



Population dynamics and sexual and reproductive health and rights: Critical cross-cutting issues for the post-2015 development agenda

Population dynamics and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) are critical, cross-cutting issues for sustainable development and the post-2015 development agenda. A focus on these issues that respects and protects rights has the potential to drive progress towards a range of development priorities, including poverty alleviation, equity, health, education, food and water security, gender equality, climate change and environmental sustainability, and to reduce the costs of achieving associated development goals.

Between now and 2100 the world population is projected to increase from 7 to 10 billion, with the vast majority of this growth expected in developing countries.¹ Whether it is closer to seven or 10 billion will significantly affect the world's potential to reach its development goals. Population dynamics and particularly population size, but also urbanization, migration, ageing etc., determine the scale and shape of the development challenges we face. While development prospects are dependent on governments' capacities to increase access to health, education and other basic services, high population growth in many developing countries is outpacing these investments and undermining economic prosperity, job creation, poverty alleviation and food security.

Unequal access to sexual and reproductive health information, education and services exacerbate the poor health, poverty and other inequalities experienced by marginalised groups including women and girls, adolescents and the poor. An estimated 222 million women in developing countries have an unmet need for family planning, meaning that they are at risk of an unplanned pregnancy and are not using modern contraception.² Increasing access to the reproductive health services that women want and need offers real opportunities to reduce population growth and associated pressures, by preventing unplanned pregnancies. **Investment in family planning is extremely cost-effective. For every dollar spent in family planning, 2 - 6 US dollars can be saved for other development interventions, including those to advance maternal and newborn health, gender equality, elimination of poverty and hunger, education, and environmental sustainability.**³

Health, human rights and equity: Human health, including SRHR, is a critical aspect of human development and sustainable development and 'the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health' is a recognized human right.⁴ Poor health, poverty and social inequities are inextricably linked, and lack of access to SRHR is a key driver of poor maternal and child health and gender inequality.

Gender equality and women's empowerment: Full realization of SRHR, including ensuring that women have the ability to choose the number, timing and spacing of pregnancies is critical for gender equality, and increases women's opportunities for education, employment and full participation in society. Investment in family planning and education improve maternal and child health and have multiple and complementary effects for women, their families and development.

Economic prosperity and poverty alleviation: Many developing countries are experiencing high rates of population growth which is associated with high levels of poverty and low levels of human development. Addressing unmet need for family planning, along with wider investments in women's health, education and empowerment can reduce fertility levels and facilitate the demographic transition in developing countries, offering opportunities for economic growth, job creation, women's employment and poverty alleviation.

Education and youth: Universal SRHR is critical for achieving universal education and empowering youth. Early and forced marriages, early pregnancy, sexual harassment and violence, HIV/AIDs, lack of sanitation facilities in schools and other sexual and reproductive health issues prevent young people and particularly girls from attending school and completing their education, driving gender inequalities and poverty. Comprehensive sexuality education and youth-friendly reproductive health services are critical for ensuring the health, education, rights and empowerment of girls and young people. Educated women are more likely to marry later and have fewer children, who are healthier and more educated.

Environmental sustainability and climate change: Population dynamics, including growth, urbanisation and migration influence consumption and availability of natural resources, including land and water. Population growth is highest in the world's poorest countries, which are most vulnerable to food and water insecurity. These countries are also the most vulnerable to the effects of climate change, but have done the least to cause it. Many of these countries identify population growth as undermining climate change adaptation by exacerbating pressure on resources. Addressing unmet need for contraception offers scope to advance environmental sustainability, support climate adaptation and increase resilience in ecologically fragile areas, alongside other necessary initiatives to address unsustainable and inequitable patterns of consumption.

Food, water and energy: By 2030 it is estimated that the world will need 50% more food and energy and 30% more water due to population growth and increasing demand, at the same time as coping with the impacts of climate change.⁵ Increased access to voluntary family planning would help reduce population growth and associated resource demands and pressures, increasing the prospects of securing sufficient food, water and energy for all.

Recommendations:

The post-2015 development framework must address social inequalities and the drivers of poverty, placing inequalities and human rights at the heart of the agenda with a focus on the most marginalised groups. A rights-based approach is necessary, and protection of human rights, gender equality, health and education should be explicitly identified as key to programme planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

Achievement of universal access to reproductive health and the advancement of gender equality and women's empowerment must be prioritised, including access to voluntary family planning services, with the full implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) and the Beijing Platform of Action. Particular attention must be paid to securing the highest attainable standard of health and human rights of girls and young people, and other marginalised groups.

There must be a focus on population dynamics in ways that respect and protect human rights, including through the advancement of sexual and reproductive health and rights. Development goals, strategies and environmental planning must take into account population dynamics, trends and projections. Development goals should be based on projected changes in population size, location etc., which have implications for demand for and supply of essential resources and services such as water, energy, food, health and education services. Population data must be used by planning, monitoring, reporting and accountability mechanisms, including where relevant, data disaggregated by sex, age and rural/ urban etc. Demography is not destiny; securing universal access to reproductive health can significantly improve prospects of the world population stabilizing at closer to 10 billion rather than reaching over 15 billion by 2100.⁶ Therefore, targets and indicators focusing on SRHR, including those relating to access to SRHR services and unmet need for contraception, should be integrated across relevant development goals associated with demand for and supply of key resources and services.

The Sustainable Development Goals, ICPD Beyond 2014 and Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women processes must be integrated with the post-2015 framework. It is critical that there is one overriding development framework which comprehensively addresses the social, economic and environmental pillars of sustainable development, including the influence of both population- and consumption-related factors. Recognition of the nexus between population dynamics, SRHR, gender equality and sustainable development, and integration of these processes and programmes, will create synergies and coherence which will achieve more effective outcomes.

Gender equity and equality should be mainstreamed into all of the goals, including data collection that is disaggregated by sex, and gender sensitive targets and indicators.

¹ UN Population Division (2011) [World Population Prospects: The 2010 Revision](#). New York: UN.

² Singh, S. and Darrich, J. E. (2012) [Adding It Up: Costs and Benefits of Contraceptive Services](#). New York: Guttmacher Institute and UNFPA.

³ Moreland, S. & Talbird, S (2006). [Achieving the MDGs: The contribution of fulfilling the unmet need for family planning](#). Washington D. C: USAID.

⁴ UN General Assembly (1966) [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#), 16 December 1966, Article 12.1.

⁵ Beddington, J. (Undated) [Food, energy, water and the climate: A perfect storm of global events?](#) UK Government Office for Science.

⁶ According to the latest UN population projections (ref 1), taking the medium variant the world population would stabilize at around 10.1 billion in 2100, and taking the high variant, reach 15.8 billion in 2100.