World Bank tells developing sector: slash population growth or else

by Mary Lalevée

The World Bank issued its "World Development Report 1984" at the beginning of July, obviously aimed at the World Population Conference to take place in Mexico City in mid-August. The report claims that "many developing countries will only escape from poverty if they manage to slow down their population growth." The World Bank's focus on the black and brown population of the world as a "problem" is not new: Last year's World Bank Report called for a 40% reduction in the population growth rate of African nations, and the World Bank's 1981 report, "Accelerated Development in Sub-Saharan Africa," stressed that "perhaps the most critical long-term problem [facing Africa] is rapid population growth."

Is the disaster now facing large parts of the developing sector, and especially Africa, with famine and chaos threatening many nations, really due to population growth? Does it make sense to say that there are too many people in Africa, where the total population of the entire continent is less than 500 million, whereas the whole of Europe, which could fit into just one African country, Zaire, has more than 530 million? Kenya, where World Bank President A. W. Clausen made his speech announcing the publication of the report, has only 18 million people according to the World Bank's own figures, with 24 people per square kilometer, whereas the number of inhabitants per square kilometer in West Germany is 247.

One might have thought that the evident failure of international financial institutions over the last 20 years to help the developing sector to actually develop into modern, industrialized nations would have led to some questioning of those policies. On the contrary, the fact that there was no starvation in Africa 20 years ago, and there is today, does not lead the World Bank to question its assumptions, but to reaffirm its proposals for the developing sector. The World Bank stressed in its 1981 report on Africa that the continent's nations should concentrate on small-scale agriculture, producing export crops. In its latest report, the World Bank fails to mention that the collapse in commodity prices has led to drastically reduced incomes for African countries which depend on one or two commodities for export revenue. The price of coffee dropped 22.8% between 1979 and 1981, and the price of cocoa dropped 47.0%. The concentration on export crops has also left African countries unable to produce food for their own populations.

The World bank has also practically stopped lending to African countries. In a memorandum to the United Nations, the Economic Commission for Africa reports, "The World Bank has indicated that only nine African countries can borrow exclusively on its terms," and that capital flows to Africa have declined from $14.2 billion in 1982 to $7.8 billion in 1983. The World Bank report does not mention this, nor the fact that developing countries' debt problems are due to the tremendous increase in interest rates and unfavorably rigged exchange rates and terms of trade, but states: "For the indebted sovereign borrower, the service of debt is a matter of political will. . . . Given the effects of the recession and the growth of debt, debtors have to show that they are prepared to pay interest out of their own income." The World Bank blames difficulties in debt repayment on "over-valued exchange rates," "protection of producers," and "import controls" in the developing sector.

Clausen's genocidal racism

The reason behind the World Bank's determination to stick to its policies can be found at the end of World Bank President A. W. Clausen's speech in Kenya: "World population has grown faster, and to higher numbers, than Malthus would ever have imagined. But so have world production and income. If we can correct the current mismatch between population and income-producing ability, a mismatch that leaves many of the world's people in a vicious circle of poverty and high fertility, we may yet evade the doom which Malthus saw as inevitable. It is *not* inevitable that history will vindicate his dire prediction of human numbers outrunning global resources. We have a choice. But that choice must be made now. Opportunity is on our side. But time is not."

Throughout his speech, and throughout the World Bank report, the Malthusian world view is repeated and elaborated. Clausen comments that by the year 2150, "Kenya's population would have risen from 19.7 million today to a staggering 160 million, a situation surely as impermissible as it is unimaginable. *And, as a group, the countries of South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa would account for about 50% of the world's people, compared with about 30% today. These are awe-inspiring projections* [emphasis added]."

These statements are nothing but straightforward racism. Why should it be "impermissible" for Kenya to have 160 million people? In the countries of West Germany and Great Britain, with a surface area equivalent to Kenya's, more than 117 million people live today. The World Bank does not describe this as "impermissible."

Three nonsense arguments

Clausen presents three arguments to "prove" that rapid population growth is a development problem. "First, it exacerbates the difficult choice between higher consumption now and the investment needed to bring higher consumption in the future. As population grows more rapidly, larger investments are needed just to maintain current capital per person. . . . Second, in many countries increases in population threaten what is already a precarious balance between natural resources and people, as here in Kenya." Both arguments are nonsense. In the real world—unless it is run by Clausen—scientific and technological progress wholly redefines productivity and the resource base, permitting even vast population growth at higher standards of living. Primitive subsistence agriculture, which he supports, destroys the environment, whereas capital-intensive and mechanized agriculture produces far more with far less catastrophic effects on the environment. Lack of energy supplies forces the population to burn wood for fuel, destroying forests and allowing the spread of desertification.

"Third, rapid population growth is creating urban economic and social problems that risk becoming wholly unmanageable. Cities in developing countries are growing to a size for which there is no prior experience anywhere." Does the fact that a problem is new mean that it cannot be solved? Five hundred years ago, there were no cities the size of Washington, D.C.

The Bank cites China as the example of a developing sector country which has drastically reduced its population growth rate—through infanticide, forced abortions, and forced sterilizations. The World Bank is proposing the same methods for all countries.

The World Bank has spent about $500 million for population projects over the last 14 years, and Clausen announced, "The Bank intends to at least double its population and related health lending. The major focus will be on Africa and Asia. . . . During the next five years, the number of population and related health projects that we plan to finance in sub-Saharan Africa will rise to 21 from the total of 3 financed by the Bank in the five years to mid-1983. And the number of countries which will be borrowing from us for that purpose will likely rise from 3 to 17."

The head of the Club of Life in Zaire, Rev. Mpolesha Dibala, commented during that organization's recent series of conferences on the food crisis in Africa: "It seems there is always money available for population reduction programs, but not for development projects. Just why is that?"

A glossary of World Bank demands

The World Bank's proposals to solve the international economic crisis may not be readily intelligible to all readers. Therefore, we are providing a glossary of the terms and phrases used, translated into plain language.

1) "Industrial nations must reduce their budget deficits." In other words: Cut such vital sectors as U.S. defense spending.

2) "Structural changes must be undertaken in industrial nations to free up competitive forces: from reducing subsidies to inefficient industries to reducing labor market interventions by governments." In other words: Let strategic industries like steel collapse and let labor be forced into wage and living standard cuts under the oligarchical bankers' "post-industrial" policy.

3) "Protectionism must be rolled back and trade liberalization must be undertaken in earnest." In other words: No country should emulate the Hamiltonian policies of protecting infant industries that built the United States into a great industrial power; rather, former colonies should remain economically *colonies*.

4) "Developing nations must avoid overvalued exchange rates." In other words: Accept accelerated deflation in prices of exports, and accelerated inflation in prices of imports, including food needed by starving populations: In other words: accept genocide.

5) "These [developing] countries must be more flexible in public spending approaches, and must reduce inefficiencies that hamper productivity and investment." In other words: Cut government spending on health and education.

6) "The multilateral financial institutions must be better utilized to assist economic development." In other words: Accept the IMF dictatorship.

7) "More commercial bank funds must flow to nations where great efforts are being undertaken to strengthen their economic prospects." In other words: Countries whose governments obey IMF orders to kill their own peoples to keep up debt payments will be rewarded.

8) "There must be a greater volume of official development assistance"—but only to countries that agree to cut their populations.