



REMAINING FLEXIBLE AND THE ROLE OF STAFF:  
*The Population, Development, and Environment Collaboration*

THE ISSUE

As concerns about environmental degradation moved onto the radar screen of the general public through the 1970s and 80s, most environmental activists were focused on wilderness protection. However, by the late 1980s, there was a growing understanding of the intertwined relationship of unchecked population growth, resource consumption, and the environment.

Although environmental groups started including population on their agenda, many groups were criticized for a perceived narrow focus on population growth. This focus ignored other population-related factors that impact environmental degradation, including economic development policies, maternal and child health issues, social justice, and corruption.

During the late 1970s and in the 1980s, women's health organizations and development groups had successfully secured U.S. congressional support for international family planning. However, by the mid 1980s, this crucial support for family planning and related reproductive health services in developing and newly independent states—such as training, communications outreach, and the provision of contraception—faced the threat of elimination. By the late 1980s, long-standing bipartisan support was beginning to erode even further as domestic debates around abortion spilled over into the international arena.

*The Population, Development, and Environment Collaboration:  
Summary Information*

Started:	April 1990
Ended:	March 1999
Total \$ Distributed:	\$454,000
Grant Range:	\$3,000 - \$30,000
Total # of Grants:	31
Sponsors:	Laura R. Chasin, Neva Goodwin, Peggy Dulany, Larry Rockefeller, Steven Rockefeller
Key Partners:	Affinity Group on Population, Reproductive Health, and Reproductive Rights; American Conservation Association
Staff:	Marcia Townley
Current Status:	Completed

In addition, a series of United Nations meetings required the cooperation of a broad alliance of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) if progressive population policies were to emerge.

At the Earth Summit, held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the topic of overpopulation was largely ignored. To avoid this oversight at the 1994 United Nations International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo and at the 1995 United Nations World Conference on Women in Beijing, a shared vision and agenda from the NGOs was required in their Plans of Action that accurately reflected emerging progressive policies.

While many funders had programs that focused on population, the environment, or development, there were very few that dealt with the connections between these issues. "This was cutting edge," said one family member. "We were trying to meet an emerging problem that fell through the cracks of traditional program areas."

As the 1990s progressed and these links were made, new, large funders began focusing on population growth and its impact on the economy, environment, and health and safety. The collaboration assisted this progress.

## CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT

In October 1989, the Philanthropy Department at Rockefeller Financial Services hosted a meeting to discuss environmental issues for the fourth generation of the Rockefeller family—the “Cousins”—at which family members expressed strong concern about the impact of population growth on the environment.

Following this meeting, staff developed a concept paper revealing the limited links between the environmental and population advocacy communities. The paper suggested that forming alliances made sense for advancing shared legislative and policy goals.

Thus the family—with the leadership of several members with a history of funding population issues acting as sponsors—chose to create their first ever collaborative fund: the Population, Development, and Environment Collaboration. With a long history of support for both population and environmental issues, this focus reflected the “natural synergies and interests in the family,” said one family member.

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*The population, environment, and development groups were at extreme poles.*

*It wasn't a close relationship and there were significant disparities in approach. Now it's taken for granted that they cooperate.*

Charles Terry  
former president  
*The Philanthropic Collaborative*

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Officially approved by the Family Philanthropy Committee in April 1990, the Population, Development, and Environment Collaboration sought to fund the development of stronger links between national organizations focused on population and environment. Ultimately, through this cooperation, the family hoped to help groups to maximize their impact and increase U.S. funding for international family planning.

When The Philanthropic Collaborative was launched in the following year, it provided a formal structure under which to administer the Population, Development, and Environment Collaboration.

## INITIAL GRANTMAKING

The Population, Development, and Environment Collaboration's first effort was to fund the development of a new coalition, the Collaboration on Population and Environment (COPE). Rather than create a formalized, bureaucratic structure, the Population, Development, and Environment Collaboration aimed to enhance

the capacity of both communities and to capitalize on their existing strengths. COPE developed a short-term, clear objective—to increase funding for international family planning.

COPE, however, did not last. Unanticipated difficulties emerged in several arenas. First, no single person was designated or emerged as a leader and the coalition floundered. There were also significant personality clashes between organizational representatives. With these conflicts, participants struggled to do cooperative advocacy and education work, suggesting that COPE, as a vehicle for increasing cooperation, never achieved full commitment and buy-in from the groups.

Although COPE did not, ultimately, create a unified group, it forged a path to building stronger relationships. While the formal entity ceased to exist, “the people still work together,” says the Audubon Society’s Pat Waak.

In addition, “there were good things that grew out of COPE that were not officially COPE projects,” explains Sharon Camp, former staff member of Population Action International. “COPE as a vehicle for doing the project was not viable, but the collaboration on the side between COPE members was highly effective.” So effective, in fact, that along with other advocates, COPE members were instrumental in sustaining funding for family planning.

### PROGRAM EVOLUTION

As family members and TPC staff watched the decline of COPE, they developed new funding approaches and altered the collaboration’s objectives, while seeking to maintain its overall goals. TPC’s flexibility and quick turn-around time enabled it to take care of a variety of small and timely issues, and was one of the key strengths of the Population, Development, and Environment Collaboration.

“They were able to take on new issues fairly quickly,” explains Shira Saperstein of the Moriah Foundation. “When an issue came along—say health care reform or family planning—they could say ‘this is an issue where we need to do something now,’ and put together a pool of money. Not to say that each effort was effective, but they had more flexibility, particularly for advocacy needs, than many funders. I think it’s a very important role.”

While the Population, Development, and Environment Collaboration continued to support coalition building among population and environment groups, it simultaneously forged relationships with groups that worked on development and women’s health, poverty, and economic development. A shared vision from these



groups was seen as critical in preparation for the U.N. meetings of 1994 and 1995. Thus the Population, Development, and Environment Collaboration funded efforts to expand the constituencies involved and provide opportunities for groups to come together and build alliances.

“People who are leaders in overlapping movements often don’t really know or understand each other personally. Personal understanding has a lot to do with how they relate in the public sphere,” says Fran Kissling of Catholics for a Free Choice. The support for meeting with other leaders provided by the collaboration helped build “greater understanding and tolerance for people with different perspectives. It helped create better relationships on a day-to-day basis, and less friction during Cairo itself. It was highly successful.”

As a follow-up to the U.N. conferences in Cairo and Beijing, the Population, Development, and Environment Collaboration focused its funding on groups working on the implementation of the “Plans of Action” that emerged from these conferences. Although the documents reflected a resounding world consensus, the political climate in the U.S. remained extremely difficult, with threats to cut family planning funds that the collaboration’s grantees had worked so hard to increase.

### FINDING AND WORKING WITH PARTNERS

Family and staff tracked these changes, in part, by working closely with other funders focused on population issues. Through these relationships, the Population, Development, and Environment Collaboration not only monitored the field, but also leveraged funds for projects outside its scope, avoided redundancy and found a funding niche to meet its specific goals.

In fact, throughout the life of the collaboration, TPC staff took a leadership role in the philanthropic community on population and environment issues. In the first few years of the collaboration, several funder briefings on population issues were hosted. These meetings were the seedlings of a funder affinity group on population that was formally established in 1997.

The Population, Development, and Environment Collaboration leadership contributed to other donors making new commitments to population issues—such as the Pew Charitable Trusts’ funding of \$50 million over 10 years to a new advocacy institute on population and consumption. Throughout the mid-1990s, several other large funders, including the Buffett Foundation and The Turner

Foundation, began funding population issues. After this money “came on the scene, we did some of the small and timely things that they could not do,” says a TPC staff member. “There was plenty of need and work to go around.”

### OPERATIONS AND STAFF

The collaboration relied on the skills of TPC staff members to conduct background research, network with other funders, and keep donors and sponsors abreast of changes in the field. “The impact of the collaboration would have been infinitely undermined without staff time,” said one family member of the staff’s role.

However, there was one staffing issue that faced this collaboration that revolved around the COPE experience. COPE also received support from the American Conservation Association (ACA), a related family philanthropy. While ACA’s support reflected the family’s synergy on these issues, it proved confusing for grantees. The ACA grant provided not just funds, but donation of time from an ACA staff member. He took an active role in the coalition, providing advice and direction, and acting as a liaison between the groups and funders. This was a helpful but complicated position, which ultimately resulted in a lack of clarity about the “voice” of the collaboration.

### ENDING THE COLLABORATION

The Population, Development, and Environment Collaboration was successful for three primary reasons:

- it closely monitored the field,
- acted quickly, and
- remained open to adjusting its funding strategy to meet the field’s changing needs.

This knowledge and flexibility—as well as the collaboration’s leadership in the funding community—led to significant successes. Ending in 1999, the Population, Development, and Environment Collaboration fulfilled its original objective. Its grants were an instrumental part of sustaining U.S. support in Congress for international family planning. “We made it through a very crucial political period,” says TPC staff.

Beyond these immediate gains, new cooperation was forged between previously disparate constituencies around population issues, which led to landmark documents emerging from key international meetings. Because the collaboration continually measured its success against specific goals and objectives, ending it was not a difficult decision. The steep increase in funding from other sources also made it a good time to end. Thus, the collaboration officially ended in 1999, having made 31 grants totaling \$454,000 since its inception in 1990.

Family members continue to recognize that issues related to population growth, development, and the environment remain critical. There was, and is, “a willingness to stick with it from family members,” that is reflected in the ongoing support of many individual family members. Members of TPC’s staff continue to be involved and monitor the field and provide recommendations for funding to individual interested clients.

