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INTRODUCTION: THE 1993 NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON SUSTAINABLE SOLUTIONS—POPULATION, CONSUMPTION AND CULTURE

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I. INTRODUCTION

An interesting thing happened to population issues on the way to the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro—they vanished. At Rio, there was almost no discussion of population issues such as family planning, contraception, or women's health. Sharon Camp, the senior vice president of the Population Crisis Committee (now Population Action International) based in Washington, D.C., remembers why:

Most of the problems that developed around the Rio conference [regarding population] came to a head in the last of the PrepCom meetings in New York in April. At that point, there was a very tenuous compromise under which the poorer countries of the South agreed to include population issues on the agenda cross-cutting development issues (Agenda 21) as long as there was very strong language about the need to curb consumption in the North . . . .

That balance was very important going into the last PrepCom meeting. What I believe happened was that the U.S.-led delegation came out very strongly against the consumption language, bracketed all of those paragraphs and called for its deletion. As soon as that happened, the deal was broken and the Group of 77, representing the developing countries of the South, said, 'Okay, if

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we're not going to have that language, we're not going to have language on population.¹

Once the compromise began to fall apart, other parties at the New York meeting took advantage of the opportunity to ensure population would not be a focus of UNCED. Their arguments characterized any talk of contraception or family planning as cultural imperialism, if not outright genocide. As a result, the official documents from Rio say little about the relationship between population and consumption.

This issue of Environmental Affairs presents a selection of six talks from the National Conference on “Sustainable Solutions—Population, Consumption and Culture,” held at Boston College Law School in the Spring of 1993. These talks successfully reflect the three main goals of the Boston College conference. The first aim of the conference was to present first-person accounts of population and consumption dilemmas. For example, Bunmi Makinwa’s talk allows us to visit the southwestern Yoruba people of Nigeria. Through his talk, we meet Makinwa’s grandmother, who continues to encourage Makinwa and his wife to have more children, even though they already have two. We also hear of the pressure on Makinwa’s sister to try a seventh time to have a female child. Thomas Landy’s memories of the lack of clean water and the inadequacy of sewage in Brazil’s favelas (shantytowns) shock us, but we are inspired by the hospitality and solidarity that exists within these communities. Through a more intimate understanding of other people’s lives and a more conscious recognition of our own lifestyles, we effectively can begin to consider sustainable solutions.

The second aim of the “Sustainable Solutions” conference was to discuss population and consumption in terms of cultural variables such as political and economic systems, educational and legal structures, conceptions of family, and regional customs. Compare Dr. Donald Minkler’s discussion of the “veto power” of husbands in Uganda who may refuse their wives any rest from having yet another in a succession of children with Russell Barsh’s insights about the matri-lineal clans of indigenous North Americans, including the Mi’kmaq of Atlantic Canada. The cultural differences which exist between these societies, as the talks demonstrate, have created many of the population and consumption problems which exist and hold the key to their solutions.

Finally, the third aim of the conference was to enable a multidisci-

plinary collection of speakers to present their ideas about concrete, sustainable solutions to problems involving the interfaces among population, consumption and culture. Contrast Werner Fornos' four recommendations for empowering women against Fred Smith's suggestion to privatize resources. All of the talks present nuts-and-bolts suggestions for sustainable solutions based on personal experiences and in the context of the appropriate cultural variables.

The staff of the *Boston College Environmental Affairs Law Review* is proud to present these talks as a foundation for further dialogue concerning the more specific legal questions surrounding population and consumption. Furthermore, we hope that the publication of this conference may help to bridge the gap between Rio's UNCED and the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo.