

Population and the Environment: Where We're Headed and What We Can Do



Many environmental problems will be easier to address if world population peaks at 8 billion rather than continuing to grow to 11 billion or higher. The good news: there is already a global consensus on how to slow population growth, with programs that improve human well-being at very little cost.

World population is still growing

While the rate of population growth has slowed in most parts of the world, overall growth continues. We increase by nearly 80 million people every year—the numerical equivalent of adding another U.S. to the world every four years.¹ The number of people on the planet has doubled since 1960 and will reach 7 billion in 2011.

Tomorrow's population size will be determined today

We often hear the prediction that world population will reach 9 billion in 2050, but demographers project a range of possibilities—from 8 billion to 11 billion by midcentury. By 2100, the range is even wider—from 6 billion to 16 billion (see graph, page 3). Tomorrow's population size depends on the choices couples make about childbearing today, but far too many lack the means to plan and space their pregnancies. Around the world, 215 million women want to prevent pregnancy but need contraception.² In nations where access to contraception is limited—such as Yemen, Afghanistan, and much of sub-Saharan Africa—women continue to have an average of more than 5 children. And the need for contraception is growing. Nearly half the world's population is under the age of 25 and entering their childbearing years.³

Eight billion would be better than 11 billion—for people and the planet

The impact of population growth on the environment is mediated by consumption, technology, urbanization and other factors. Still, slower population growth could reduce pressure on natural systems that are already over-taxed, and research shows that a host of environmental problems—including the growth of greenhouse gases, water scarcity, and biodiversity loss—would be easier to address if world population peaks at 8 billion, rather than climbing to 11 billion or more.⁴ Climate change is expected to result in declining agricultural production in many parts of the world, and will make limited water supplies even more difficult to manage. Slower population growth would help people adapt to climate change, reduce the scale of human vulnerability to these impacts, and give nations a chance to make essential investments in health care, education, and sustainable economic development.

The good news: We know how to slow population growth

A half-century of experience has shown that the best way to slow growth is to ensure that people are able to make decisions about childbearing. That means providing access to contraception and other reproductive health services, not “population control”



measures that could become coercive. It means education and employment opportunities, especially for women. And it means tackling gender and economic inequities that are associated with rapid population growth.

There are success stories: International family planning programs, supported by the U.S., have enabled women around the world to plan and space their pregnancies. Partly as a result of those programs, contraceptive use in developing countries rose from less than 10 percent in the 1960s to 60 percent today, and fertility rates fell from six children per woman to three.⁵ But with 215 million women around the world still in need of contraceptives, the job is not yet done.

There is already a global agreement on population and development goals

The world's nations are struggling for consensus on climate change but we already have a U.N. agreement on population, endorsed by 179 developed and developing nations in 1994 in Cairo. Countries at that time agreed on a plan to slow population growth through universal access to reproductive health services, empowering girls and women, and combating poverty. These were reaffirmed in the U.N. Millennium Development Goals earlier this decade.

Domestically, despite some politicians' attempts to politicize the issue, the American public is overwhelmingly supportive of family planning. In multiple polls over decades, 75 to 90 percent of Americans support international family planning programs, including 69 percent of Independents and Republicans.⁶

Family planning programs are cost-effective and contribute to human well-being

Family planning programs are relatively inexpensive, especially when compared to many environmental mitigation efforts. Meeting the demand for family planning in the developing world would require an additional \$3.6 billion annually.⁷ The U.S. share of the cost is about \$1 billion. These programs also support broader U.S. foreign policy and development goals and make enormous contributions to human health and well-being. Meeting the need for family planning

would help millions adapt to climate change, and prevent 53 million unintended pregnancies, 150,000 maternal deaths and 25 million abortions.⁸

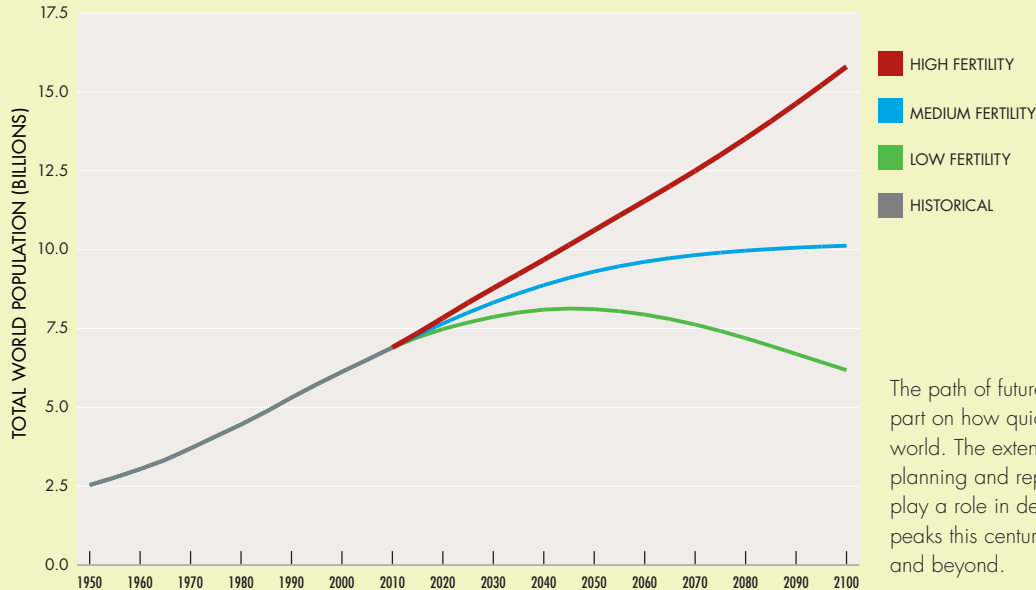
But governments are not keeping their promises

Despite the low cost and many benefits of family planning programs, the world's nations have yet to mobilize sufficient resources to pay for them. While developing countries are spending about half of what they pledged in Cairo, developed countries have provided less than a quarter of the promised funding.⁹ U.S. support for international family planning assistance has increased from \$464 million in 2008 to \$615 million in 2011, but further increases are needed to address rising need. The 2010 U.S. funding level is nearly 25 percent less (adjusted for inflation) than the 1995 level, despite the fact that the number of women of reproductive age in the developing world has grown by more than 300 million since then.

Environmentalists have an important role to play

Since the 1970s, environmentalists have been an important constituency for U.S. leadership in population policy. A family planning vote has been a part of the League of Conservation Voters scorecard since 1985. But greater effort is needed to incorporate population and family planning into global and national environmental dialogues. Drawing these connections can keep the pressure on Washington to increase funding for international family planning assistance. A broad coalition of environmentalists, reproductive health and rights organizations, faith groups, and relief and development organizations are calling on Congress and the Administration to increase funding for international family planning to \$1 billion. More voices are needed to demonstrate the broad base of support for these vital programs that benefit human health and well-being, as well as the global environment.

POPULATION GROWTH, HISTORICAL AND PROJECTED, 1950-2100



Source: Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, *World Population Prospects: The 2010 Revision*.

The path of future population growth depends in large part on how quickly fertility rates will drop around the world. The extent to which women's needs for family planning and reproductive health services are met will play a role in determining whether world population peaks this century, or continues growing to 2100 and beyond.

Simple Points About Population and the Environment

- Rapid population growth increases pressure on resources that are already over-taxed, including water, forests, land, and the atmosphere. If current population growth rates continue, the world's population would grow from around 7 billion today to 11 billion by 2050.
- The rate of population growth in the future responds to actions we take today, including providing access to family planning.
- More than 215 million women around the world want to avoid pregnancy but need contraception.
- Achieving universal access to family planning and reproductive health services will improve the health and well-being of women and families. Slowing population growth will also ease pressure on natural resources and improve prospects for solving environmental challenges.
- Family planning stands out as an opportunity to improve the health of women and children, while increasing people's resilience to environmental challenges.

Words to Watch

Population control/stabilization: We don't need to control people to slow population growth, we need to meet their needs for contraception. During the last 50 years, we learned that enforced demographic targets sometimes result in shameful abuses and provoke a powerful backlash. Today's framework empowers women to make their own choices about childbearing and have been enormously successful. Improving access to family planning and educating girls, for example, result in smaller (and healthier and more economically secure) families.

Overpopulation: If we say that the planet is "overpopulated," we miss the underlying issue that resources are distributed inequitably. A person in Ghana uses 1/50th of the energy of a person in the U.S. Moreover, "overpopulation" suggests that some people are superfluous—a notion that those "extra" people are bound to reject.

Optimum population size: Some people who are concerned about population growth seek to determine the optimum number of people their nation or region can support. However, the "carrying capacity" of any given area is based in part on how inequitably or wastefully resources are used. The best answer to the question is that it depends on how we use and distribute our resources. It depends on the choices we make today about technology, consumption levels, economics and family planning.



Notes

- 1 United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. 2011. *World Population Prospects: The 2010 Revision*. New York: United Nations.
- 2 Guttmacher Institute/United Nations Population Fund. 2009. *Adding It Up: The Costs and Benefits of Investing in Family Planning and Maternal and Newborn Health*. Washington, DC: Guttmacher Institute.
- 3 United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. 2011.
- 4 O'Neill, B et al. 2010. "Global Demographic Trends and Future Carbon Emissions." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 107 (41); Cincotta, R et al. 2000. "Human Population in the Biodiversity Hotspots." *Nature* 404: 990-992; Engelman, R et al. 2000. *People in the Balance: Population and Natural Resources at the Turn of the Millennium*. Washington, DC: Population Action International.
- 5 Sinding, SW. 2007. "Overview and perspective," in *The Global Family Planning Revolution: Three Decades of Population Policies and Programs*. Washington, DC: The World Bank.
- 6 Hart/ViaNovo. 2009. Support for International Family Planning and Reproductive Health Programs. Poll conducted March-May 2009; Planned Parenthood Federation of America. 2004. Poll conducted by Lake Research, February 2004; Americans for UNFPA. 2010. Poll conducted by Harris Interactive, September 2010.
- 7 Guttmacher Institute/United Nations Population Fund. 2009.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 Speidel, JJ. 2005. "Population donor landscape analysis" for *Review of Packard Foundation International Grantmaking in Population, Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights*. Unpublished report.

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