

Sustainable development, demography and sexual and reproductive health: inseparable linkages and their policy implications

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Abstract: *The greatest challenge today is to meet the needs of current and future generations, of a large and growing world population, without imposing catastrophic pressures on the natural environment. Meeting this challenge depends on decisive policy changes in three areas: more inclusive economic growth, greener economic growth, and population policies. This article focuses on efforts to address and harness demographic changes for sustainable development, which are largely outside the purview of the current debate. Efforts to this end must be based on the recognition that demographic changes are the cumulative result of individual choices and opportunities, and that demographic changes are best addressed through policies that enlarge these choices and opportunities, with a focus on ensuring unrestricted and universal access to sexual and reproductive health information and services, empowering women to fully participate in social, economic and political life, and investing in the education of the younger generation beyond the primary level. The article provides a strong argument for why the Programme of Action that was agreed at the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) 20 years ago continues to hold important implications and lessons for the formulation of the post-2015 development agenda, which is expected to supersede the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).* © 2014 Reproductive Health Matters

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Today, mega population trends at the national and global levels – continued rapid population growth, population ageing, urbanization and migration – constitute important developmental challenges and opportunities in themselves. Furthermore, they influence the concerns and objectives that are at the top of international and national development agendas. Population dynamics affect economic development, employment, income distribution, poverty, social protection and pensions; they affect efforts to ensure universal access to health, education, housing, sanitation, water, food and energy; and they also influence the sustainability of cities and rural areas, environmental conditions and climate change.

Against this background, population dynamics have moved to the fore in the national and international discussions on development and sustainable development goals and targets. The importance of population dynamics was empha-

sized in the outcome document of the Rio+20 conferences *The Future We Want*¹ and in the report of United Nations (UN) Task Team on the post-2015 development agenda *Realizing the Future We Want for All*.² Building on these developments, the United Nations Development Group (UNDG) has initiated a global thematic consultation on population dynamics and the post-2015 development agenda. But how exactly are population dynamics linked to sustainable development, and how can population dynamics be shaped to ensure more sustainable development pathways?

The discussion on the linkages between population dynamics – in particular population growth – and its environmental implications is often characterized by gross simplifications. Indeed, the poorest countries which have the highest population growth have thus far contributed least to global greenhouse gas emissions. But it would be hasty to conclude that population growth does not have important implications for environmental sustainability. Likewise, it would be inaccurate to suggest that population growth has a clear and direct impact on the

*The views expressed in this article are those of the author, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).

natural environment. The relationship between demographic change and environmental sustainability is complex and mitigated through many different factors.

This article discusses the links between sustainable development and demographic change, and policies for more sustainable development. It argues that the objective of sustainable development demands a focus on three principle policy levers, notably policies that promote more inclusive economies, policies that ensure greener economies and policies that address and harness population dynamics. While the article outlines the importance of more inclusive and greener economies, it focuses its discussions on the need to plan for and shape population dynamics. This focus is not meant to suggest that the achievement of more equal and greener economies is easy or straightforward, rather it is motivated by the fact that policies to address and harness population dynamics are generally neglected. Despite the growing realization that demography matters for sustainable development, many continue to treat demography as though it was destiny. It is not. This article takes issue with the view that demographic change is exogenously determined and cannot be influenced by policies, as well as the view that demographic change can only be influenced through population control policies that violate human rights. The Programme of Action (PoA) that was agreed at the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) 20 years ago not only highlighted the importance of population dynamics for sustainable development, but also spelled out in great detail how to shape population dynamics through rights-based and gender-responsive policies. The ICPD Programme of Action³ holds important implications and lessons for the formulation of the post-2015 development agenda.

“The 1994 Conference was explicitly given a broader mandate on development issues than previous population conferences, reflecting the growing awareness that population, poverty, patterns of production and consumption and the environment are so closely interconnected that none of them can be considered in isolation.” (ICPD PoA, 1994, Preamble 1.5)

Sustainable development and population dynamics

According to the latest UN population projections, the world population stands at about 7.2 billion in

2014, and will continue to grow for decades to come. Between now and 2050, the world population will grow by another 2.4 billion people – about as many people as inhabited the planet in 1950. Compared with previous population projections, the most recent projections, revised in 2012, suggest a more rapid increase in the world population (Figure 1). This is largely due to stalled fertility decline in high fertility countries in Africa, a slightly higher fertility in very populous countries in Asia, and slight improvements in life expectancy at birth.⁴

The global trends mask considerable differences between countries, however. While fertility and population growth are still high in the poorest countries, fertility and population growth have fallen in many other countries. Indeed, an increasing group of developed countries have fertility levels below replacement level, and therefore are already or will be witnessing a population decline. Because of growing demographic differences between countries, many countries today have very different concerns. Countries that have a low and falling fertility, may find it difficult to understand concerns about high fertility and population growth elsewhere. But even though the demographic realities differ considerably at the national level, these demographic realities have global implications. Global climate will change regardless of where greenhouse gases are emitted, and global population will grow regardless of where this growth originates. Although the least developed countries have contributed least to global greenhouse gas emissions, they feel the effects of global warming caused by the advanced countries. Likewise, while the advanced countries have comparatively low fertility levels today, they will feel the effects of global population growth which originate largely in the poorest countries. For example, efforts to meet a rapidly growing demand for water, food and energy will affect all countries, and so will the failure to meet these growing demands.

“Demographic factors, combined with poverty and lack of access to resources in some areas, and excessive consumption and wasteful production patterns in others, cause or exacerbate problems of environmental degradation and resource depletion and thus inhibit sustainable development.” (ICPD PoA, 1994, Ch. 3.25)

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