the notion of an issue-attention cycle. Arguing from the premise that public attention rarely focuses on a single concern for long before boredom with the topic sets in, Downs suggests that all issues go through a five-stage cycle. In the “preproblem stage,” a problematic issue has been identified by experts or interest groups, but has yet to capture public attention. Unfolding events lead the public to become aware of the issue in the “alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm stage.” Associated with this revelation are discussions about society’s ability to deal with the issue. Politicians and the public become aware of the costs involved in dealing with the concern during the “realizing the cost of significant progress stage.” Waning interest and public boredom set in during the “gradual decline of public interest stage,” as either the issue appears too daunting to deal with or solutions are found. Finally, in the “postproblem stage,” the issue enters a twilight zone of limited attention and a possible intermittent recurrence of interest.

Downs does not preclude the possibility of an issue’s going through the cycle again; rather, he suggests that an issue may sporadically recapture public interest once it has reached national prominence. Institutions, programs and policies created in response to the issue remain as legacies of a time when they initially captured public attention, and they continue to have some effect once that attention has shifted elsewhere. Further studies show that the issue-attention cycle is applicable to concerns other than the environment, and that there is a relationship between the cycle and governments’ organizational activities.

**Population Concerns and the Cycle**

Global population issues appear to have gone through the issue-attention cycle thrice: from the mid-1960s, when population growth in developing countries was first brought to the attention of the Western public, until the 1974 Bucharest Conference; around the 1984 Mexico City Conference; and in the early 1990s, in the lead-up to the ICPD. Given the global attention that UN conferences generate, donors are eager to present themselves as good members of the international community, who are fulfilling their international commitments. Once the hype is over, however, governments can cut funding without the fear of highly publicized repercussions, and they frequently do.

In the 1940s and 1950s, American demographers began to view population growth as impeding economic development and to argue that policy interventions such as family planning were necessary. However, calls by these demographers for foreign aid to implement birth control policies in countries in the early stages of development were sidelined, as religious and societal prejudices against birth control made such support by the United States unthinkable. Other donor countries expressed little interest in offering population assistance during this period, with the notable exception of Sweden, which began support in 1958.

In the mid-1960s, famines in South Asia and environmental concerns linked with overpopulation helped population issues capture media attention and subsequently public opinion. At this point, world population issues progressed from the preproblem stage to the stage of heightened alarm, characterized by apocalyptic prognostications and the advocacy of rigorous measures, referred to hereafter as the population hysteria. The media played a crucial role in this transition by illustrating examples of Malthusian tragedies and highlighting the perceived consequences of population growth. Much prominence was given to Ehrlich’s views on the “inevitable population-food crisis.” His thesis proved to be “one of the most potent factors in creating popular support for large-scale efforts to control population growth in the Third World during the sixties and seventies.”

An assessment of the population debate in American popular magazines between 1946 and 1990 indicates a significant rise in the number of articles on population issues during the years of the population hysteria. For instance, in the 1950s, an average of 11.7 reports appeared on population growth annually in *The New York Times*, but this figure increased to 40.4 in the 1960s and to 42.0 in the 1970s. The number of articles peaked in 1970, around the time of the Earth Day celebrations, and again at about the time of the 1974 Bucharest Conference.

More important, the emphasis of these reports shifted. During the 1950s, many articles reported on rapid population growth either without offering further analysis or by stressing its advantages. By the early 1960s, however, the proposition that “population growth is harmful” had solidified itself in the popular literature; at the height of the population hysteria in 1966–1970, more than 80% of articles about population...