## Climate Change and Population: the old game of blaming women and the poor

Farida Akhter, 5 December 2009

The 2009 edition of The State of World Population was released just before the 15th Session of the United Nations Climate Change Conference of Parties (COP15) to be held in Copenhagen, Denmark from 7 - 18 December, 2009. It shows that climate change is more than an issue of energy efficiency or industrial carbon emissions; it is also an issue of population dynamics, poverty and gender equity. In Bangladesh, the UNFPA Representative, Mr. Arthur Erken launched the report at Hotel Sonargaon in the capital city Dhaka. The focus of the UNFPA report of 2009 is women, population and climate change.

Making the link between population, climate change and women is a bit tricky in the context of developing countries, because according to our experiences since the Earth Summit of 1992, every time the wealthy nations of the world are reminded of their contribution to the degradation of environment, they tend to point fingers at the poorer countries and talk about population. Since the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo, Egypt, women are linked with the solution to problems of poverty, environmental degradation, climate change and other social issues. In an overly simplistic way, they propose that women can solve the problem by having fewer children, thus reducing the number of people being affected by climate change related disasters.

In December 2009, world leaders from 192 countries are supposed to come to an agreement at the COP 15 of the UNFCCC to keep global temperatures below catastrophic levels. The Conference of the Parties (COP) to the <u>United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)</u> was adopted in 1992 as the basis for a global response to the problem. The ultimate objective of the Convention is to stabilise greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that will prevent dangerous human interference with the climate system.

According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) 2008 State of the Climate Report and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's (NASA) 2008 Surface Temperature Analysis, (1) since the mid-1970s, the average surface temperature has warmed about 1°F; (2) the Earth's surface is currently warming at a rate of about 0.29°F/decade or 2.9°F/century, and (3) the eight warmest years on record (since 1880) have all occurred since 2001, with the warmest year being 2005.

According to the most recent assessment report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2007) the warming trend is seen in both daily maximum and minimum temperatures, with minimum temperatures increasing at a faster rate than maximum ones. Land areas have tended to warm faster than ocean areas, and the winter months have warmed faster than summer months.

However, the extent and duration of this rise and the severity of its consequences depend on how quickly and effectively emissions of greenhouse gases can be restricted and, over time, reduced. Since the preparations for the conference at COP 13 and 14 held in Bali and Poznan respectively, everyone is waiting for a new global climate agreement to be negotiated by the world leaders, especially those from the developed countries.

It is a well acknowledged fact that the developed countries and major emerging economy nations lead in total carbon dioxide emissions. Developed nations such as United States, Canada, UK, and Germany etc. typically have high carbon dioxide emissions per capita and high total carbon emissions. Thus developing countries expected that these wealthy industrialised nations must take the main responsibility for cutting carbon emissions. But at the closing session of the Ad hoc Working Group on Further Commitments for Annex I Parties under the Kyoto Protocol (AWG-KP) held in Barcelona in early November, many developing countries, including Bangladesh, expressed their deep frustration at the slow progress of its work, especially in arriving at the scale of Annex I (developed country) Parties' greenhouse gas emission reductions for the second commitment period under the Protocol.

According to the Third World Network Barcelona News Update (#12, 9 November 2009), the announcements for emission reduction targets by developed countries in aggregate range between 13-26% below 1990 levels by 2020 as calculated by the Secretariat of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and 12-19% by the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) if the US (non-Kyoto Protocol Party) is included. This does not meet the expectation of what the developed countries are supposed to do. Climate scientists say that the world must stop the growth in greenhouse gas emissions and start making them fall from around 2015 to 2020. By 2050 they estimate the world must cut its emissions by 80% compared with 1990 levels to limit global warming to a 2C average rise. Therefore, the prospects of developed countries coming up with ambitious targets in Copenhagen are not good, as indicated in the final contact group session on this issue in Barcelona on 6 November 2009.

While the developed countries are failing to meet their commitments of coming to an agreement for reduction in carbon emissions, they are now adding a new dimension to the issue and that is "population." In the State of World Population Report, 2009 it says, "A growing body of evidence shows that recent climate change is primarily the result of human activity. The influence of human activity on climate change is complex. It is about what we consume, the types of energy

we produce and use, whether we live in a city or on a farm, whether we live in a rich or poor country, whether we are young or old, what we eat, and even the extent to which women and men enjoy equal rights and opportunities. It is also about our growing numbers—approaching 7 billion. As the growth of population, economies and consumption outpaces the earth's capacity to adjust, climate change could become much more extreme—and conceivably catastrophic."

Very surprisingly the report gives a new figure of world population as approaching 7 billion (from the present level of 6 billion plus) without any population census being held in any country. It is simply a calculation based on estimates of birth rates. Don't we need a population census anymore? Secondly, although the report clearly admits that population growth has been a smaller contributor to growth in energy-related carbon-dioxide emissions, they still want the debate to be raised. The report says: "Indeed, fear of appearing supportive of population control has until recently held back any mention of "population" in the climate debate. Nonetheless, some participants in the debate are tentatively suggesting the need at least to consider the impacts of population growth."

The population debate is associated with the debate on consumption. There is no doubt that the wealthier countries and wealthy people in particular are responsible for the high level of consumption which is again responsible for carbon dioxide emissions. The Population report, 2009 quotes environmental journalist Fred Pearce (2009) that "[T]he world's richest half-billion people—that's about 7 per cent of the global population— are responsible for 50 per cent of the world's carbon dioxide emissions and the poorest 50 per cent are responsible for just 7 per cent of emissions." Therefore, even with large numbers of people in the developing countries, their carbon emissions are only 7% -- only one-seventh of what the wealthy nations are contributing. Blaming population growth as an influence on climate change has also been refuted by environmental activists from Bangladesh who say that "Climate change is far more sensitive to consumption patterns than to demographic considerations."

According to the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) <u>Human Development Report 1998 Overview</u>, which focused on patterns of consumption, the inequalities in consumption are stark. Globally, the 20% of the world's people in the highest-income countries account for 86% of total private consumption expenditures — the poorest 20% a minuscule 1.3%. More specifically, the richest 20% of population: consume 45% of all meat and fish, 58% of total energy, 84% of all paper and own 87% of the world's vehicle fleet, while the poorest 20% consume 5% of all meat and fish, 4% of total energy, 1.1% of all paper, and own less than 1% of the world's vehicle fleet. The overwhelming growth in consumption in the past 50 years is putting heavy strains on the environment. Despite these statistics, the efforts to blame population growth for climate change did not stop. The arguments to prove that populations in the developing countries, and particularly in the poorest countries, contribute to greenhouse gas emissions have been very weak. Even if we reduce population growth in the

poorest countries, their contribution to the reduction will be not be significant because they are not the big consumers.

Although 'control' of population is not the suggestion, still family planning towards a reduced population growth is given as an answer by the World Population Report, 2009. They quote the United States National Academy of Sciences report of 1992, which emphasizes family planning rather than population control. It says "family planning impacts on greenhouse-gas emissions are important at all levels of development. The family planning effects indicate that, as of 2020. carbon emissions will be about 15 per cent lower for the lower, middle and uppermiddle income countries than they would be without family planning. Strong family planning programmes are in the interests of all countries for greenhousegas concerns as well as for broader welfare concerns." But it does suggest that family planning will contribute to carbon-dioxide reductions. According to population and development expert Betsy Hartmann, "Population control isn't the solution to global warming. In much of the world, birthrates are coming down toward replacement level. In places where they remain relatively high, e.g. sub-Saharan Africa, per-capita emissions are quite low." She adds that "Focusing on population growth not only diverts us from the real problems and solutions at hand, but it could undermine the achievements made at the 1994 U.N. International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo."

In countries like Bangladesh, where a good health care facility is still absent and people are deprived of basic primary health care, a contraceptive-driven family planning programme will simply aggravate problems rather than solving them. The actual implementation of family planning is going to be nothing but population control of the poor, because once the Copenhagen conference brings forward the population equation into the Climate Change issue, fingers will be pointed at the poorer countries and particularly to poorer people. This will allow the rich countries to divert attention from their responsibilities for reducing carbon dioxide emissions by finding easy ways of funding family planning programmes to reduce the number of people.

The shift to the population debate also indicates that more and more people in the poorer regions will be affected by climate-related natural disasters. This is a serious problem. The World Population Report, 2009 estimates that the total number of people suffering the impacts of these natural disasters has tripled over the past decade, with an average of 211 million people directly affected each year. The annual average "humanitarian toll" of climate-related disasters was an estimated 165 million people in the 30 years between 1973 and 2003, amounting to a staggering 98 per cent of all persons killed or affected by natural disasters within that period. There are also indications that this figure is on the rise: from 1998 to 2007, 2.2 billion people were affected by climate disasters compared to 1.8 billion in the previous 10 years.

In Bangladesh, on the occasion of launching the report, UNFPA Representative in Bangladesh Arthur Erken said that poor women in poor countries like Bangladesh were among the hardest hit by climate change, even though they contributed least to it. He said, "The poor are especially vulnerable to the effects of climate change, and the majority of the 1.5 billion people living on \$1 a day or less are women. The poor are more likely to depend on agriculture for a living and therefore risk going hungry or losing their livelihoods when droughts strike, rains become unpredictable and hurricanes move with unprecedented force."

The report was supplemented by a video documentation on 'Population and Climate Change: Facing the challenges in Bangladesh' that portrayed the situation of women under the climatic conditions in Bangladesh, especially after the cyclones Sidr and Aila. In November 2007 cyclone Sidr- the meanest hurricane of all time - took the lives of more than 3,500 people, and thousands had to leave their homes. Cyclone Aila struck Bangladesh on May 25, 2009, putting coastal people in severe danger. About half a million people had to leave their homes and go to temporary shelters. Although the death toll of Aila was less (about 200 people), more than 1,120 people were missing and 200,000 people were trapped in floodwater. Such frequent cyclones, droughts and floods have become almost regular phenomenon. It is true that the poorest people are the hardest hit by such climate-change related disasters. But then how are family planning programmes going to help people in this regard? That having fewer people means a lower death toll is an over-simplified formula. Family planning can only help people not to be born and therefore not to face the disasters by preventing pregnancies. But what about those who are already born in this world and are facing disasters because of the developed nations' emissions? How will family planning help them?

It is good that Bangladesh expressed its concern in Barcelona by saying that the developed countries' pledges are insufficient for global mitigation based on what is needed, according to the science. Bangladesh emphasized the need for political will and solidarity in Copenhagen. It supports the Kyoto Protocol, which is the only legally binding instrument with a compliance regime, and insists that partners should join the international platform.

So let's not divert attention from the real commitments of the developed countries to reduce carbon emissions by blaming the poor countries for the number of people and also not make women the target for contraceptives in the name of solving climate disasters.

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