



# Population and Sustainability Network

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## Population Growth – Impact on the Achievement of the Millennium Development Goals

**Submission from the Steering Group of the  
Population and Sustainability Network (PSN)  
to the 2006 Parliamentary Hearings  
organised by the All Party Parliamentary Group on  
Population, Development and Reproductive Health.**

Individual organisational members of the Network have been invited to submit evidence on behalf of their organisations: this submission comes from the Network steering group, based in London.

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This submission sets out the Case, Evidence, Conclusions and Recommendations for Action, with a particular focus on MDG 7: **Ensure Environmental Sustainability**

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## Submission from the Steering Group of the Population and Sustainability Network (PSN)

*"Not enough is being said about the threat to development from continued rapid population growth. Paradoxically, one reason for this neglect may be the success of family planning programmes in other regions which has given a false sense that the population problem is solved"*

Steven Sinding, Director of the International Planned Parenthood Federation and John Cleland, Professor of Medical Demography at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine in "What would Malthus say about AIDS in Africa?", The Lancet, October 2005

*" Population has all but disappeared from the media, and even discussion about why this subject has fallen off the table is considered by some groups to be only marginally acceptable. Population growth is an important factor among others that have impact on the environment. Population is the multiplier of everything we do wrong".*

Dr Martha Campbell, Senior Lecturer at the School of Public Health, University of California at the Population and Sustainability Network's Annual Meeting, October, 2005

### Introduction

1. This PSN submission aims:
  - To outline the case for the integration of the population factor into development and environment policy,
  - To summarise evidence and to draw attention to some of the obstacles in the population debate that have developed,
  - To focus particularly on the environmental aspects of population growth (MDG 7) and
  - To make recommendations about future actions
2. Our guiding principles are:
  - The rights of women and men to choose to plan their families must be safe-guarded where they already exist and promoted where they do not;
  - Coercive family planning practices should not be tolerated.

### The Case

3. The twin issues of population numbers, and over consumption, have been highly contentious, if not taboo, and in the past decade few in the policy and advocacy world have been prepared to address them. As a result, the relationship between human population issues and environmental 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.
4. More needs to be done to bring reproductive health and population issues back on to the international agenda. Many majority world <sup>1</sup> countries recognise the problems caused by high fertility and argue that more financial investment in this area is urgently needed.
5. But many national and international organisations, and policy papers, studiously avoid the population issue. For example: the Human Development Report, 2005, the 2004 World Bank Annual Review of Development Effectiveness, and the summary report of the Poverty-Environment Partnership events at the 2005 World Summit – all make no mention of population as a factor to be considered. And finally, DFID's policy paper on its approach to the environment (February 2006) makes only one reference to 'population pressures'.
6. In the last 20 years the 'population factor' has been largely ignored in consideration of development and environment policy – it has slipped off the 'radar' not just in the UK but

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<sup>1</sup> 'Majority' and 'minority' worlds are the terms used to describe what are more commonly called, respectively, 'developing' and 'developed' worlds.

internationally. The received and applied wisdom of many of the development agencies has been 'attend to poverty, and population growth will take care of itself'.

7. The issue has become politically charged and has therefore been neglected. This submission argues that 'population' is a critical factor in efforts to stem poverty and environmental degradation, and should be addressed – wisely and compassionately through meeting the reproductive rights and health needs of families.
8. There is growing awareness that the three issues of environmental 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 caused by those living in the minority world. One estimate is that by 2050 there will be 150 million environmental refugees, mostly from the majority world.

## The Evidence

9. Many influential organisations (UNFPA, the Population Reference Bureau [PRB], Population Action International [PAI], DFID and others <sup>2</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. 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'*.
10. 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, including, specifically, family planning, 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:**

11. Writing in the New Scientist <sup>3</sup>, Jeffrey Sachs, Director of the Millennium Project said: *'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'*.

## **Consumption of Resources and global pollution:**

12. 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.

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix 1: references and further reading,

<sup>3</sup> The New Scientist, November 8<sup>th</sup> 2003

### Population: the taboo issue:

13. The taboo nature of the population factor must also be recognised as one of the obstacles to attracting proper attention and resources:

Imre Loeffler, Editor of the Nairobi Hospital Proceedings, described (BMJ in 2003) how, at WSSD in 2002, delegates talked about the scarcity of water, land, food, medicines, and education, the disappearance of forests, and the depletion in fish stocks and about trade and sustainable development. He pointed out that they did not talk about population growth. He said that there was *'an international taboo: it is not desirable to speak about population problems'*.

He claims that there are few people who have the courage to say that the trebling of the population within 50 years has devastated many countries. And he asks about the reasons for the taboo and the blindness. He concludes that The Vatican, the pro-life fundamentalists, the imams, and the witch doctors have been joined by the politically correct with the result that the whole issue is now out of bounds. And finally he comments that *'this is the work of men, for that matter mostly of old men. If women were allowed to decide, then the demographic traps would not have been sprung.'*

### Conflict:

14. Population growth is also a factor in civil conflict – see the report “The Security Demographic” produced by PAI. The report concludes that countries in which young adults comprised more than 40% of the adult population were more than twice as likely as countries with lower proportions to experience an outbreak of civil conflict. And those 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. The highest rates of civil conflict are concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa, in the Middle East, and in South Asia. Progress through the demographic transition helps reduce the risk of civil conflict and thus contributes to a more peaceful and secure world.

### Avoiding complacency:

15. While it is clear that the birth rate is falling in some countries, it remains alarmingly high in some of the poorest countries of the world. The table below gives details of 12 representative countries where the situation remains grave. 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’.

A Briefing (2002) for DFID from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine reminds us that the decline in birth rates over the past 50 years has affected all but a small number of countries in Central and West Africa, and that there is growing confidence that the world's population will stabilise in the latter half of this century. But the decline has given rise to a remarkable, and unjustified, complacency that the population crisis is over.

The Briefing goes on to observe that demographic-economic research of the 1970s and 1980s failed to find evidence of a negative impact of population growth on per capita living standards but that research in the 1990s based on a longer time scale and using more appropriate methods gives very different results, namely that fertility and mortality decline made a contribution of about 20% to average annual growth in per capita output in developing countries between 1960 and 1995<sup>4</sup>.

The Briefing concludes that continued rapid population growth in today's poorest countries represents one of the clearest challenges to meeting the millennium goal of reducing poverty. Three problems that are likely to be severely exacerbated by continued growth are highlighted:

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<sup>4</sup> See Birdsall et al., (eds) (2001) Population Matters - Demographic Change, Economic Growth and Poverty in the Developing World OUP

unemployment and underemployment; increasing water scarcity resulting from the need for increased food production; and political unrest and instability.

**STATISTICS from 2005 POPULATION REFERENCE BUREAU DATA**

Country	Population 2005 (Millions)	Population projection (millions)		% Married women using contraception (modern methods)	GNI PPP per capita 2004 (US\$)	Total Fertility Rate (TFR) [Children per Woman] Replacement = 2.1
		2025	2050			
Afghanistan	29.9	50.3	81.9	4	- <sup>5</sup>	6.8
Brazil	184.2	228.9	259.8	70	8,020	2.4
Burkina Faso	13.9	22.5	39.5	9	1,220	6.2
China	1,303.7	1,476.0	1,437.0	86	5,530	1.6
Congo (Dem Rep)	60.8	108.0	183.2	4	680	6.7
El Salvador	6.9	9.1	10.8	67 <sup>6</sup>	4,980	3.0
Iraq	28.8	44.7	63.7	25	-	5.1
Kenya	33.8	49.4	64.8	32	1,050	4.9
Nepal	25.4	36.1	47.8	35	1,470	3.7
Nigeria	131.5	190.3	258.1	8	930	5.9
Philippines	84.8	115.7	142.2	33	4,890	3.5
Uganda	26.9	55.8	130.9	18	1,520	6.9

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

**To focus particularly on the seventh MDG:**

16. Ensure Environmental Sustainability: This is the MDG that has received least attention, but which is particularly relevant in the context of population growth. The quotation in paragraph 11 by Jeffrey Sachs illuminates this issue.

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'*.

Extracts from a fact sheet from Population Action International (September 2005)– highlight the important issues with regard to MDG 7 and the link to poverty alleviation:

***Water scarcity already is a chronic concern that is growing more acute and widespread in many Middle Eastern and African countries. In most of the countries where water scarcity is severe and worsening, high rates of population growth exacerbate the declining per capita availability of renewable fresh water.***

***Population dynamics are among the primary causes of forest decline. The current ratio of forests to human beings is less than half what it was in 1960, due to centuries of deforestation related to human population growth - the dominant force being increasing demand for farmland.***

***Ghana cites population growth as an impediment to the achievement of MDG 7. The country requires "adoption and implementation of sustainable population policies to reduce pressure and minimize environmental degradation" to achieve environmental sustainability.***

***Couples that can manage their own fertility are better able to manage other aspects of their lives, including natural resource conservation. Access to family planning contributes to lower fertility, later childbearing and slower population growth - all of which are critical variables influencing population change and, thus, the availability of the natural resources on which life depends.***

[http://www.populationaction.org/resources/factsheets/factsheet\\_31.htm](http://www.populationaction.org/resources/factsheets/factsheet_31.htm)

<sup>5</sup> Indicates no figures available  
<sup>6</sup> Modern and traditional combined

17. Population Growth: biodiversity, natural resources and water: Sir David King (Chief Scientist to HM Government) said in February 2006 at a PSN event that biodiversity was seriously threatened by population growth. The natural world is what, ultimately, we all depend on for our survival.

Water is likely to be an increasing 'flash-point', but in discussions about water provision, reference to 'population growth' is rarely made.

Case Study: The Nile.

The Blue Nile starts in Ethiopia's Lake Tana and flows west into Sudan. The White Nile comes out of Uganda and meets the Blue Nile in Khartoum. The merged Nile flows north through Egypt and into the Mediterranean. Today the Nile is nearly depleted by the time it reaches the Mediterranean because of the water that is drawn out to support the populations in these countries. These are rapidly growing countries and their governments are aware of the water situation. Here is the problem: between now and 2050, the populations of these countries combined are projected to double. But there is no other Nile, and nothing will make this life-giving water resource larger. Population growth is the primary driving factor in the depletion of the waters of the Nile. Also, in all of these countries dependent on the Nile it is relatively difficult for low-income people to obtain family planning.

Dr Martha Campbell, Senior Lecturer at the School of Public Health, University of California at the Population and Sustainability Network's Annual Meeting, October, 2005

## Conclusions

18. The three pillars of sustainable development – social/cultural, economic and environmental – are decidedly shaky without proper attention to population issues. 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 threatens the achievement of sustainable development. The natural environment, in particular, is at risk from population growth.
19. The attainment of the MDGs is jeopardised 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 delivery or research programmes of work.
20. 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.
21. International peace is likely to be increasingly threatened if attention to the population factor is not given: the threat to food and water supplies and from climate change will make the world an increasingly unstable place. The vast differences in consumption and equity in the minority and majority worlds endanger our world.
22. As Joseph Chamie, former director of the UN Population Division, said in an article on 21<sup>st</sup> Century Demographics in July 2005: *Population issues will continue to require sustained and critical attention and informed policy making at the national, regional and global levels. The decisions and actions taken today will affect not only human well-being, but also the quality of all life on the planet in the coming decades and beyond.*

## Recommendations for Action

23. Within the research and policy environment, more attention needs to be given to poverty eradication through provision of adequate reproductive health/family planning services, and ease of access to those services. Currently there is unmet need from about 350 million couples for adequate reproductive health/family planning services.
24. A great deal more attention to MDG 7 should be given: degradation to the natural environment from population growth and per capita over consumption ultimately threatens the survival of the world's population, but in particular those living in ecologically vulnerable areas.
25. Donor governments should 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.
26. Those countries, which have developed their own population policies, should be supported by donor countries in order to provide accessible non-coercive family planning services, to fulfil unmet need.
27. Research should be carried out to identify the costs of population growth and its impact on the MDGs for developing countries.
28. There should be more dialogue between those NGOs who focus on reproductive health and the development and environment NGOs.
29. Development and environment NGOs should include population issues within their strategic plans.
30. 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, according to many observers, (NEF, the World Watch Institute and others) may mean the 'end of development'<sup>7</sup>. Certainly the achievement of MDGs is threatened, affecting the poorest sections of the population.

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

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<sup>7</sup> See details of the NEF report in the Reference section

## Appendices

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## 2. Information about the Population and Sustainability Network

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.

Since its inception in 2003, PSN has been promoting to DFID, UNFPA and the World Bank, among others, a research initiative to establish the costs of population growth, with reference to poverty alleviation, development and environmental protection.

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

# ***Population and Sustainability Network***

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

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