

Population Dynamics and Sustainable Development

Joint Submission by the United Nations Population Fund and the Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs

In 1992, the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development affirmed that “human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature” (Principle 1) and that “the right to development must be fulfilled so as to equitably meet developmental and environmental needs of present and future generations.” (Principle 3). In 1994, these principles guided the debates held in Cairo during the International Conference on Population and Development and were adopted as principles 2 and 3 of the ICPD Programme of Action. The Programme of Action contained actions to “collectively address the critical challenges and interrelationships between population and sustained economic growth in the context of sustainable development” (ICPD Programme of Action, 1.9).

Today, as world population crosses the 7 billion mark, it is clearer than ever that given current patterns of production and consumption, population growth requires scaling up efforts to eradicate poverty and inequality, combat hunger, malnutrition and overall food insecurity; prevent the overexploitation of land, oceans and ground water; increase access to energy; develop sustainable cities, and mitigate the impact of natural and man-made disasters. Sustainable development cannot be attained without a sound understanding of population dynamics and the adoption of strategies that incorporate appropriate policy options to manage and support population change.

Expected population growth makes it more urgent to redouble efforts to reduce poverty and safeguard the environment. Lifting people out of poverty and providing decent livelihoods for all the people that will be added to the planet will require major development efforts. Rising economic output is essential to provide goods and services for a growing population, but it is also essential to create full, productive and remunerative employment for a growing labour force. Without either, poverty reduction, rising living standards and improved human well-being will remain elusive goals. Furthermore, higher and sustained rates of economic growth are not enough. Promoting sustainable development depends on more inclusive as well as greener economic growth and rights-based population policies. Without these comprehensive policies, efforts to cater for growing populations and raising economic output will lead to dangerous degradation and depletion of natural resources, affecting the climate, land, forests, ground water and oceans, and generating greater challenges in regard to energy production.

Evidence shows that Governments can influence population growth through effective, rights-based policies that expand individual choices and opportunities. Attaining the Millennium Development Goals in terms of ensuring universal access to sexual and reproductive health and voluntary family planning, empowering women, ensuring universal primary education and increasing enrolment in secondary education, especially among girls, would not only improve human well-being and build human capital but also shape population trends, contributing to the stabilization of population. The ICPD Programme of Action recognizes that early stabilization of world population would make a crucial contribution to realizing the overall objective of sustainable development.

Although some future population growth is inevitable, if only because the number of potential future parents is at an all time high, the future size of the world population depends

crucially on the changes that take place over the next few decades. Projections show that with just half a child more on average, than the medium variant*, the population of the world could grow to 11 billion by 2050 and nearly 16 billion by 2100. Every decade of delay in reaching replacement-level fertility implies continued and significant population growth for decades to come.

Most of the population growth expected in the future is likely to occur in developing countries and to be concentrated among the least developed countries and the poorer communities of other developing countries. These trends pose therefore particularly significant challenges for countries and communities that are already among the most vulnerable, where environmental and societal stresses are growing, poverty and malnutrition are high, levels of education are low, job creation is weak and people are least prepared to cope with the effects of environmental change.

Already in 1994, the ICPD Programme of Action noted that “slower population growth has in many countries bought more time to adjust to future population increases. This has increased countries’ ability to attack poverty, protect and repair the environment, and build the base for future sustainable development. Even the difference of a single decade in the transition to stabilization levels of fertility can have a considerable positive impact on quality of life” (para. 3.14).

The benefits of wider access to family planning and the reduction of fertility that results from it also derive from the changes it induces on the age structure of populations. Declining fertility eventually produces fewer children relative to the working-age population, thereby reducing the number of dependants per working adult and thus gives rise to a unique opportunity for increasing investments in health, education, infrastructure and environmental protection. This “demographic bonus”, if accompanied by development-oriented social and economic policies, has been shown to increase economic growth and help propel countries out of poverty. It also helps in making the necessary investments for a future with a higher proportion of older persons.

Countries that have reduced fertility also benefit from slower growth in the number of young people, which ease the demand for jobs and provide greater opportunities to invest in the education of young people. Although the number of young people is declining at the world level, it is still increasing rapidly in the least developed countries. Young people everywhere have the legitimate ambition to improve their standards of living and require opportunities to become productive members of society. They will live in a world that is increasingly urban and more interconnected. They should have the freedom to make informed choices about when to have children, how many to have and to have the means to do so. In planning for their families, they have the responsibility to ensure that every child is wanted and that they made the necessary investments to ensure the present and future wellbeing of their children.

Parents wishing to invest more in their children prefer to have fewer. Population policies can support parents’ choices by emphasizing also the value of investing in children. The advances already made in improving the lives of millions of people living in vulnerable countries by boosting the health and survival chances of children and increasing the reach of education are sufficient to prompt parents to make informed and responsible choices about the world they want to bequeath to future generations and the kind of future generations they wish to raise. Yet, still too many people are deprived of the means of realizing their reproductive choices

because they lack access to modern methods of family planning. To achieve the Millennium Development Goals' target of ensuring universal access to reproductive health, at least 215 million women who have an unmet need for family planning need to get access to modern contraception. There is convincing evidence that with strong Government commitment this goal can be achieved in any socio-economic or cultural setting. But in order to reach that goal, women must have the possibility of having their voices heard. Increasing equity in gender relations within families and in society is key to accelerating the achievement of that goal.

Governments need to plan for other aspects of population trends. Already today, over half of the world's population lives in urban areas and, as development continues, urbanization will rise. Future population growth is expected to be concentrated mostly in urban localities, especially in those with fewer than half a million inhabitants. By supporting well-planned urbanization, which includes the consideration of housing, land and water needs of emerging urban agglomerations, countries can reap many benefits, including the economies of scale involved in providing infrastructure and services to populations concentrated in space and the possibility of developing greener cities with greater efficiency. But without proper planning and effective national and local governance, urbanization may fail to deliver those benefits.

Migration is an intrinsic component of population dynamics and, because it is driven by disparities in opportunities, it will remain significant, particularly as a component of urbanization and as a driver of the spatial redistribution of populations within and between countries. By facilitating and planning for internal migration, Governments can ensure that it is beneficial for development, and that it is among people's options for adapting to environmental changes, including climate change. In addition, Governments need to strengthen cooperation in facilitating international migration and ensuring that it occurs in authorized and safe circumstances.

There is rising concern about the increasing likelihood of unplanned population displacements driven by disasters, particularly climate-induced events, in environmentally vulnerable areas. Strengthening the ability of the international community to provide assistance in such cases is necessary, as is commitment to disaster risk reduction and adaptive migration, which can reduce the incidence of displacement and forced movements.

Recommended Actions

1. Promoting sustainable development requires fostering sustainable consumption and production patterns, as well as technological progress – which are the central focus of green growth - but it also requires stronger government efforts to address population growth and its determinants using a rights-based approach. Along these lines, the ICPD Programme of Action does not only emphasize the need for sustainable economic growth, but also specifies that essential population-related policies include universal access to sexual and reproductive health and family planning, the empowerment of women, and investment in younger generations, in particular in their education.
2. Governments should ensure “that all women, men and young people have information about, access to and choice of the widest possible range of safe, effective, affordable and

acceptable methods of family planning.” (para. 75.e of the Outcome Document of the 2010 Summit).

3. Governments are urged to achieve the Millennium Development Goals on health, education and the empowerment of women. Ensuring universal access to health care services, including sexual and reproductive health and family planning, and expanding education beyond the primary level contribute not only to reducing infant, child and maternal mortality and to controlling the spread of communicable diseases, but also empower women, lead to lower fertility and promote human development and wellbeing.
4. Governments are urged to invest in reducing the vulnerability and enhancing the adaptive capacity, particularly in relation to effects of climate change, of low-income households by supporting the access of their members to health care and education, particularly for girls and women, whose role in adapting to changing societal, economic and environmental situations is known to be disproportionately significant.
5. Governments should leverage the powerful economic and social potential of their young generations by empowering them to be active custodians of the future and by providing them with opportunities to increase their human capital and improve their productivity, ensuring gender equality and the right to plan their families, and promoting their full participation and civic engagement.
6. Governments should endeavour to address the consequences of population dynamics before they unfold via forward-looking and pro-active planning based on the collection of reliable data on population trends, sound demographic analysis and the consideration of both population projections and different future scenarios of population change. Such information is essential for setting overall national goals as well as for the formulation of effective rural and urban as well as sectoral development strategies.
7. Governments should prepare ahead for the rapid urbanization that will occur in many countries in the next decades, taking into account that internal migration helps the population to concentrate where opportunities are better, which improves efficiency and facilitates sustainable development. In doing so, Governments should enhance the capacity of local authorities to plan for the population growth and contribute to a sustainable management of urban localities, taking into account overall national population growth.

* The medium variant of the population projections prepared by the Population Division of United Nations assumes that fertility will reach replacement level by 2035-2040 and remain below replacement level for the rest of the century.