

# Population and Sustainability Network



73 Charlotte Street  
London W1T 4PL  
United Kingdom  
Tel: +44 (0)20 8673 8963  
Fax: +44 (0)20 7792 9163  
[cbm@populationandsustainability.org](mailto:cbm@populationandsustainability.org)  
[www.populationandsustainability.org](http://www.populationandsustainability.org)

## Getting Population Issues back on the Policy Agenda

### Introduction

The Network is an international advocacy group which aims to bring together development, environment and reproductive health NGOs, government departments, academics, policy makers and others, to increase leverage on population issues.

It endeavours to provide a 'space' in which different constituencies can learn from each other. The intention is that such increases in understanding of the issues will inform the strategies and activities of Network members, and bring population issues higher up the policy agenda in a range of other organisations.

A central aim of the Network is to increase public and professional understanding of the inter-relationship of the key issues and their importance in addressing sustainable development and poverty eradication both in the rich minority world and in the majority world.

In addition, the Network aims to explore the barriers that inhibit discussion about and action on these issues and, finally, to promote processes that increase participation and exchange between the various stakeholders.

The Network is predominantly UK based, but it encompasses an increasingly broad range of overseas organisations. It was launched as a United Nations Partnership at the Commission for Sustainable Development meeting (CSD 12) in New York in April 2004.

### **The overarching concept of the Network – The Population Coin:**

#### **On one side of the coin**

Unsustainable population increase and its social, economic and environment effects in the majority world.

#### **On the other side**

over-consumption per person and the consequences for sustainability.



### **Network Co-ordinator:**

Catherine Budgett-Meakin

### **Members**

ActionAid  
African Foundation for  
Population and Development, Nigeria  
African Women's Economic Policy Network  
All-party Parliamentary  
Group on  
Population  
Development &  
Reproductive Health (UK)  
Best Foot Forward  
Centre for Alternative Technology  
Centre for Population Studies at  
London School of Hygiene  
and Tropical Medicine  
Commonwealth Women's Network  
Department for  
International Development (UK)  
FPA (Portugal)  
International Institute for  
Applied Systems Analysis  
International Institute for  
Co-operation between Peoples  
International Planned  
Parenthood Federation  
John Snow International  
National Wildlife Federation, USA  
New Economics Foundation  
Oxfam  
Philippines NGO Council on  
Population Health & Welfare  
School of Public Health  
University of California  
The Sexuality Information and  
Education Council  
of the United States  
Sierra Club, Canada  
United Nations  
Population Fund  
Women's Environment and  
Development Organisation  
World Wide Fund for Nature

### **Sponsor:**

Margaret Pyke Memorial Trust  
The Advancement of Medical Education &  
Research in Sexual & Reproductive  
Health  
Reg Charity No: 1064672  
Company No: 3438741  
[www.margaretpyke.org](http://www.margaretpyke.org)

## The Case

The twin issues of population numbers, and over consumption have been highly contentious, if not taboo, and few in the policy and advocacy world have been prepared to address them. As a result, the relationship between human population issues and sustainability on a finite planet is widely denied. Many see any quantitative concern about human numbers as intrinsically coercive, or as a distraction from other important measures to relieve poverty and to promote social justice.

The UN International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo in 1994 shifted the emphasis away from population 'control' and towards people-centred development, including human and reproductive rights for women. The Programme of Action, the principle outcome of the Conference, required much greater resources for sexual and reproductive health care (SRHC), but since then even in this area a sense of urgency has been lacking. Far more resources are needed to attain the annual target of \$17 billion proposed at Cairo – currently only about \$10.9 billion is allocated to SRHC - \$6.1 billion short of what was promised. 2004 has seen many ICPD + 10 events all around the world: it is apparent that much more needs to be done to bring reproductive health and population issues up the international agenda. Many majority world countries recognise the problems caused by high fertility: more financial investment in this area is urgently needed.

In the last 20 years or so the role of 'population' has been largely ignored in consideration of development and environment policy – it seems to have slipped off the 'radar'. The received wisdom of many of the development agencies seems to have been 'attend to poverty ("take care of the people"), and the population will take care of itself'. The issue has become too politically charged and has therefore been neglected. This paper argues that 'population' is itself a critical factor in tackling poverty and environmental degradation, but that the population challenge should be addressed – wisely, compassionately and democratically through meeting the reproductive rights and health needs of (primarily) women.

There is now growing awareness that the three issues of sustainability, population and consumption are inextricably linked: 20% of the world's population consumes 80% of its resources. The climate scientists agree that climate change is happening faster than originally predicted and this means that survival for the poorest is threatened: while not all climate change is anthropogenic, a significant proportion is, mostly from those living in the minority world. One estimate is that by 2050 there will be 150 million environmental refugees, most from the majority world.

The ecological footprint of a child born in the minority world is about 200 times as damaging as that of a child born in the majority world: it is therefore essential that discussions about 'population' should take account of over-consumption and pollution by the minority world as well as population growth. The role of over-consumption in the minority world is therefore also central to discussions about sustainability. As the Worldwatch Institute's State of the World 2004 states: 'The underlying premise of mass consumption economics – that unlimited consumption is acceptable, even desirable – is fundamentally at odds with life patterns of the natural world'.

## The Evidence

Many influential organisations (The World Bank, UNFPA, the Population Reference Bureau [PRB], Population Action International [PAI], DFID and others<sup>1</sup>) have argued that the first seven (of the eight) of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) cannot be delivered without the provision of good reproductive health services. Poverty is inextricably linked with the inability of women and men to choose when and if to have children. Given the choice, the social environment, and the family planning wherewithal, women usually choose to limit their families.

A study commissioned by DFID and carried out by John Snow International in 2004 asserted that reproductive health (RH) is particularly critical to reducing child mortality, improving maternal health, and combating HIV/AIDS. Better RH and RH care can also make an important contribution to eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, achieving universal primary education, promoting gender equality and empowerment of women, and ensuring environmental sustainability.

**The Consequences of High Fertility:** The high fertility rates in Africa and the Middle East have at least three major consequences. First, high total fertility rates (TFRs) go hand in hand with lower rates of economic growth in poor countries, diverting resources into current consumption and away from investment in productivity. When poor families have many children, the parents cannot invest adequately in the health, education and nutrition of all of them...secondly, rapid population growth puts direct stress on limited environmental resources. In Africa, growing population contributes to rising demands for fuel wood and farmland, which is leading to dramatic rates of deforestation. This, in turn, is causing multiple environmental catastrophes, including soil erosion and more frequent flooding. Third, a rapidly growing population is probably an important factor in the crises of governance throughout sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East<sup>2</sup>.

As the UNFPA State of World Population 2004 says: 'Population growth is contributing, along with resource consumption by affluent populations, to increasing stress on the global environment. Global warming, deforestation, growing scarcity of water and diminishing crop land will make it harder to address poverty and gender inequality'.

Following on from the UNFPA comment above, there is an urgent need to address the damaging effects of over consumption of resources by the minority world – it is well recognised that anthropogenic pollution is seriously damaging habitats (human and animal), and biodiversity. In particular the urgent issue of climate change threatens our way of life – everywhere, but particularly in vulnerable regions of the world where the poorest live.

**HIV/AIDS:** The impact of this disease continues to have extremely serious consequences. Africa is the world's worst hit region for HIV/AIDS: 13 million people have died of HIV/AIDS; 28 million are now living with the virus. Its devastating impact is reducing

---

<sup>1</sup> See references and sources of information at the end of the paper

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey Sachs in the New Scientist, November 8<sup>th</sup> 2003

economic growth, increasing the attrition of skilled workers, and adversely affecting agricultural productivity and food security. An estimated 860,000 children in sub-Saharan Africa lost teachers to AIDS in 1999.

**Conflict:** Population growth is also a factor in civil conflict – see the report “The Security Demographic” produced by PAI. The report concludes that countries with low availability of cropland and/or renewable fresh water, measured on a per capita basis were 1.5 times as likely to experience civil conflict as those in other categories, and that the highest rate of civil conflict are concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa, in the Middle East and in South Asia where those elements are exhibited.

**Avoiding complacency:** While it is clear that the birth rate is undoubtedly falling in some countries, it remains alarmingly high in some of the poorest countries of the world. The table below <sup>3</sup> gives details of 12 representative countries where the situation remains grave. However the situation is not grave everywhere: there are signs that some countries are developing population policies – but their effects take time to percolate through, so we still face a future with a large number of ‘reproductively active’ people lacking the facilities to control their own fertility. This is most acutely true for the youngest cohorts currently or soon-to-be teenagers: one third of the world (2 billion) is under 20 years old. The UN notes that the expected decline to low levels of fertility is ‘contingent on ensuring that couples have access to family planning’.

Country	Population 2004 (millions)	Population projection (millions)		% Married women using contraception (modern methods)	GNI PPP per capita 2002 (US\$)
		2025	2050		
Afghanistan	28.5	50.3	81.9	4	- <sup>4</sup>
Brazil	179.1	211.2	221.4	70	7,450
Burkina Faso	13.6	22.5	39.5	9	1,090
China	1,300.1	1,476.0	1,437.0	83	4,520
Congo (Dem Rep)	58.3	104.9	181.3	4	630
El Salvador	6.7	8.5	9.9	67 <sup>5</sup>	4,790
Iraq	25.9	41.7	57.9	-	-
Malawi	11.9	23.8	47.2	26	570
Mexico	106.2	131.7	149.7	59	8,800
Nigeria	137.3	206.4	307.4	8	800
Sudan	39.1	61.3	84.2	7	1,740
Uganda	26.1	47.5	82.6	18	1,360

[GNI PPP = gross national income in purchasing power parity divided by mid-year population]

#### The Network's key Research Project

The Population and Sustainability Network is planning a research project to investigate the economic, social and environmental effects of ‘unsustainable population increase’ – to assess the extent of the population factor in the poverty/sustainable development nexus. The hypothesis is that it is unrealistic in many cases to argue for no population growth at all, certainly in the short run. However there is a rate of increase, varying with circumstance, above which key development goals of poverty alleviation, per capita productivity and investment in healthcare and education become significantly compromised. The economy at local level is unable to support such increase, with high resultant unemployment, emigration to towns, urban squalor. An equally relevant aspect of “unsustainability” in population increase relates to its impact in a finite physical environment – causing degradation of land, pollution, loss of biodiversity and pressure on natural resources.

*We need to attract financial support for this project. [Please contact us for more information.](#)*

#### Recommendations for Action

- Population as an issue to be addressed became ‘taboo’ partly because of the perception that this was the minority world attempting to ‘dictate’ to the majority world. By proving that unsustainable rates of population increase hinder economic development and poverty alleviation, this perception can be reversed and population planning can become an instrument of empowerment for less developed countries.
- Within the research and policy environment, much more attention needs to be given to the effect of provision of adequate reproductive health care services on poverty eradication. Currently about 350 million couples lack access to adequate reproductive health services;
- Donor governments need to increase their allocation of funds to reproductive health services (it seems that funds to HIV/AIDS have been diverted from RH budgets). DFID is now taking this issue more seriously, but there is work to be done with other donor governments. The commitments made at ICPD in 1994 should be fulfilled.
- There should be more dialogue between those NGOs who focus on reproductive health and rights and the development and environment NGOs, and between those exploring policy issues in these areas.
- Development and environment NGOs need to include population issues (both growth and per capita consumption) within their strategic plans: Both sides of the ‘population coin’ needs to be an inescapable element in the population equation.
- More attention needs to be given to the role of unsustainable consumption by rich populations in the minority world in hindering sustainability at individual and institutional levels. Particular attention needs to be given to climate change which,

<sup>3</sup> Population Reference Bureau 2004

<sup>4</sup> No figures available

<sup>5</sup> Modern and traditional combined

according to many observers, (NEF, the World Watch Institute and others) may mean the 'end of development'<sup>6</sup>: certainly the achievement of development goals is threatened, affecting the poorest sections of the population.

## Conclusions

The three pillars of sustainable development – social/cultural, economic and environmental – are decidedly shaky without proper attention to population issues – both population growth in many of the poorest countries of the majority world and over-consumption of resources and consequential pollution by those living in the minority world.

The attainment of the MDGs is threatened by the failure of the international community, national governments, academic institutions, NGOs and particularly those developing policy for international and sustainable development to incorporate population issues in their agendas and programmes of work, whether they focus on delivery or research.

As Kofi Annan said in Bangkok in December 2003: *'The Millennium Development Goals, particularly the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger, cannot be achieved if questions of population and reproductive health are not squarely addressed. And that means stronger efforts to promote women's rights, and greater investment in education and health, including reproductive health and family planning'*.

While it is clear that in some countries, the demographic transition is taking place, in many others – the poorest – the light at the end of the tunnel is far away. Although the projection is that world population may begin to decline by the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, we are currently faced by an increasingly polarised and inequitable world with another, at least, two billion human beings destined to arrive. With about 77 million added on our planet every year, we must not duck this problem any longer – regardless of religious or cultural sensitivities and the 'political correctness' which tempt politicians, policy makers and NGOs to do so. International peace is likely to be increasingly threatened if attention to both sides of the population coin is not given: the threat to food and water supplies and from climate change will make the world a progressively more unstable place. The vast differences in consumption in the minority and majority worlds endangers our world.

Sir David King, Government Chief Scientist, at an ITDG conference (November 2004), bracketed 'population' with poverty eradication, education and skills, water and energy and the impact of climate change as critical driving forces, but the issue of population is not addressed in depth in the policy agendas: let us change that.

In the interests of all our children and grand-children – everywhere – 'Population', the word that dares not speak its name, must become central to discussions about poverty eradication and sustainability in both the majority and minority worlds.

Catherine Budgett-Meakin, Population and Sustainability Network Co-ordinator  
February 2005. [Catherine@Budgett-Meakin.co.uk](mailto:Catherine@Budgett-Meakin.co.uk)

## References and Sources of Information

- Reproductive Health Background Paper, prepared for the UK Department for International Development (DFID) by John Snow International (UK), April 2004
- Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights – a position paper, DFID, July 2004
- Implementing the ICPD Programme of Action, Marianne Haslegrave in Reproductive Health Matters, May 2004
- World Population: More than Just Numbers, Population Reference Bureau (PRB), 1999
- Critical Links: Population, Health and the Environment, Population Bulletin, September 2003, PRB
- 2004 World Population Data Sheet, PRB
- UNFPA State of World Population 2004
- Population, Environment and Poverty Linkages: Operational Challenges, UNFPA, 2001
- Population and Poverty: Achieving Equity, Equality and Sustainability, UNFPA, 2003
- Achieving the Millennium Development Goals: Population and Reproductive Health as Critical Determinants, UNFPA, 2003
- The Security Demographic: Population and Civil Conflict after the Cold War, Population Action International (PAI), 2003
- Helping People, Saving Biodiversity, PAI, 2003
- Population Matters: Demographic Change, Economic Growth, and Poverty in the Developing World, edited by Nancy Birdsall, Allen C Kelley and Steven Sinding, pub. OUP, 2001
- The End of World Population Growth in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: New Challenges for Human Capital Formation and Sustainable Development, edited by Wolfgang Lutz, Warren C Sanderson and Sergei Scherbov, IIASA/Earthscan, 2004
- Worldwatch Institute magazine, September/October 2004
- Worldwatch Institute: State of the World 2004 – Consumer Society
- Commission for Africa: An Overview of Evidence July 2004
- Commission for Africa: Consultation Paper, November 2004
- Harbingers of Doom, Fred Pearce, New Scientist, 24<sup>th</sup> July 2004
- How We can Save the Planet, Mayer Hillman and Tina Fawcett, Penguin 2004
- Coming Back to Life, Joanna Macy, New Society Publishers, 1998
- The End of Development? Global Warming and the Great Reversal of Human Progress. New Economics Foundation and the Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies, 2002
- Global Warming, Unnatural Disasters and the World's Poor, Christian Aid, 2000
- Solidarity with the Victims of Climate Change, World Council of Churches, 2002

---

<sup>6</sup> See details of the NEF report in the Reference section