

## Population Growth: the Neglected 'Green' Issue

### A Text for Rio+20

*"Population stabilization should be a priority for sustainable development": 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.*

*"It's no use reducing your footprint if you keep increasing the number of feet": popular saying.*

#### **1. Population Growth as a Multiplier of all Other Environmental Problems:**

Each additional person: needs **more food, water, energy**, land, timber and minerals; and produces more waste, CO<sub>2</sub> and pollution; the rich consuming and polluting more than the poor. Thus rising populations: increase soil exhaustion, erosion, desertification, habitat destruction, deforestation, aquifer depletion, CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, sea level rise, climate change and chemical pollution; and reduce the finite and dwindling natural resources available per person, increasing long term **poverty**. Thus all environmental, and most economic problems become harder, and ultimately impossible, to solve with ever more people. **Population stabilisation is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for sustainability.**

#### **2. The 'Sustainable Development Goal':**

Impact (on the environment) = **Population** x **Affluence** (resource consumption) x **Technology** – the 'IPAT function. Thus long-term biophysical sustainability 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 (preferably) sooner by fewer births; or later by more deaths, overwhelming any attempt at a '**Green Economy**'.

#### **3. Population Growth as a Variable, not a 'Given':**

As the global population passes 7 billion in 2011, its growth (at 80 million per year, 10,000 per hour) is clearly **a driver of all the new and emerging challenges**. 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 reproductive rights with social and environmental responsibilities to current and future generations.

#### **4. Resources for Family Planning:**

There are currently 215 million women (and rising) with an unmet need for family planning (FP). Total world aid for FP is only 10% of the Goldman Sachs bonus pot – a derisory figure. EU aid for FP is 0.4% of total EU aid. 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 programmes across all Departments. Some 40% of all pregnancies world-wide remain unintended. The total cost of meeting the unmet need for FP, some \$6.7 bn per year, is less than Americans spend on Halloween.

#### **5. Action at Rio+20 - a draft Text:**

Ignoring the population multiplier guarantees ultimate failure for all sustainable development initiatives, since ever-rising populations will overwhelm any development gains. To address this, the following draft text for Rio is proposed:

[The Conference]

***Recognises: 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 of biophysical sustainability; that prospects for sustainable development will thus improve, the sooner population can be stabilized within ecologically sustainable limits; and that this can best be achieved by non-coercive population stabilization/reduction policies in all countries, comprising the provision of family planning and women’s education and empowerment programmes to meet all unmet need for contraception, and the promotion of a cultural shift in favour of smaller families;***

**Calls on:**

- ***All Governments to give priority to the introduction, promotion and resourcing of such programmes;***
- ***All Governments to implement a programme of assessment and evaluation, both of their resources relevant to the well-being of their people, and of the impact of population growth on it;***
- ***Donor countries to give priority to support of these programmes.***

Population Matters (UK)

[www.populationmatters.org](http://www.populationmatters.org)

**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).

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