

II ECONOMIC SECURITY AND THE ENVIRONMENT

1. Poverty and Population

Digby McLaren introduced the speaker by emphasizing the effects of the population explosion on the ecology. He pointed out that the environment is currently affected far more by human activities than by natural forces. For example, man displaces more matter and produces more change in the atmosphere than do volcanoes. According to Mr. McLaren, the current vagaries in the climate are probably caused by human activities and are indicative of much more serious environmental problems. The population explosion presents the greatest threat to ecology and the planet cannot survive the depletion of its resources and the deterioration of the environment which this rapid increase in population entails. Mr. McLaren ended his speech with a striking image: he said that if intelligent extra-terrestrial beings were to approach the planet earth they would immediately identify it as a system out of control.

John Loxley tried to show how difficult it would be to reduce population growth with the programmes currently underway. He suggested that the growth rate can be reduced only if we adopt a policy for international development which included certain new social measures.

According to the conventional analysis of the connection between population and poverty, demographic growth is one of the main causes of Third World poverty, since the increase in the number of mouths to be fed cannot be offset by a corresponding rise in agricultural productivity. This thesis was first propounded by the British economist Thomas Malthus (1766-1834) and certain current developments would seem to confirm his apocalyptic vision of demography.

In 1500 the total world population numbered about 600 million. This doubled in three hundred and fifty years, by 1850. During the next hundred years it doubled again and then again, in only 35 years, by 1985. The main factor in this rapid growth has been fertility in the Third World. In the 1960s, Paul Erlich predicted in The Population Bomb that the world's population would number 10 billion by the year 2000. It is now known that this figure will not be reached before the end of the 21st century, since the birthrate of two percent of twenty years ago has now fallen to between 1.6 and 1.7