



Family planning: Good for the environment, as well as for saving lives

Introduction

Everyone knows that childbearing is risky for women in the developing world, and that, by ensuring that women can get pregnant if they want to, and not if they don't, family planning can reduce high-risk pregnancies, and save lives that might otherwise be lost during childbirth – i.e. save some of the 350,000 women who die each year from causes related to pregnancy and childbirth.¹

But family planning can also make an **important** contribution to ensuring environmental sustainability.

At the end of October 2011, the world welcomed its seven billionth inhabitant. From a historical perspective, that milestone was reached in a very short time: it took over 50,000 years for the world population to reach its first billion, but the last two have been added in barely 25 years. Even if the speed of population growth continues to slow as it has done since the 1960s, the world population is likely to continue rising over this century. The United Nations projects that by 2050 the world population may be anywhere between 8.1 billion and 10.6 billion persons.² In a world within which an estimated 215 million women in developing countries wish to avoid pregnancy but do not currently use an effective contraceptive method, the extent to which we act now to reduce the 75 million unintended pregnancies that occur every year in developing countries by providing universal access to the family planning services we in the developed world take for granted can have a massive impact on whether global population in 2050 is closer to 8 billion, or exceeds 10 billion³

Rapid population growth exerts increased pressure on natural resources such as water, forests and land, as well as contributing to loss of the biodiversity upon which human life depends. Providing family planning to the millions of couples who want it can reduce this pressure, by reducing demand for the world's non-renewable resources while, at the same time, empowering women and men to choose whether and when to have children.

Biodiversity Facts⁴

Every day species' extinctions are continuing at up to 1,000 times or more the natural rate. Habitat destruction, land conversion for agriculture and development, climate change, pollution and the spread of invasive species are only some of the human-induced threats responsible for this crisis. Habitat loss and degradation affects an estimated 86% of all threatened birds, 86% of the threatened mammals and 88% of the threatened amphibians.

- Coral reefs provide food, storm protection, jobs, recreation and other income sources for more than 500 million people worldwide yet 70% of coral reefs are threatened or destroyed.
- 19,265 species out of the 59,507 assessed by the IUCN are threatened with extinction.
- Of the world's 5,494 mammals, 78 are Extinct or Extinct in the Wild, with 191 Critically Endangered, 447 Endangered and 496 Vulnerable.
- 1,910 of the planet's 6,312 amphibians are in danger of extinction, making them the most threatened group of species known to date.

¹ World Health Organisation (2010) Trends in maternal mortality: 1990 to 2008. Geneva: WHO.

² UN Population Division (2011) *World Population Prospects: The 2010 Revision*. New York: UN. Available at: <http://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/index.htm>

³ Guttmacher Institute (2010) Facts on Investing in Family Planning and Maternal and Newborn Health. New York: Guttmacher Institute and United Nations Population Fund.

⁴ IUCN (2011) *Why is Biodiversity in Crisis?* Retrieved 17 February 2012 from: http://www.iucn.org/what/tpas/biodiversity/about/biodiversity_crisis/

Deforestation Facts⁵

- Deforestation and forest degradation account for nearly 20% of global greenhouse gas emissions, which forests would absorb if carefully managed.
- Broadly, there are three main sources of forest degradation: commercial logging, fires, and gathering wood for fuel. Population pressures leading to increased demand can intensify the rate of forest degradation.
- Forests cover 31% of total land area while at the same time supporting 80% of terrestrial biodiversity that live in them.
- 36 million acres of natural forest are lost each year.

Water Security Facts⁶

- Water use has been growing globally at more than twice the rate of population increase in the last century, and an increasing number of regions are reaching the limit at which water services can be sustainably delivered.
- By 2025, 1800 million people are expected to be living in countries or regions with “absolute” water scarcity (<500 m³ per year per capita), and two-thirds of the world population could be under “stress” conditions (between 500 and 1000 m³ per year per capita).
- Water insecurity will be exacerbated as rapidly growing urban areas place heavy pressure on neighbouring water resources.
- Climate change and bio-energy demands are expected to amplify the already complex relationship between world development and water demand.

Food Security Facts

- In the first half of this century, as the world’s population grows to around 9 billion, global demand for food, feed and fibre will nearly double while, increasingly, crops may also be used for bioenergy and other industrial purposes.⁷
- New and traditional demand for agricultural produce will place increasing pressure on already scarce agricultural resources. While agriculture will be forced to compete for land and water with sprawling urban settlements, it will also be required to serve on other major fronts: adapting to and contributing to the mitigation of climate change, helping preserve natural habitats, protecting endangered species and preventing further loss of biodiversity.⁷
- In most regions fewer people will be living in rural areas and even fewer will be farmers. They will need new technologies to grow more from less land, with fewer hands.⁷
- Some 218 million people in Africa, around 30 percent of the total population, are estimated to be suffering from chronic hunger and malnutrition. Eighty percent of Africa’s farms are less than two hectares in size and there are 33 million of them.⁸

Climate Change Facts

- Each year since 2000 has ranked as one of the 15 warmest since records began.⁹
- Climate change is increasing the frequency and intensity of extreme natural events and disasters. The IPCC reports best estimate temperature rises of between 1.8°C to 4°C.¹⁰ However, global carbon dioxide emissions are already rising faster than the most pessimistic of the IPCC emission scenarios.

⁵ UNEP (2011) *Forest Facts*. Retrieved 17 February 2012 from: <http://www.unep.org/wed/forestfacts/>

⁶ FAO (2008) *Water Scarcity*. Retrieved 17 February 2012 from: http://www.fao.org/nr/water/topics_scarcity.html

⁷ FAO (2009) *How to feed the world in 2050*. Retrieved 17 February 2012 from: <http://www.fao.org/wsfs/forum2050/wsfs-forum/en/>

⁸ FAO (2009) *2050 – Africa’s food challenge*. Retrieved 17 February 2012 from: <http://www.fao.org/news/story/en/item/35770/icode/>

⁹ NAOO (2011) cited by The Guardian. Retrieved 4 November 2011 from: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2011/jan/12/2010-joint-warmest-on-record>

- Currently one third of the world's population lives within 60 miles of a shoreline and thirteen of the world's twenty largest cities are located on a coast.¹¹
- Hundreds of millions could be displaced in environmental mass migration.¹¹

Climate change is typical of environmental issues that seem, at first glance, to have relatively little to do with family planning, and yet are closely connected. The least developed regions of the world have contributed the least to climate change, are most vulnerable to its impact, and have the least resources available to them for adaptation. Interestingly, developing countries themselves find the link between population dynamics and climate change adaptation strategies self evident; a recent analysis of national climate change adaptation programmes of action showed that 37 out of 40 reports identified population pressure as a factor that was making it more difficult for the country to adapt to the effects of climate change. The five most frequently mentioned factors that will be exacerbated by population growth and climate change were fresh water availability, shortage of land per capita/over grazing, deforestation, population affecting soil degradation/erosion, and associated implications for agriculture, and high population density causing migration to coastal areas, thereby increasing vulnerability.¹²

An example project that combines the provision of voluntary family planning services with environmental issues is operated by Blue Ventures in Madagascar. Responding directly to community needs articulated by a fishing village which had identified that overfishing caused by increasing demand was contributing to environmental degradation and poverty, the project combines marine conservation with the provision of family planning services.¹³

China is a clear example of the complex interactions between population and climate change factors. There are huge differentials in per capita energy consumption levels and resultant greenhouse emissions of the USA and China: 19.3 metric tons of CO² emissions per person for the USA in 2006, ranked 7th in the world, compared with China's 4.7 metric tons and ranking of 66th. Nonetheless in 2006, China overtook the USA as the world's largest emitter of CO². While this is clearly a result of population size; China currently has a population of over 1.4 billion, while the USA population is approximately 318 million, it is important at the same time to recognize that a significant percentage of China's emissions emanate from the manufacture of products that will be consumed in the developed world.¹⁴

Conclusion

We all know that family planning saves lives, and that a significant proportion of the 350,000 women who die each year of preventable causes related to pregnancy and childbirth could be saved if women had access to family planning services that would enable them to plan their families. The link between this and the environment may not at first be apparent, but pressures caused by population dynamics including urbanization, migration, and population growth increase the challenge of tackling environmental issues such as biodiversity loss, deforestation and climate change effectively. Increased investment in voluntary family planning services that respect and protect rights will not alone solve any of these problems, but, as well as securing the basic human right for individuals and couples to decide whether and when to have children, it can make a significant contribution to several of the world's most pressing sustainable development issues.

¹⁰ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (2007) *IPCC Fourth Assessment Report: Climate change 2007 (AR4)*. Geneva: IPCC.

¹¹ Costello, et al. (2009) "Managing the health effects of climate change". *The Lancet*, 373, 9676, pp.1693–1733.

¹² Bryant, L, Carver, C, & Anage, A (2009). "Climate change and family planning: least-developed countries define the agenda." *WHO Bulletin*, 87, pp.852-857.

¹³ For further information see the Blue Ventures website: <http://blueventures.org/conservation/community-health.html>

¹⁴ Population and Sustainability Network (2010) *Population Dynamics and Climate Change: A PSN Briefing Paper*. Available at: <http://www.populationandsustainability.org/293/articles-and-reports/articles-and-reports.html>