

# POPULATION DYNAMICS, REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: CRITICAL LINKS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR POST-2015



## INTRODUCTION

Population dynamics<sup>i</sup> and sexual and reproductive health and rights are critical to sustainable development. By 2050 the world's population is projected to increase from 7 billion in 2011 to 9.6 billion.<sup>1</sup> In the same period the population living in urban areas will grow from 3.6 billion to 6.3 billion.<sup>2</sup> A growing and increasingly affluent world population is increasing demand for and pressure on vital natural resources and services. At the same time, certain aspects of demographic change, including urbanization and prospects to lower fertility, if harnessed, offer opportunities to advance sustainable development. Advancing sexual and reproductive health and rights,

including increasing access to voluntary family planning services, can positively influence population dynamics and advance a number of sustainable development priorities, including those related to health, gender equality, food, water and energy security and environmental sustainability. Addressing population dynamics in ways that respect and protect human rights must be part of the sustainable development goals and post-2015 international development framework, along with other necessary interventions for achieving sustainable development, including those that combat unequal and unsustainable consumption patterns, and other pressing drivers of social inequalities and environmental degradation.

## OVERVIEW

Population dynamics, human health and well-being and environmental sustainability are intrinsically linked.

Achieving universal access to reproductive health, including family planning, is critical for addressing these links and would:

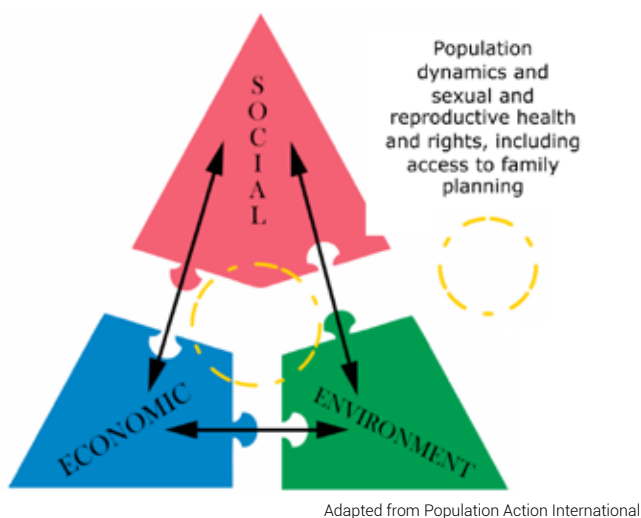
- improve **health**, including maternal and child health
- empower women, improving women's and girls' health, education, employment and overall **gender equality**
- positively influence **population dynamics**, reducing unsustainable levels of population growth
- lessen demand for and pressure on natural resources, including **forests, oceans** and **biodiversity**, advancing more **sustainable consumption** and **environmental sustainability**
- help achieve **food, water and energy security** for all
- reduce the pressures of rapid population growth and urbanization, helping achieve **sustainable cities and human settlements** for all
- support adaptation to **climate change** in countries where population pressures exacerbate climatic impacts on natural resources
- help developing countries to realise a 'demographic dividend' and transition, offering opportunities for **economic growth, employment and decent work for all** and **poverty eradication**
- advance **education**, helping **youth**, particularly girls, to complete their education
- help promote **peace and security**, by alleviating pressures that can contribute to conflict and insecurity
- empower **young people**, advancing their health, education, rights and overall prospects for leading healthy, productive lives
- increase the impact and effectiveness of other necessary initiatives, including those addressing unequal and unsustainable consumption patterns, and other pressing drivers of social inequalities and environmental degradation

<sup>i</sup> Population dynamics refer to demographic trends and changes including population growth, population decline, ageing, urbanization and migration which influence the size, composition and spatial distributions of populations.

## POPULATION AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH: SHAPING DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGES

Population size and other dynamics such as urbanization and migration, influence demand for and pressure on resources and services, alongside consumption patterns and efficiency. **Population dynamics set the scale and determine the shape of the development challenges we face**, reflecting the number and location of people requiring access to water and sanitation, food, and health

### Population dynamics and SRHR link the three sustainable development dimensions



and education services. Yet an estimated **222 million in women in developing countries are at risk of and want to avoid pregnancy but have an unmet need for contraception.**<sup>3</sup> *Demography is not destiny: achieving universal access to reproductive health, including access to voluntary family planning services that respect and protect human rights, offers opportunities to reduce population growth and pressures, while advancing women's rights and improving human health and wellbeing.* This would have far reaching benefits, because population dynamics and reproductive health are cross-cutting issues with critical implications for the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. Universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights is a precondition for achieving all three of these dimensions, and helps integrate them.

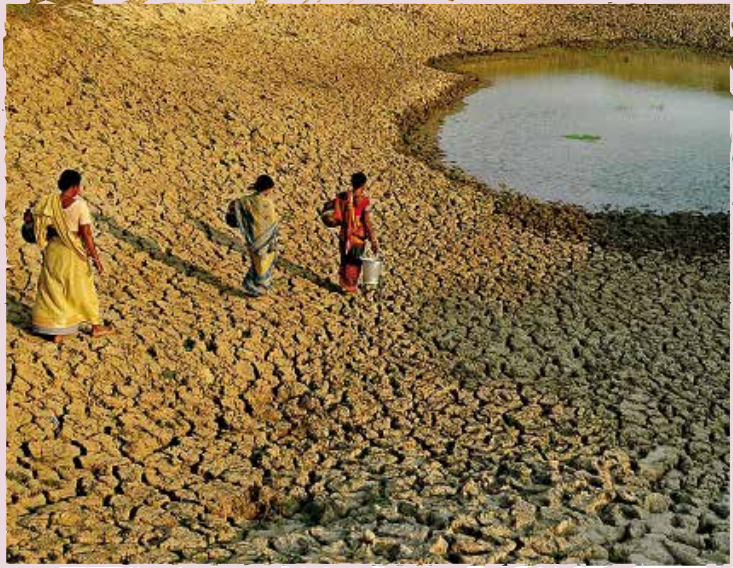
## INVESTMENT IN REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH: A KEY PRIORITY

Empowerment of women and universal access to sexual and reproductive health services are key priorities in their own right, and important factors which influence population dynamics. Ensuring that everyone can enjoy the right to 'decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing and timing of their children<sup>4</sup> is essential for women's health and well-being, and for overall sustainable development. Yet MDG 5 (Maternal and Reproductive Health) is the most off-track and vast unmet need exists for sexual and reproductive health services. When women and couples have the means to determine the number of their children families tend to be smaller, or the size that they can best provide for. This improves their chances of breaking the poverty cycle, and by helping people to manage their fertility, addresses population dynamics and offers opportunities to advance all three dimensions of sustainable development, as shown in the diagram to the left.

*'We emphasize the need for the provision of universal access to reproductive health, including family planning.'*

The Future We Want, para 145





# POPULATION AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH: LINKS AND OPPORTUNITIES

## Health, human rights and social equity:

- Comprehensive reproductive health services, including family planning and HIV/AIDS services, are critical for realising the right to health and achieving sustainable development.
- Fulfilling unmet need for family planning would each year prevent an estimated 79,000 maternal deaths, 1.1 million infant deaths and avert 54 million unintended pregnancies.<sup>3</sup>
- Fertility, migration, urbanization, increased population densities and unhealthy conditions in urban slums affect the spread of disease, including TB, malaria and HIV/AIDS.
- Poor health, poverty and social inequities are inextricably linked and lack of access to reproductive health services is a key driver of poor maternal and child health, and gender inequality.

*'Health is a precondition and an outcome and indicator of all three dimensions of sustainable development.'*

The Future We Want, para 138

## CASE STUDY: POPULATION, REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND WATER LINKAGES

### Key facts:

- By 2030 it is estimated that the world will need 30% more water, due to population growth and other factors increasing demand.<sup>5</sup>
- Population growth leads directly to increasing overall demand for water, and to reduced availability of water per person.
- Urbanization, population density and other dynamics also influence demand for water.
- The most water scarce or stressed areas are typically those with few water resources, high population densities and high population growth rates.<sup>6</sup>
- In many of these countries unmet need for family planning is high.

### Achieving universal access to reproductive health, including voluntary family planning services, would:

- Lessen future demand for water and sanitation, making it easier to achieve universal access to water and sanitation for all **(Social Dimension)**
- Help ensure sufficient water for economic purposes, and reduce ill-health and poverty associated with lack of access to safe water **(Economic Dimension)**
- Ease pressure on water resources, minimising pollution and degradation of water sources **(Environmental Dimension)**

## Gender equality and women's empowerment:

- Reproductive health, including realisation of women's right to choose the number, timing and spacing of pregnancies, is critical for gender equality.
- Access to sexual and reproductive health services, including family planning, empowers women and girls and increases their opportunities for education and employment.
- Investment in reproductive health and education have multiple and complementary effects for women, their families and overall sustainable development.

*'We reaffirm the vital role of women and the need for their full and equal participation and leadership in all areas of sustainable development.'*

The Future We Want, para 236



## **Economic prosperity, employment and poverty alleviation:**

- High population growth is outpacing investments in health and education in many developing countries, undermining economic prosperity, social equity and poverty alleviation.
- Meeting women's needs for family planning improves their health and opportunities to lead economically productive lives, increasing household incomes.

*'Demographic trends and factors and sustainable development have a synergistic relationship.'*

Agenda 21, Chapter 5

- Increased access to voluntary family planning services, along with wider investments in women's health, education and empowerment, can reduce fertility and deliver a 'demographic dividend'.
- The demographic dividend offers countries an opportunity to capitalise on the productivity of a growing workforce to boost economic growth and reduce poverty; it delivers the best results in the presence of investment in health, particularly women's health, and education.

## **Education and youth:**

- Early and forced marriages, early pregnancy, sexual harassment and violence and HIV/AIDs prevent young people, particularly girls, from attending school and completing their education, driving gender inequality and poverty.
- Comprehensive, youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health information, education and services are critical for the health, education, and empowerment of young people.
- Population growth is undermining progress towards universal access to education; in some countries thousands more teachers are needed each year just to keep class sizes constant.
- Smaller family size can improve girls' access to education and educated women are more likely to have fewer children who are healthier and more educated.

## **Environmental sustainability and climate change:**

- Unsustainable consumption by the wealthiest nations and groups is the primary cause of climate change and global environmental degradation, as they are responsible for the bulk of fossil fuel emissions, but population dynamics are also relevant and influence per capita availability of resources, including land and water.
- Many of the world's poorest countries hit hardest by climate change identify population dynamics, including population growth, migration and high population density, as exacerbating climatic impacts and other environmental problems, including soil erosion, water and land scarcity and deforestation.<sup>7</sup>
- Empowering women and men to achieve their desire for a smaller family size can improve human health and well-being while helping advance environmental sustainability, support climate adaptation and increase resilience in ecologically fragile areas.

## **Forests, land degradation and biodiversity:**

- As the world population grows, so does demand for land and natural resources, contributing to land degradation, deforestation, desertification and biodiversity loss. Population density, urbanization and migration also influence these environmental impacts.
- Population growth is particularly high in areas with high biodiversity and high deforestation rates, and in many of these areas there is high unmet need for family planning.
- Integrated approaches combining reproductive health with conservation and development initiatives can benefit both the health of local communities and ecosystems, helping balance environmental protection, natural resource use and human well-being.



### Food, water and energy security:

- By 2030 it is estimated that the world will need 50% more food and energy and 30% more water due to population growth and other factors increasing demand.<sup>5</sup>
- While the world produces enough food for today's population and a number of factors impact food insecurity, including distribution issues, demographic trends also play a role.

*'To achieve sustainable development and a higher quality of life for all people, States should reduce and eliminate unsustainable patterns of production and consumption and promote appropriate demographic policies.'*

Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, Principle 8

- Population growth and unmet need for family planning is greatest in the world's poorest countries where water and energy shortages are severe and hunger is most prevalent.
- Increasing access to family planning can help slow population growth and complement efforts to achieve access to food, water and sanitation, and energy for all.

### Sustainable consumption and production:

- Unequal and unsustainable consumption by the wealthiest groups and nations must be addressed in order to satisfy the need of the world's poorest to consume more, without further breach of critical environmental thresholds.
- Population size, migration and urbanization influence demand for and consumption of resources; both consumption- and population-related factors must be addressed.
- Universal access to family planning would improve health and well-being while increasing the effectiveness of initiatives to promote more equal and sustainable consumption and production patterns, and the development of a fair and green economy.

### Sustainable cities and human settlements:

- Population growth and migration contribute to urbanization, and influence demand for housing and essential services including health, education, water and sanitation.
- Increasing access to family planning in rural and urban areas could lessen the pace and pressures of urbanization and enable more effective urban planning to seize the opportunities that urbanization offers, including economies of scale.
- Population trends are important to take into account for planning and ensuring sufficient infrastructure and services for growing and moving populations, including slum residents and migrants.

### Conflict, peace and security:

- Countries with very young age structures, particularly when there are insufficient jobs, education and other prospects for youth, are more likely to experience conflict.
- Pressures associated with population growth, migration and urbanization can fuel or exacerbate conflict over access to resources such as land, water and basic services.
- Family planning provision and investment in young people has the potential to advance peace and security, by alleviating population-related factors that contribute to conflict.



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'We commit to systematically consider population trends and projections in our national, rural and urban development strategies. Through forward looking planning, we can seize the opportunities and address the challenges associated with demographic change.'

The Future We Want, para 144

'We reaffirm our commitment to gender equality and to protect the rights of women, men and youth to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality.'

The Future We Want, para 146

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To address population dynamics in ways that respect and protect human rights the post-2015 international development framework must:

- **Prioritise universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights, including family planning, as part of a Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) on health:** Complete the unfinished business of MDG 5 and the full implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development.
- **Devise forward-looking goals:** SDGs, targets and indicators must be forward-looking, based on projected changes in population size, location and age structures which influence demand for and supply of key resources and essential services.
- **Sectoral planning should utilize population data:** Planning for water and sanitation facilities, food security, health and education services etc., and overall development strategies, must be informed by systematic use of population data and projections.
- **Use population data to address inequalities:** Monitoring and reporting mechanisms should use data and indicators disaggregated by sex, age, rural/urban location, educational background and economic quintile, to ensure development goals benefit all.
- **Invest in the cross-cutting issues of health, education, gender equality, empowerment of youth and human rights:** These critical investments offer opportunities to improve human health and well-being and advance each of the three dimensions of sustainable development.

## POPULATION: COMMON QUESTIONS AND MYTHS

**Q Can you care about both population and human rights and freedoms?**

**A** Yes. Advancing reproductive rights and freedoms is the answer. 222 million women in developing countries have an unmet need for contraception.<sup>3</sup> Empowering women to choose the number, timing and spacing of their pregnancies is not only a matter of health and human rights, but by preventing unplanned pregnancies would also reduce population pressures and advance sustainable development.

**Q Isn't the problem consumption, not population?**

**A** Unsustainable and unequal patterns of consumption and production are a major obstacle to achieving sustainable development. Yet the perception that either population or consumption is the problem is simplistic. A holistic response is necessary, including address of both consumption- and population-related factors.

**Q Are you saying that reproductive health and rights is the answer to sustainable development?**

**A** No. There is no magic bullet. But addressing these issues can play a valuable part in securing sustainable development, and without addressing population dynamics and sexual and reproductive health and rights, the impact and effectiveness of other interventions will be less.

The Population and Sustainable Development Alliance (PSDA) is an international network of civil society organisations that work together on population, sexual and reproductive health and rights and sustainable development issues.

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