PART II

Chapter 4

Factoring population dynamics into sustainable development

by

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Although population growth has decelerated in most countries, the world’s population is still growing at a high rate. Without a significant and rapid drop in fertility rates it could reach 16 billion by 2100, according to the latest projections of the United Nations Population Division. Population growth, coupled with higher consumption, raises the stakes in our efforts to reduce poverty, create employment, provide food, water and energy security, while safeguarding the natural environment. These facts were well-known nearly 20 years ago when, shortly after the 1992 Rio Declaration, the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action outlined a two-pronged approach to promote sustainable development. This approach called for a shift towards sustainable production and consumption, together with appropriate policies to address demographic change. Yet action is long overdue. To promote sustainable development pathways, developing countries and their partners will need to ensure: i) universal access to sexual and reproductive health care and family planning; ii) investment in education with a particular focus on gender parity; iii) empowerment of women; and iv) systematic integration of population projections in development strategies and policies.
People are central to sustainable development.

People are the central concern of sustainable development (Rio Declaration, 1992, Principle 1). Efforts to promote more sustainable development pathways must take account of people – their numbers, location and age structures, as well as their living conditions, ambitions and opportunities (IIASA and UNFPA, 2011). A focus on people is also essential to better understand the linkages among social, economic and environmental development, and for a strong and more meaningful integration of these dimensions of sustainable development.

How population dynamics link to sustainable development

Population dynamics are strongly and inseparably linked to sustainable development. The world population has now passed the 7 billion mark and, according to the UN’s projections, it will continue to grow. Population growth raises the stakes in our efforts to reduce poverty, create employment, and provide food, water and energy security, while safeguarding the natural environment (WEF and UNFPA, 2012).

To feed 9 billion people we will need to increase agricultural output by 70%.

Population growth paired with higher consumption increases the pressure on all natural resources. More than 1 billion people throughout the world suffer from poverty and food insecurity. Lifting these people out of poverty and ensuring a decent quality of life for succeeding generations will require major development efforts. Not only is it important to ensure a more equitable distribution of economic resources – a growing challenge in an increasingly unequal world; higher economic output is also essential (Herrmann, 2012). Feeding a world population of 9 billion, which will likely be reached before the middle of this century, will require an overall increase in agricultural output of about 70% according to the FAO (2010). In addition to increasing the output of the agricultural sector, countries will also need to increase production of many other vital goods and services. People will require clothing, housing, water, sanitation and infrastructure; they will also demand health care and education, for example. The ambition to reduce poverty and raise living standards for a growing world population will place mounting pressures on all natural resources, including climate, water, land and forests.

By 2050, the population of the least developed countries will double.

The world’s least developed countries are the most immediately affected, but the challenges demand global policy responses. The poorest countries have the highest rates of population growth. They also have the highest incidence of poverty and food insecurity and confront the greatest challenges in raising and maintaining per capita spending on
health and education for their growing populations. Furthermore, while a comparatively small share of their populations is outright unemployed, with scarce unemployment benefits, the vast majority suffers from unproductive and often precarious underemployment, as well as from vulnerable employment (ILO, 2011). By 2050, the population of these countries will double and their collective available labour force will continue to expand by about 33 000 young people each day (UNFPA, 2011a). Meeting the needs of their current and future populations, while promoting environmental sustainability, is an increasing development challenge for many of the poorest countries.

Even though to date the world’s poorest countries have contributed least to global greenhouse gas emissions, they are disproportionately affected by climate change, which is reinforcing exposure to natural hazards, including shifts in precipitation and increases in desertification that have a direct impact on agriculture. Nonetheless, pressures on agricultural land, forest and water resources are not only attributable to climate change; they also result from patterns of consumption and production in the poorest countries themselves. Many of these countries rely heavily on the exploitation of their natural resources to spur economic growth – notably extractive industries and large-scale agriculture and timber production – and many of the poorest households depend on wood and other natural resources for their daily needs. Recently, UNFPA (2011a) has drawn attention to the fact that the world’s least developed countries are suffering most from a rapid degradation and depletion of their natural resources, and that this is effectively undermining a sustainable catch-up with more advanced countries (see also UNCTAD, 2011). Between 2000 and 2008, the average rate of real economic growth in the least developed countries was almost as high as in other developing countries (6.5% compared with 6.6%, respectively); but when adjusted for population growth and environmental degradation and depletion, this amounted to almost half of what it was in other developing countries (2.5% compared with 4.7%, respectively) (UNFPA, 2011a).

Although the impacts of population growth and environmental degradation are most pronounced in the least developed countries of Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, these challenges inevitably have serious global implications that demand globally co-ordinated responses. The world is not only bound together by trade and financial flows, but also by environmental and demographic change. Efforts to meet rapidly growing demands for water, food and energy, for example, will affect all countries. Likewise, failure to meet people’s needs, reduce poverty, raise living standards and ensure greater equity will threaten stability, security and sustainability throughout the world.

The Programme of Action agreed upon at the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo in 1994 identifies policy priorities for sustainable development. Its preamble clearly identifies the focus and objectives of this landmark document: “The population and development objectives and actions of the present Programme of Action will collectively address the critical challenges and interrelationships between population and sustained economic growth in the context of sustainable development” (Paragraph 1.9). Echoing the Rio Declaration of 1992 (Principle 8), the ICPD Programme of Action (Principle 6) outlines a two-pronged approach to promote sustainable development, notably a shift towards sustainable production and consumption – which is the hallmark of a green economy – and the development and implementation of appropriate policies to address demographic change.
II.4. FACTORING POPULATION DYNAMICS INTO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

**Demography is not destiny**

Without urgent action we could be living in a world of 16 billion people by 2100.

Whether the world population will grow over 9 billion by mid-century and level off at about 10 billion by the end of the century, or grow instead to over 10 billion by mid-century and reach about 16 billion by the end of the century depends on policies that countries pursue today. The difference between the mid and high-range UN population projections boils down to only an additional 0.5 children per woman (UNFPA, 2011b; UN, 2010). Every decade of delay in reaching replacement-level fertility implies continued, significant population growth for decades to come (UN, 2011).

All countries, especially the poorest, must use population data and projections to inform their development strategies.

Countries can address population dynamics through effective, human-rights based policies and good planning. Together, universal access to sexual and reproductive health care, voluntary family planning, investment in the education of youth with a particular focus on girls, and the empowerment of women can make a big difference. These measures will not only help to improve quality of life by reducing infant, child and maternal mortality; arresting the spread of communicable diseases; and reducing unintended pregnancies of young women – they will also contribute to reducing fertility and slowing population growth. Yet, even if fertility levels were to drop quickly to replacement levels, populations would continue to grow for decades to come because of the sheer number of women of child-bearing age. In the poorest countries, urban populations will grow at an even faster pace than rural ones. It is critical that all countries, including the poorest, systematically use population data and projections to inform their development strategies. Through planning, countries can address the many challenges associated with rapid urbanisation by seizing the immense opportunities this process offers for economic, social and environmental development. Demographic change can provide opportunities for sustainable development. Rural-urban migration can also ease pressures on natural resources and enable people to adapt to changes in economic and environmental conditions. In this way, urban population growth – accelerated by rapid migration in many of the poorest countries – can contribute positively to sustainable development. As populations increase, it makes economic and environmental sense for people to move closer together in urban areas, where they tend to consume less energy – adjusted for income – than in rural areas. Energy savings are particularly large in the urban housing and transport sectors, allowing governments to deliver essential infrastructure and services at lower costs per capita than in rural areas.

Demographic change can provide opportunities for sustainable development.

Furthermore, a fall in fertility levels will temporarily reduce dependency ratios and open a window of opportunity for households and countries to increase investment in their productive resources. For instance, higher investment in young people can contribute to a healthier, better-educated and more productive labour force; if those young people find
jobs, it will trigger higher and more sustained economic growth. The ICPD Programme of Action noted that “slower population growth has in many countries bought more time to adjust to future population increases. This has increased countries’ ability to attack poverty, protect and repair the environment, and build the base for future sustainable development. Even the difference of a single decade in the transition to stabilisation levels of fertility can have a considerable positive impact on quality of life.” (ICPD, 1994)

The way forward

The inseparable linkages between population dynamics and sustainable development hold concrete policy implications for developing countries and their bilateral and multilateral development partners. Today, there is wide consensus that population matters for sustainable development and that it is fundamental to spell out the implications of their inter-relations to develop a credible agenda. To promote sustainable development pathways, developing countries and their partners will need to ensure: i) universal access to sexual and reproductive health care and family planning; ii) investment in education with a particular focus on gender parity; iii) the empowerment of women; and iv) the systematic integration of population projections in development strategies and policies. Planning for the projected changes in population size and age structures, or migration and urbanisation, is an indispensable precondition for sustainable rural, urban and national development, as well as for efforts to mitigate and adapt to climate change and reduce the risks of natural disasters. Without planning for these demographic transitions and seizing their benefits, governments will be forced to operate in a permanent crisis mode, reacting to demographic challenges as they arise – which is typically more costly and less effective.

References

Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) (2010), Growing Food for 9 Billion, FAO, Rome.


