



## Population and Environment

By Robert Engelman, Population Action International

The long debate over the impact of population growth on the environment is gradually converging on a middle ground where most scientists can agree. The need now is to prod U.S. policymakers—distracted by political battles over abortion—to a consensus on which they can act. Sound population policies can brighten environmental prospects while improving life for women and children, enhancing economic development, and contributing to a more secure world.

Changes in population size, age, and distribution affect issues ranging from food security to climate change. Population variables interact with consumption patterns, technologies, and political and economic structures to influence environmental change. This interaction helps explain why environmental conditions can deteriorate even as the growth of population slows.

Despite slowing growth, world population still gains nearly 80 million people each year, parceling land, fresh water, and other finite resources among more people. A new Germany is added annually, a new Los Angeles

monthly. How this increase in population size affects specific environmental problems is impossible to say precisely. Too many factors interact, and much depends on the time frame under consideration. Obviously, trends such as the loss of half of the planet's forests, the depletion of most of its major fisheries, and the alteration of its atmosphere and climate are closely related to the fact that human population expanded from mere millions in prehistoric times to nearly 6 billion today.

No policy can change the past. But addressing current population needs would head off the regrets that future generations will otherwise have

about the failure of today's generation to act. Equally importantly, the policies that address demographic trends have immediate and beneficial impacts on the lives of women and their families. It is this "win-win" strategy—slowing population growth by attending to the needs for health care, schooling, and economic opportunities—that should encourage policymakers to consider population-related policies when addressing environmental risks.

Future population trends will influence the abundance and quality of such critical renewable natural resources as fresh water, fisheries, forests, cropland, and the atmosphere. An international scientific panel, for example, noted recently that Israel, Jordan, the West Bank, and Gaza are home to 12 million people and yet receive only as much rainfall as Phoenix, Arizona. Sponsored by the U.S. National Academy of Sciences and counterpart institutions in the region, the panel identified rapid population growth as a major concern for the region's critically stretched supplies of renewable fresh water. Stabilizing world population tomorrow won't by itself solve natural resource crises and other environmental problems. But without a leveling off of population, eventually environmental challenges press more urgently no matter what other measures are taken. Policymakers tend not to address such interconnected issues. One result is that there really is no U.S. policy on population and the environment, only a range of separate policies related either to international population or to specific environmental issues.

The requirement that environmental conditions be maintained in ways that sustain human life does not imply a need for population "control." Governments cannot control population any more than they can control people themselves. Lasting demographic trends respond to the childbearing choices people make themselves, not to those others would impose. The decline in family size that has occurred over the past 35 years—from six to three children per woman worldwide—has resulted from changing attitudes about childbearing and improved access to family planning services. Nonetheless, with two in five pregnancies worldwide still unintended, U.S. foreign policy should maintain and strengthen its historic efforts to improve access to family planning and related services where this access is now poor or nonexistent. (Unintended pregnancy stems from more than lack of access to contraceptives, but expanding this access is essential to reducing the phenomenon.) Support of education for girls and of economic opportunities for women would contribute to further declines in birthrates while improving individual capacities.

The generation now moving into its childbearing years is the largest in human experience. Responding to this generation's aspirations for later childbearing and smaller families will expand everyone's opportunities. It will also make the 21st century's environmental challenges easier to manage.

### Key Points

- Declines in birthrates worldwide could ease the challenge of solving difficult environmental problems.
- Population policies respond foremost to the widespread and growing desire of couples—and especially of women—to have children by choice rather than by chance, with any environmental gains of such choices a welcome side benefit.
- The U.S. government should reverse its retreat from international population assistance and encourage greater female access to education and expanded efforts to improve economic opportunities for women.

Policymakers rarely contemplate long time periods and connections between disparate sets of issues, especially controversial ones. Nonetheless, at the dawn of the new century the world faces a host of environmental and security risks strongly connected to the growing size of human population and the increasing affluence of some, but not all, of that population. Among the greatest policy challenges is that there is no framework for dealing with these issues on anything but a make-shift, stop-gap basis, addressing each environmental problem only when it becomes so acute that doing nothing is no longer politically viable. The organization of both congressional committees and executive departments by topical sectors makes it difficult to address interconnections such as those that link environmental and population change.

As problems like water scarcity, the depletion of fisheries, and human-induced climate change become more widely recognized in the coming decades, however, governments will increasingly be asked to develop systemic approaches and win-win strategies that go beyond short-term amelioration of environmental deterioration. Future changes in global population will contribute significantly to the need for such integrated, long-term approaches to environmental problems.

Although the global rate of population growth peaked 30 years ago, human population has grown by nearly two thirds since then. The ratios of people to fresh water, forests, cropland, fish, and the atmosphere have grown in tandem. According to accepted hydrological benchmarks, fewer than 4 million people lived in countries experiencing chronic scarcities of renewable fresh water in 1955, despite the rapid population growth of the time. Less than half a century later, despite slower growth, the population of people living in water-scarce countries has grown to more than 165 million, a figure that could grow to between 1 billion and 2.2 billion, depending on future rates of population growth, in the next 50 years.

What applies to water applies to many other natural resources critical to life, health, and economic development, although they may not be as readily quantified. Scarcities of natural resources should concern policymakers, because they not only hamper economic and social development, they also threaten global security by contributing to conflict where institutions are ill-equipped to mediate among groups competing for critical resources.

Nondemographic factors also deserve attention in addressing natural-resource scarcity: more responsible consumption, innovative substitution, and pricing

systems that discourage waste, for example. But such efforts can reach points of diminishing returns unless the underlying numbers of human beings requiring natural resources for basic needs and aspirations eventually reach stable or declining levels.

This characterization of the population-environment connection necessarily simplifies a complex and controversial set of relationships. The key point is that policies that result in lower trajectories of population growth are likely to increase the chances of success for comprehensive approaches to environmental problems in the coming decades. Policies—or policy vacuums—that result in more rapid growth are likely to make these problems even more intractable and thus dampen the long-term success of targeted policy responses.

Unfortunately, misperceptions about population contribute to an impasse that discourages environmentalists, opinion leaders, and policymakers from marshaling environmental arguments on behalf of sound population policies. The view that such policies amount to rich countries attempting to “control” the populations of poor countries through incentives or coercion dies hard. Few policymakers understand that population policy is primarily about expanding the capacity of women and men to manage their own reproduction as they choose—with slower population growth a mere bonus. Fewer still seem to be aware of the action program—agreed to in 1994 by 179 nations—to make this capacity real and universal early in the 21st century.

One outcome of such misunderstandings is that Congress is scaling back Clinton administration requests for funding for international population assistance. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), which administers bilateral programs through the governments of developing countries that request such assistance, is increasingly hamstrung in providing family planning assistance abroad. Similarly, Congress recently prohibited further U.S. funding for the United Nations Population Fund on the misguided claim that the agency’s work supports reproductive coercion in China.

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## Key Problems

- Continued world population growth tends to exacerbate both localized and global environmental problems that will demand serious policy responses in the coming century.
  - Despite growing recognition that population is one among several key factors in environmental problems, its role remains controversial.
  - Most people and policymakers are unaware that there is an international consensus that grounds population policy in human rights and development, emphasizing building the capacities of women to manage their own lives.
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Sound population policies focus not so much on discouraging reproduction but rather on access to critical services that make reproduction healthy, safe, and intentional for all people. This requires universal access both to information and to a range of choices and means for planning pregnancy, supplemented by a broad range of services related to reproductive and sexual health and rights. (Contrary to some claims, this does not include U.S. funding for abortions overseas, which has been prohibited by law since 1973.)

The education of girls through secondary school and improvements in economic opportunities for women

are also potential components of population policy. Policies with these objectives aid development by bringing women more fully into the mainstream of national and community life. The impact on demographic trends is substantial, because women who have completed high school tend to have fewer children and to give birth later in life than women who have not. Both effects reduce birthrates, improve maternal and child survival, and slow the growth of population.

The best population policies, and the ones the United States should pursue, are modeled after the Program of Action agreed to by representatives of all the world's governments at Cairo in 1994 at the International Conference on

Population and Development. This agreement was remarkable among international accords for its consensus on goals and strategies related to population and development. It is appropriate for governments to be concerned about the stabilization of population, the representatives agreed, but not to require or induce their own citizens to make reproductive decisions based on this concern. The Cairo conference reaffirmed the previously established human right that decisions about the number, timing, and spacing of children belong exclusively to couples and individuals. All people should have both the information and the means they need to make reproductive decisions and to put them into effect in good health.

Demographic research overwhelmingly demonstrates that social policies advancing this right produce multiple bonuses beyond the health and related benefits they confer on mothers and their families. By allowing for the safe and effective prevention of pregnancies, these investments reduce reliance on abortion—a goal shared by both sides in the battle over abortion rights. And by

giving couples and individuals—especially women—control over the timing of childbirth, such investments act powerfully to slow population growth.

The reality is that women in all parts of the world, in developing countries as well as industrialized ones, are participating in a demographic revolution. They seek to have fewer children, and to have them later in life, than ever before in human history. Men, too, are joining women in this aspiration. But perhaps because men do not bear children themselves and are less active in caring for them on average, in much of the world they lag behind in this shift. Part of the emphasis in population policy is in finding new ways of attending to the reproductive needs of boys and men, which includes improving their understanding of the needs of girls and women.

Already, globally, women have half the number of children—roughly three over their lifetimes—that they had in 1960. This average fertility would be lower still if not for the fact that an estimated 38 percent of pregnancies worldwide are not sought or desired. Among the goals of population policies are: to reduce the percent of unintended pregnancies as much as possible; to improve the conditions under which women experience pregnancy, childbirth, and the post-natal care of their children; and to advance the opportunities for women to take on challenges other than motherhood. There is no need to specify that population policies should actually reduce population growth; overwhelmingly, the right policies will achieve this as a demographic bonus to their primary objectives. These objectives are radical, for they amount to making women full partners in economic, social, and political life by affording them full rights and capacities over their health, their reproduction, and their destinies.

In Cairo, the world's governments devised a spending formula for achieving universal access to critical reproductive health services by early in the next century. Achieving this goal—worthy on its own terms and essential for a stabilized world population—would cost roughly \$17 billion per year in current dollars, with developing countries contributing about two thirds of that amount, industrialized countries one third. Based on the size of its economy, the United States should be contributing about \$1.9 billion to this effort; instead, it has reduced its support from about \$667 million annually in 1996 to around \$400 million in the current fiscal year.

Paying our fair share to help make basic family planning and reproductive health services universally available is only part of a new foreign policy approach to global population concerns. But it is a critical first step—and a profoundly environmental one for the multiple benefits it would yield in the 21st century and beyond.

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## Key Recommendations

- Policymakers and environmentalists should support the international consensus on population policy, which would improve the lives of women and their families while slowing both population growth and environmental degradation.
- Environmentalists should urge Washington to increase its population assistance to levels consistent with commitments made at the International Conference on Population and Development in 1994 and to restore funding to the United Nations Population Fund.
- Congress should resist additional restrictions on overseas family planning organizations.

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