

UN Commission for Population and Development
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Submission by Population Matters (UK)
on behalf of the European Population Alliance

Young People in an Over-Crowded, Degrading Planet

“Population stabilization should be a priority for sustainable development, including a strong focus on the empowerment of women and girls”: Kofi Annan, former UN Secretary-General. (Key Recommendation of GHF 2009).

“Either we reduce our numbers voluntarily, or nature will do it for us brutally”: Maurice Strong, Secretary-General first Earth Summit, Rio, 1992

1. The Youth Bulge: More People than Jobs and Resources:

As a result of the low priority accorded to family planning programmes in the last two decades, many developing countries, especially the poorest, are marked by a number of linked factors inhibiting development: rapid population growth; high and growing numbers of young people; high un- and under-employment; rising social and political tensions; dwindling natural resources, notably water and soil; rapid urbanization; and degrading wider environments. Few economies can expand fast enough to keep pace with increases in the potential workforce.

2. Population Growth as a Multiplier of Resource and Environmental Problems:

Each additional person: needs more food, water, energy, land, timber and minerals; and produces more waste, and pollution; the rich consuming and polluting more than the poor. Thus rising populations: increase soil degradation, aquifer depletion, habitat destruction, deforestation, climate change and chemical pollution; and reduce the finite and dwindling natural resources available per person. Expanding economies increasingly do so by eating into natural capital rather than relying on natural income. This increases long-term poverty, and is physically unsustainable on a finite planet. Thus all environmental and long-term economic problems become harder, and ultimately impossible, to solve with ever more people. **Population stabilisation is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for sustainable development; and young people will not benefit from unsustainable development.**

3. The ‘Sustainable Development Goal’:

Impact (on the environment) = Population x Affluence (resource consumption) x Technology – the ‘IPAT function. Thus sustainable development requires: improved technology, giving greater resource efficiency; and reduced resource-consumption by the rich; and stable or reducing populations. Smaller populations can sustainably consume more resources per person than larger ones, while remaining within the biophysical limits of a finite planet; and indefinite growth being physically impossible, it is certain that population growth will end in any case at some point. This can only happen: either sooner by fewer births (contraception backed by policy to make it available and encourage people to use it); or later by more deaths (the ‘natural’ controls of famine, disease or predation/war).

4. Population Growth as a Variable, not a ‘Given’:

The global population, growing by 80 million per year or 10,000 per hour, passed 7 billion in 2011. The UN now project the population for 2050 between 8.1 and 10.6 billion – a range of 2.5 billion, or the Earth’s entire population in 1950. Clearly sustainable prosperity will be far easier to achieve, the nearer to 8.1 bn the population stabilizes. This will need priority and resources: in developing countries for non-coercive family planning and women’s education and empowerment programmes (new programmes in Rwanda, Malawi and Ethiopia show what can be achieved); in developed countries for public information programmes/incentives, aiming to balance individual reproductive rights with social and environmental responsibilities to current and future generations.

5. The Right to, and Resources for, Family Planning:

MDG 5b calls for universal access to family planning (FP) by 2015; and women’s right to control their own fertility is a pre-condition for them to exercise their other rights. Coercive pregnancy and child marriage are serious abuses. 215 million women (and rising) still have an unmet need for FP; and some 40% of pregnancies world-wide are unintended. Yet total world aid for FP is only 10% of the Goldman Sachs bonus pot – a derisory figure; and EU aid for FP is 0.4% of total EU aid. The total cost of meeting the unmet need for FP, some \$6.7 bn per year, is less than Americans spend on Halloween. Priority for FP is low, partly because the ‘population’ problem has in recent years been marginalised as one largely of sexual and reproductive health and women’s rights; whereas in reality it affects the long-term prospects of success for all the programmes across all Departments on which young people will depend.

6: Recommendations to both the CPD and “Rio+20” UNCSD

i) All relevant UN bodies should recognize: that all population growth, especially in developed countries, increases impacts on the environment, and reduces the natural resources available per person; that population stabilization in all countries is therefore a necessary condition for sustainable development, improving the prospects for young people; and that this can best be achieved by non-coercive population stabilization/reduction policies, comprising non-coercive family planning and women’s education and empowerment programmes, and the promotion of a cultural shift in favour of smaller families.

ii) All Governments and donor countries should give high priority to support for these programmes.

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On behalf of the European Population Alliance: One Baby (Belgium); Demographie Responsable (France); Herbert Gruhl Society (Germany); BOCS (Hungary); Associazione Radicale Rientrodolce (Italy); Population Matters – Sweden; ECOPOP (Switzerland).