

PREPRINT

Author-formatted, not peer-reviewed document posted on 17/10/2024

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3897/arphapreprints.e139451>

Cairo Population Conference at Thirty: Impact and Consequences

 **Alexander Tkachenko**

Cairo Population Conference at Thirty: Impact and Consequences

Keywords: international conferences on population, family planning, international parliamentarians' conferences, reproductive rights, UN Sustainable Development Goals, sustainable development, global community

Κοδός JEL: J110, J160, J180

Introduction

In 2024, exactly 30 years have passed since the last international conference on population (Cairo, 1994), which undoubtedly went down in the history of the world community and humanity. As United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) writes, The 30th anniversary of the ICPD in 2024 is a “moment to remind the world of the critical importance of its agenda, which champions people-centred development, rights and choices for all.”¹ The International (World) Conference on Population and Development was held in Cairo, Egypt, from 5 to 13 September 1994. As correctly noted in the Demographic Encyclopedia, the expansion of the conference's name compared to previous similar conferences reflected two hypostases (ὑπό-στάσις) at once, although only one word was introduced - "development". Firstly, this is a new emphasis by both the UN itself and the global community on the problems of social and economic development in the context of a growing global population, on the one hand, and the demographic aging of the world's leading economies, on the other. Secondly, it is the recognition of the high degree of dependence of development, including economic growth, on the characteristics of population growth, its health, education and other quantitative and qualitative characteristics.

In the 1999 General Assembly resolution² that adopted Key Actions for the Further Implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action, it was noted that the Programme of Action of the 1994 Cairo Conference marked the beginning of a *new era* in population. Over the past 30 years, the significance of the conference has not faded.

Main positions of the Cairo Conference

The International Population Conferences, as an important international institution for the exchange of opinions of experts and officials from countries around the world, existed for exactly 70 years, almost as long as the life expectancy at birth of the world's population. The last conference - the International Conference on Population and Development - took place exactly 30 years ago in Cairo (hereinafter referred to as the Cairo Conference) and had a profound influence and far-reaching consequences both in time and space. The Cairo Conference added the concept of “development” to the name of the forum itself, and became a conference on population and development, thus indicating a paradigm for the future attitude to population issues. These problems must be considered through the prism of the development of society, the economy, the environment, social institutions and the state population policy itself. The main theme of the conference was chosen as quite ambitious: “Population, Sustainable Economic Growth, and Sustainable Development”. If, summing up 30 years of development and implementation of the conference's guidelines, we can talk about progress as a whole, then the latest discussions within the UN family organizations show that even before the COVID19 pandemic, the commandment of steady development was violated and a certain retreat from the results already achieved began.

In its statement of the main goal of the conference, it can be considered a forerunner of the UN Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted 20 years later, in which it is already indicated to comprise 17 goals, 169 complex targets, reflected 230 indicators.³

¹ <https://arabstates.unfpa.org/en/events/international-conference-population-and-development>.

² S-21/2. Key actions for the further implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development.

³ The UN SDGs that pop up in every article about the Cairo conference written since 2014.

The conference attempted to formulate a global strategy and plan of action in the field of population issues for the beginning of the 21st century. These problems cover all spheres of human life, family, household, population of a territory or country. Therefore, setting tasks and specific development goals on this scale inevitably leads to an intrusion into the tasks and development goals of society and the country. This does not depend on the nature of population reproduction or on the ideological foundations of the national model of economic development/growth.

It is noteworthy that the conference adopted a Programme of Action [Population and development 1995], designed for 20 years, approved by all participating countries (179 states), and 20 years later, in 2015, the UN adopted a new programme of action: The Sustainable Development Agenda [The Sustainable Development 2018], which covers the entire “aura” of human life: ecology, economy, family well-being, social development and social inclusion. The seventeen UN Sustainable Development Goals for 2030 adopted within the framework of this Agenda replaced the UN document “Millennium Development Goals” (MDGs).⁴ It is also worth noting that in honor of the 20th anniversary of the Cairo Conference, the Programme of Action was reissued in 2004 with the Foreword of the UN Secretary General and the Introduction Executive by Director of the United Nations Population Fund [International Conference on Population 2014], as well as with “Key Actions for Further Implementation of the Program of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development” adopted at the 21st special session of the General Assembly (New York, 30 June – 2 July 1999) [International Conference on Population 2014, p. 221-296].

The conference was evaluated as a milestone event that allowed the consensus of all countries, putting above the human right. The goals set out in the Programme of Action: ensuring universal education, reducing infant, child and maternal mortality after Cairo continued to be monitored by UN bodies and summarized in reports submitted every 5 years.

The Cairo Conference was the last in a series of seventy-year-long conferences.⁵ This is due to many reasons, among which, apparently, are the titanic efforts not only of the UN and its organizations, but also of the host country of the conference to prepare and receive such a large number of government delegations, new UN initiatives that include addressing population issues, the emergence of new technologies for communications and organizing summits.

Not in exchange for, but as a development of the Cairo Conference, international conferences of parliamentarians began to be held to implement the Cairo Conference Program of Action. In 2002, parliamentarians adopted the Ottawa Commitment, positioning themselves as voices of the public interest, legislators and policymakers, promising to work systematically towards the Cairo Agenda and actively monitor progress on population issues.

Since 2002, eight International Parliamentarians’ Conferences on the Implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action have been held: Ottawa 2002, Strasbourg 2004, Bangkok 2006, Addis Ababa 2009, Istanbul 2012, Stockholm 2014, Ottawa 2018.⁶

In Bangkok, parliamentarians recalled that the world community had made a concerted decision to annually allocate funds for the implementation of population and reproductive health programs in developing countries. On the other hand, it is necessary to remember that reproductive health issues apply to the population of all countries, including highly developed ones. I would also like to highlight two statements in the Bangkok justification: today, over 350 million couples do not have full access to family planning services, and population growth in developing countries continues to increase pressure on the environment.⁷ These realities, from our point of view, are important for understanding the positive shifts in the consciousness of the world community and policy-makers that have occurred since the Cairo Conference.

⁴ Eight goals adopted by the UN as international development goals for 2015

⁵ If we do not take into account the first World Population Conference of 1927 (Geneva). See: [DE. P. 564-565].

⁶ As can be seen, the Ottawa decision to hold conferences once every two years has not been implemented.

⁷ Significant differences in ecological balance issues can be seen between developed and developing countries [Tkachenko 2021, p. 24-27].

In 2024, in Oslo, 6 years after the previous one, a conference of parliamentarians from all regions of the world was held, as emphasized in the Oslo Statement, which summed up the results of the past thirty years since the ICPD. The meeting resulted in the adoption of the Oslo Statement of Commitment with the poignant title “Life or Death is a Political Decision,” which noted progress in the adoption of new laws, policies, and programs. One can agree with the main message of the statement: “Our successes have placed individual dignity and human rights at the center of development”,⁸ but at the same time, the listing of indicators of these successes draws attention (women's access to contraception, number of girls having access to education, reduction in child marriage), which mainly apply not even to developing countries as a whole, but to the poorest of them. This once again demonstrates that the focus of the UN (UNFPA) is on the world's poorest and most vulnerable countries and territories.

The Eighth International Parliamentarians’ Conference demonstrated the amalgamate of issues of implementation of the Cairo Conference Programme of Action and the UN SDGs along the road, as figuratively stated in the press release, leading to 2030. At the same time, the main task is said to be the mobilization of resources and the creation of favourable conditions for sexual and reproductive health and rights.⁹ In our view, this narrows the main idea of the Cairo Summit on development quite a bit, although reproductive rights are one of the building blocks of development in the area of population.

The Cairo Conference is the subject of special UNFPA reports in 2004 [] and 2011 []; in addition, the UN monitors progress in achieving the ICPD goals on 11 indicators for all countries of the world, the results of which are regularly published. UNFPA conferences provided five-year reviews of its implementation, drawing input not only from national institutions but also from a wide and diverse array of stakeholders who were drawn into the discussions through UN-led events and dialogues.

Experts on the role and significance of the Cairo Conference

Leading UN population experts/experts John Wilmoth and Julia Bunting¹⁰ summed up the 30th anniversary of the Cairo Conference and said leaders need to renew their commitment to the ICPD agenda. They noted, as a small number of Russian specialists had done earlier, that integral elements in solving population problems for all governments participating in the summit were: sexual and reproductive health, reproductive rights, gender equality, environmental sustainability and international cooperation were codified as integral to addressing population issues and achieving the development goals articulated by governments.¹¹

Three decades later, the results of the Cairo Conference, especially the adopted Programme of Action, are assessed as an outstanding success based on the dynamics of the most important indicators: child mortality, which has decreased by 2 times, maternal mortality, which has decreased by 34% during this period, and the number of women using contraception has doubled.¹²

UN experts stress that population issues have been integrated into national development strategies in countries around the world, and government commitments to collect demographic data have enabled policymakers to make informed decisions. In Russia, despite the existence of a

⁸ Oslo Statement. <https://ipcconference.org/>.

⁹ This may be one of the most pressing, especially for the developing world, but not the main issues of world population development.

¹⁰ John Wilmoth is Director of the Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) and Julia Bunting is Director of the Programme Division of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).

¹¹ Wilmoth John, Bunting Julia. Thirty Years On, Leaders Need to Recommit to the International Conference on Population and Development Agenda. UN Chronicle. 26 April 2024. <https://www.un.org/en/un-chronicle/thirty-years-leaders-need-recommit-international-conference-population-and-development>.

¹² United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2022). World Family Planning 2022: Meeting the changing needs for family planning: Contraceptive use by age and method. UN DESA/POP/2022/TR/NO. 4. P. i.

large number of development strategies,¹³ each of which touches upon or names a number of demographic problems, a comprehensive strategy as a holistic view of population development is absent. One can only refer to the national project “Demography”, which ends in 2024. Regarding the collection of demographic data by official statistics, it can only be noted once again that despite the obvious progress in Russian statistics of the new era, gender is still missing, for example, in the indicators of Perinatal mortality [The Demographic Yearbook 2023, p. 91] or in the data on industrial injuries [Labor and employment 2023, p. 126].

The role of the Cairo Conference in the area of reproductive health, the definition of which was, as V. Sakevich notes, “formulated and introduced into international practice” precisely in the materials of this world forum, is of historical significance. The hottest and often irreconcilable battles among the participants revolved around the issue of family planning. Despite all the subtlety of the interpretation of this largely fundamental concept or even phenomenon by experts of the UN Secretariat, opponents of family planning as such continued, as often happens to this day,¹⁴ to assert that family planning aims to limit the birth rate in those countries where it is high, that it is an interference of the state and its official policy in the reproductive rights of the family.

There is growing recognition among experts of the importance of local/municipal authorities in addressing the complex issues associated with the implementation of the ICPD Action Programme. Effective local governance and equitable provision of local public services, according to J. Wilmoth and J. Bunting, are critical to tailoring actions to the unique needs of communities, ensuring sustainable development and promoting inclusive policies. We also believe that the uniqueness of local authorities/municipalities in solving the problems of the population at the local level stems from the greater effectiveness of their actions. The main problem is the lack of appropriate funds for the programs, since in Russia the principle of budgetary federalism is ignored in practice and most local authorities are more than limited in financing even approved programs [Tkachenko 2024, p. 118-119].

UN experts in 2024 stated that while our demographic trends diverge, our fates remain intertwined. I would like to think that by intertwined and to support those hardest to reach, the experts do not mean ever-increasing support from the most developed countries to the least developed countries and even greater demands on the volume of this support. For example, to meet the UN SDG target on environmental sustainability, the Fund for responding to Loss and Damage was established at COP28 (2023) to help vulnerable populations in least developed countries. The fund is to channel about \$100 billion annually to these countries so they can cope with the effects of climate change. The Fund has total commitments of over \$660 billion, which is considered insufficient to address the unavoidable and irreversible impacts of the climate emergency. Some estimates of the required financial coverage are significantly higher – up to \$400 billion per year [Vaidyanathan 2024].

Impression of a member of the Russian delegation

For the first time in national practice, preparation for participation in the conference, primarily the national report, was entrusted to the Ministry of Labour and Social Development, and not to the main statistical agency.¹⁵ Representatives of the statistical agency have already “distinguished themselves” with their approaches to such forums in previous decades. This was evidenced by the position of the leaders of demographic statistics, who exerted powerful resistance, as A.G. Vishnevsky writes, to the desire of “demography to establish itself as an independent scientific discipline” [Vishnevsky 1996, p. 97].

¹³ Spatial Development Strategy, Economic Security Strategy, Economic Development Strategy, Energy Strategy and others.

¹⁴ For example, the Institute for Family Studies made such attacks on the report of the United Nations Fund for Population Activities [State of World Population 2023].

¹⁵ To a certain extent, this was facilitated by the creation in 1993 of the Interministerial Commission on Population under the Ministry of Labour, of which the author of this article was the executive secretary.

In the new conditions of Russia's acceptance of market relations as conditions for the development of Russian society, a new approach was required. This was preceded by preparation and, most importantly, participation in a regional – European conference with the same focus, since, according to the UN decision, these continental conferences were considered preparation for the world summit in Cairo.

A few words about the Geneva European Conference on Population and Development (1993). It became the first forum where official delegations from all post-Soviet countries met and could exchange opinions on the demographic situation in their countries and such contacts are very useful in any capacity (even if they take place informally on the sidelines of the summit).

It is also necessary to recall that conferences like the one in Cairo are forums of the governments of the participating countries, therefore, similar meetings of scientists, experts and representatives of public organizations are held separately on the sidelines of the summit, where the same materials presented by the UN Secretariat are discussed. This does not mean that scientists were not represented in government delegations. For example, the Russian delegation included A.G. Vishnevsky, who worked very closely with the Ministry of Labour, and the Ukrainian delegation included V.S. Steshenko as the second most important person. The Russian delegation distributed at the conference "Population: Encyclopedic Dictionary" [Population 1994], the release of which was specially timed to coincide with the opening of the conference.¹⁶ Various public organizations took part in the work on the sidelines of the conference from Russia (scientific institutes, university departments, other public organizations dealing with population issues in Russia), who discussed the same issues at a side event organized by the Executive Board of the United Nations Development Programme and the United Nations Population Fund. The recommendations of this forum were taken into account when adopting the final documents of the conference.

The biggest problem during the discussion of the report and the Programme of Action was Section VII. Reproductive Rights and Reproductive Health and its point B. Family planning. A number of delegations expressed the view that planning was aimed at limiting the birth rate in those countries where it was high. From another position, this point of the Programme of Action was considered unacceptable by the Vatican, whose delegation conducted a lobbying policy within the framework of the conference to remove the point from the final document, which was to be approved by consensus. For the Russian delegation, this problem was of a somewhat different nature. The public forum included representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church who lobbied for the inclusion of their note condemning the clause in the official materials of the Russian delegation (for their distribution on behalf of the government delegation, which could be assessed as the positions of the official delegation) and appealed to the head of the Russian delegation, G.G. Melikyan. And although the non-governmental delegation included leaders of Russian family planning organizations, their arguments were less heard in the internal debate. The decision not to include this note and not to distribute it as official material was greatly influenced by the member of the delegation from the Russian parliament,¹⁷ E. Lakhova at that time the Chairman of the Commission on Women, Family and Demography under the President of the Russian Federation (on a voluntary basis). In the delegation of non-governmental organizations during the discussion of Section VII, N.M. Rimashevskaya played an important role.

Conclusion

The 30th anniversary of such a landmark event as the Cairo Conference on Population and Development is not only an occasion/reason to sum up the results, but also, as UNFPA believes, for "positioning for the **post-2030** population and development agenda" (highlighted – A.T.), that is, the period that will begin after the UN SDGs are achieved. This once again confirms the now

¹⁶ The delivery of 40 copies of the dictionary to Cairo was undertaken by Russian diplomatic services.

¹⁷ Another member of the delegation from parliament was S.V. Kalashnikov, later the Minister of Labour.

indisputable fact that the Cairo Conference succeeded in making decisions that determined population policy for decades to come and will continue to have a positive impact.

Reference list

- Demographic Encyclopedia. Moscow: Encyclopedia Publishing House, 2013. 944 p. ISBN 978-5-94802-051-8. (in Russian)
- International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action. Twentieth Anniversary Edition. UNFPA, 2014. 296 p. ISBN 978-0-89714-022-5.
- Labor and employment in Russia. 2023: Statistical collection / Rosstat. Moscow, 2023. 180 p. (in Russian)
- Population and development. Programme of Action adopted at the International Conference on Population and Development, Cairo, 5–13 September 1994. UN, 1995. 104 p. ISBN:92-1-151278-6.
- Population. Encyclopedic Dictionary. Moscow: Great Russian Encyclopedia, 1994. 640 p. – ISBN 5-85270-090-8.
- Takevich V.I. (2018) Reproductive health policy in regions and countries of the world. Demoscope Weekly. No. 777-778. (in Russian)
- State of world population 2004. The Cairo Consensus at Ten: Population, Reproductive Health and the Global Effort to End Poverty. UNFPA, 2004. 124 p. https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/swp04_eng.pdf.
- State of World Population 2011. People and Possibilities in a World of 7 Billion. UNFPA, 2011. 132 p. <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/EN-SWOP2011-FINAL.pdf>.
- State of World Population 2023. 8 Billion Lives, Infinite Possibilities: The Case for Rights and Choices. United Nations Population Fund, 2023. 192 p. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18356/9789210027137>.
- The Demographic Yearbook of Russia. 2023: Statistical Handbook/Rosstat. - Moscow, 2023. 256 p. (in Russian)
- The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2018. New York: United Nations, 2018. 40 p. ISBN: 978-92-1-101390-0.
- Tkachenko A.A. (2021) Is a transition to a new climate economy possible? // Economy. Taxes. Law. 14(4): 15-29. DOI 10.26794/1999-849X-2021-14-4-15-29.
- Tkachenko A.A. (2024) Actual problems of development of Russian regions: economics and demographics. Economics, Taxes. Law. 17(3): 115-124. DOI 10.26794/1999-849X-2024-17-3-115-124. (in Russian)
- Vaidyanathan G. (2024) A giant fund for climate disasters will soon open. Who should be paid first? Nature. 2024 Jan 29. Doi: 10.1038/d41586-024-00149-x.
- Vishnevsky A.G. (1996) Hard rebirth of demography. Sociological Journal. 1-2: 93-116. (in Russian)