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Keynote Address: The 1993 Conference on Sustainable Solutions – Population, Consumption and Culture

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

*Werner Fornos**

II. KEYNOTE ADDRESS

I am pleased to be at Boston College Law School this morning.

I have to tell you that I'm from Washington, D.C., an interesting place to be away from. The only thing we seem to have growing in Washington is the Federal Budget. But there is one occupational specialty that is growing by leaps and bounds. For those of you who don't know what kind of law you want to pursue, I would recommend that you watch out for this profession: polling. Everybody in Washington wants to know what you are thinking so that enlightened politicians can come in here and tell you how they are going to lead you. Even the people who produce *Ripley's Believe It or Not* once hired a pollster to find out the three biggest lies that Americans tell each other. The biggest white lie is, of course, "the check is in the mail." The second biggest they found is, "I'll respect you in the morning." The third biggest: "I'm from Washington and I'm here to help you."

Be that as it may, I'm here today to talk to you about overpopulation—a problem that if we continue to ignore, as we have for so many years, we may be committing the ultimate global blunder, one from which there is no recovery.

It took all of recorded history until 1830 for world population to reach one billion. By 1930, only one hundred years later, we had two billion people. Then, in 1960, just thirty years later and despite the

* President, the Population Institute.

devastation of World War II, world population grew to three billion. Fifteen years later, in 1975, we went to four billion. Only eleven years later, in 1986, we were at five billion. We could reach six billion as early as 1995. And at current birth rates the population of the planet could double in less than forty years.

We live in a demographically divided world. Some countries and regions will require many more than four decades to double, others will require considerably less. Africa, for instance, is expected to double in little more than twenty years. The U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization has notified United Nations Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali that twenty-nine African nations will be unable to feed their populations by the year 2000.

This is an extension of what we are seeing in Somalia, which is costing us an unappropriated billion dollars—a hidden part of our deficit. And so when you look at the future, you have to wonder about this subject that we are talking about today. It is not about those of us in the audience that are as bald as I am, but about the young people in this room who will have the awesome burden of making the necessary course corrections.

That course, as I said, is one where it will take only forty years to double the world's population! I was asked to come to Catholic University in Washington to moderate a debate between a Catholic bishop, a Methodist minister and a rabbi. The subject was "When Does Life Begin?" The bishop maintained that life begins at conception. The minister maintained that life begins when it can be sustained outside of a woman's body. But the rabbi waved his hands frantically and said: "No, no, life begins when the kids leave home and the dog dies."

That is about the position most of this audience will be in forty years from now. But what kind of world will we have then, unless we make the necessary course corrections to ensure a sustainable planet? Future generations may look back upon this time and praise our wisdom and our foresight for having made the necessary changes. Or, if we fail to make them, they will look back in anger and dismay at what we've lost for them forever.

I was raised less than 100 feet from here. Well, maybe 1,000 feet. I spent a beautiful childhood here in Newton. I could look out of my bedroom window at the convent—which is what it was when I was growing up—and I always felt very assured that life was okay.

But while we meet here on this beautiful spring morning, things are not very reassuring in the world. Our forests are declining. Our topsoil is eroding. Our deserts are expanding. Our planet is heating

up, and the ozone layer—the protective layer of skin over the earth—is thinning.

No one seems to stop to think that what is causing this savage depletion of our planet is that there are 5.5 billion of us. In 1830 when we were only one billion, we had thirty-two acres of land per human being. Now we're down to less than six acres per person in a demographically divided world.

Let me give you an example. New England compares in physical size to Bangladesh. But, while New England has thirteen million people, Bangladesh has 112 million. It will take ninety-seven years for New England to double its population. Bangladesh, however, will double in only twenty-nine years—to 224 million! Per capita income is \$21,700 in the New England states. In Bangladesh it is \$130. We can burn that much in gas in a week, delivering pizzas.

	New England	Bangladesh
Area	66,700 sq. miles	55,600 sq. miles
Current Population	13 million	112 million
Distribution	210 per sq. mile	2,004 per sq. mile

Note: The population of Bangladesh is eight times greater than the combined population of the six states that make up New England.

Source: Population Reference Bureau, Inc. (Washington, D.C.) and 1990 census.

	U.S.A.	Bangladesh
Doubling Time	89 years	29 years
Projected Population In 2010	295.5 million	165.1 million
Life Expectancy:		
Male	72	54
Female	79	53
Per Capita Gnp 1990 (\$u.s.)	\$21,7000.00	\$200.00
Infant Mortality Per 1,000 Live Births	9	20
Fertility Rate	2.0	4.9
Population Under Age (%):		
15	22%	44%
65+	13	3
Birth Rate per 1,000	16	37
Death rate per 1,000	9	13

65,250 sq. miles — an area nearly eight times larger than the size of the state of Massachusetts — of forests are cut down per year.*

Source: Population Reference Bureau, Inc. (Washington, D.C.) and 1990 census.

* *Source:* World Resources Institute

But Bangladesh is far, far away, and so we are inclined not to realize the severity of the problem. While the world is down to six acres of land per person, Bangladesh has fallen to one-fifth of an acre per person, and much of that land is not really habitable. One-third of the population lives below sea level. When the typhoons hit and the Bay of Bengal erupts, is there any wonder we have tremendous loss of life?

When those lands are swallowed up by enormous winds and rains, they are also swallowed by the tremendous problem of a world without borders. The floods in Bangladesh are a direct result of population pressures in Nepal. In Nepal, people have gone higher and higher into the Himalayan highlands, cutting down trees and vegetation to produce enough wood for heat and fuel because ninety-eight percent of that country depends upon wood as its sole source of fuel.

But by cutting down those trees they are interfering with nature's ecological defense zone, its buffer zone. Once those trees are cut down, farmers, who are already hard-pressed to grow crops, go up into the highlands and create terraced farms. When the monsoon rains come, the topsoil washes away, flooding huge parts of India during the peak growing season. It then winds up in Bangladesh where as much as eighty percent of the country has been under flood waters rushing down from the highlands of neighboring Nepal.

Environmental destruction does not respect sovereign borders. The trash burned in Mexico causes air pollution in the United States. The acid rain we create kills fish in Canada. Acid rain created in England killed eighty percent of the salmon stock in Norway last year.

For law schools and lawyers, this means we must come up with new international standards of "livability" in nations that think their sovereignty excludes the rights of people beyond their borders to sue to protect themselves against damage that starts in other countries. A whole new age of law is ahead. What do we do with the United Nations Security Council? Do we change its mandate to include protection against environmental destruction, which kills just as savagely as the war in Bosnia, or in any other conflict that we have in the world today? Environmental issues will become a major thrust of legal thinking in the next twenty years.

Last year nearly 100 million people were added to the world; the largest annual increase ever. What is deceiving about that statistic is that ninety percent of this growth took place in the developing world. And much of that world is already terribly torn by social strife, civil unrest, and many people who live in brutal poverty. It may seem far removed from us, but they are part of us, and how well they do will

determine the future of civilization. We no longer can exclude the poorest among us from our conscience. But how do we go about addressing these problems that we have ignored for so long?

A top priority must be the elimination of illiteracy—especially among women. Two-thirds of all illiterates in the world today are women. They are kept barefoot, pregnant, and in the fields working. Eighty percent of all farming in Africa is done by women. Several studies have demonstrated that where a woman has had an eighth-grade education, she has half the number of pregnancies of her uneducated sister.

Secondly, we must work toward income enhancement. Where women are able to participate in the paid sector of the economy, they are equally determined to govern their fertility. I emphasize paid employment. Here in 1993 women do two-thirds of the world's work, but earn only one-tenth of the world's income and own less than one percent of the property. So empowering women to be equal partners in society is perhaps the best investment we can make through the remainder of this century.

Third, reduction of infant mortality. We must do all we can to rid ourselves of the awesome specter of compensatory pregnancies, where a woman has twelve children because she wanted four but all the rest died. I just returned two weeks ago from India. I was in Bajar, India, where I talked with a woman who at the age of forty-nine had eighteen pregnancies, and only three survived. She killed five herself because they had the misfortune of being born girls. Chicken broth at boiling temperatures was poured into these children's mouths to kill them.

Now you may think that may be some sort of exaggeration. I thought so when I spoke to this woman. But within the last five years seventy-seven million girls have been murdered—many by their own families who considered them to be a liability. And the international community has done nothing about it. That's equal to wiping out the combined populations of California, New York, Texas and Florida. But not a single politician in the United States, or any place in the world, has spoken out against this barbarous injustice. Substantially reducing infant mortality would allow young women to opt for only the number of children that they are able to care for so that they may grow into responsible adults. And we will not have conditions where 42,000 children die needlessly each day: many because their births were spaced too closely to those of siblings.

Fourth, and perhaps the most controversial, is the most effective means of giving us a chance to regain this planet's sustainability:

slowing down unwanted pregnancies. The World Fertility Survey indicates there are some 500 million women today in the world who want no more children. Most of them did not want their last child, but all want to, at least, have more space between their pregnancies. But they lack the education and means to do anything about it.

I am referring to education about family planning, both modern methods and natural methods. Abortion is not a method of family planning. Abortion has at its root cause a much more serious problem: the *failure* to prevent unwanted pregnancy. Abortion is the remedy to which many women resort when family planning methods are unavailable, or when they are used improperly, or when they are defective.

But make no mistake about it, men remain the greatest obstacle to educating women about family planning and to ensuring the accessibility and availability of modern contraceptives. Many men around the world still believe they were somehow put on this earth to spread their seed and then walk away from responsibility. Men are perhaps the greatest obstacle to solving the population problem. If we could empower those 500 million women I mentioned earlier with the knowledge and the means to control their fertility, we could set them on a path to share as equal partners in society and in reducing problem growth in the world population.

We can stabilize world population at eight billion, though we are now on a course of doubling to eleven billion. The demand exists. The technology exists. But the political will does not exist. If we can develop the political will, we can bring population into balance with the environment and resources.