any mention of the only possible cure – a reduction in population.

The Times' editorial went on to say, "The meeting did not come up with instant solutions, but it did offer a conceptual framework and a series of targets for how to go about reducing health and environmental problems in the coming decade or two while promoting economic growth (emphasis added)." So, was the conference about sustainable development, or was it really about promoting sustainable economic growth? NPG has long

recognized that the term “sustainable economic growth” is an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. If anything is certain it is that perpetual economic growth, or any material growth, is impossible in a world of limits. If the conference had formally recognized that truth it would have taken a giant step toward sustainability.

I would like to suggest that at the next World Summit on Sustainable Development the following questions be put on the agenda for debate and discussion:

1. How can we go about creating a world economy that will be sustainable indefinitely? What needs to be done?
2. Is a sustainable world economy possible with a world population of six billion people or more? If not, what size world population would be compatible with a sustainable world economy?
3. Can economic growth be sustainable in a world of limits such as the one we live in?
4. Is sustainable development the same as sustainable economic growth? If they are not the same, what is the difference between the two?
5. If we need to halt and then reverse population growth in order to achieve a smaller world population that would be sustainable indefinitely, how could we go about achieving a negative rate of population growth?

NPG’s answers to the above questions are as follows:

A drastic reduction in world population size is the essential precondition to creating a world economy that would be sustainable indefinitely.

A sustainable world economy would be impossible to achieve with a world population of six billion

or more people. We believe that a world population in the range of one to two billion might well be sustainable.

Any material growth cannot possibly be sustainable in a world of limits. Exponential growth cannot be sustained for very long. No resource, regardless of how vast, can withstand more than a very few doublings.

Sustainable development is not the same as sustainable economic growth. The former deals with changes in quality and not with material growth. The latter deals with physical growth and requires the growth of energy and materials to fuel that growth.

To achieve a negative rate of population growth any given country would need to have a below replacement level fertility. Japan, and most European countries, already have a below replacement level of fertility, in many cases far too low. In those countries there is an urgent need to increase their fertility rate so that it moves closer to, while still remaining below, replacement level.

The problem lies with the developing countries where 90% of future world population growth is projected to occur. In those countries, depending on mortality rates, replacement level fertility ranges between 2.1 and 2.4 children per woman. At present, in most developing countries, fertility is far higher than replacement level. For such nations NPG has long recommended that family planning be supplemented by non-coercive incentives and disincentives to encourage parents to have not more than one or two children.

As a final word, I believe that the World Summit on Sustainable Development was, unfortunately, counter-productive, which my dictionary defines as “tending to hinder the attainment of a desired goal.” That is because it proposed solutions that fail to address the central problem, which is overpopulation. The danger is that if an inadequate solution is accepted as adequate, then the only real solution – in this case a reduction in world population – will not be seriously considered or even discussed.