

Response note to The Dasgupta Review – Independent Review on the Economics of Biodiversity Interim Report as commissioned by the UK’s HM Treasury.

Population Matters welcomes the Review and in particular, its clear and persuasive argument that human population is a critical factor in assessing human impact on nature and on biodiversity.

Public discourse on what drives biodiversity loss has been scant in public forums and the media, especially when you compare it to discussions about the impact of climate change. Legagneux et alⁱ report that between 1991 and 2016 climate change received up to eight times more media coverage than biodiversity, a finding that they argue cannot be explained by differences between the number of scientific papers published or the level of research funding. What the authors do believe however is that the causes, consequences and solutions for addressing the impact of climate change through a reduction by 1.5 to 2 degrees is a much easier concept to run with. So much so that climate change has unwittingly become a *synonym* for environmental impact in lieu of public discourse on the other drivers being adequately scrutinised.

Biodiversity is complex; its causes, consequences and solutions have been harder to articulate so it is for this reason we welcome the direction this Review has taken.

Our specific comments address two aspects of the report. First, there is one significant area in regard to population and consumption that the review does not currently address and which should be featured in the final version and its policy recommendations: the value of smaller families in affluent nations. Second, if recommendations for effective and ethical policy actions to address population are to be effective, the Review must recognise resistance to discussing this area among policymakers and some environmental influencers and organisations, and build ‘safe spaces’ for stakeholders to talk about population growth in public policy spheres.

Demographic and Consumption Trends

The Review does not currently place enough emphasis on solutions to **global population challenges**, only emphasising the need for family planning solutions in the Global South. We urge the Review to address the fact that population numbers and potential growth in developed nations also pose a threat to biodiversity, and policies which address that are critical: in addition to addressing inequity and unsustainability in per capita consumption and economic activity, addressing the *number* of consumers/producers in affluent countries also provides an opportunity to reduce the consequent impact.

To give a simple example, addressing only one driver of species loss, an individual in the UK is responsible for 50 times the CO₂ of someone in Niger.ⁱⁱ Put another way, while Niger has a Total Fertility Rate more than three times that of the UK (7.1 compared to 1.9)ⁱⁱⁱ, the positive climate effect of one less Briton being born is equivalent in these terms to more than 50 Nigeriens. The same will apply to almost any conceivable metric of environmental impact. Fewer people being born in the rich world has the most immediate and positive impact on our environment, climate and sustainability.

Addressing Pro-natalist policy pressures

Related to this, this Review also has an opportunity to include and promote discourse on global population growth to mitigate against the upsurge in pro-natalist policies, especially in the developed world. Countries such as France, Italy and Hungary are incentivising younger families with cash, land and maternity policies to have bigger families, as now is China^{iv}. Without clear policy messages that openly talk about the value of smaller families in the context of rich, developed nations then policy makers all over the developed world will be fighting a losing battle to halt biodiversity loss in the face of increased consumption as a result of growing populations, albeit at a slower rate than in the Global South.

Supporting and encouraging 'safe spaces' to discuss population growth

We propose that the Review sets out ways to build bridges with cross-sector policy makers and influential stakeholders in the environment and development sector. There is a significant reluctance to talk about solutions to population growth in the environmental sector, and reluctance among some stakeholders in the development sector to address them clearly – as a consequence, policy makers are often very reluctant to talk about population explicitly. Even though many influential global reports recognise the impacts of population growth, projections of future population are often seen as a given – not as a demand on the Earth's resources that needs to be addressed. This is why we wholeheartedly welcome the Review. But the policy mechanisms must recognise where the discourse on population growth is headed.

For example, WWF's 2018 Living Planet Report, one of the world's foremost studies on global biodiversity loss refers to population growth almost only in passing, and stops well short of providing or recommending solutions^v. Meanwhile, the Convention on Biodiversity recognises population growth as an indirect driver as per the IPBES's Global Assessment in May 2019^{vi} in which the IPBES stated *"changes to the direct drivers of nature deterioration cannot be achieved without **transformative change that simultaneously addresses the indirect drivers.**"*

Yet the CBD's 20 Aichi Targets are on course to be missed, in part because population growth is not recognised or prioritised as a policy lever in many of the Country-level National Biodiversity Strategic Action Plans. Significantly, there are no references to population growth or fertility in the current zero draft of the post-2020^{vii} framework, which therefore risks failing to provide guidance and a framework for ethical and empowering measures to reduce fertility rates as actions within NBSAPs.

Similarly, the Sustainable Development Goals do not address the impact of human population growth, or the obstacle it places before their achievement. The UN's Commission on Population and Development reiterated this sentiment at its 2019 meeting stating that, "progress on development has been woefully slow...because development can't keep pace with our rapidly increasing numbers."^{viii} The Review rightly points out the SDGs will fail to achieve its ambitions without addressing family planning needs but places emphasis only on solutions in the Global South.

It is also important for the committee to recognise that any population-related narrative will face not just indifference or being ignored, but significant hostility and opposition from some influencers and environmentalists. It is Population Matters' direct experience that some political leaders who are supportive of positive and ethical measures are unwilling to advocate on their behalf because they fear criticism by these influencers and among their own supporters. To provide specific examples:

- one of the UK's most influential environmentalists, George Monbiot, recently (but before the death of George Floyd) directly accused population advocates of being motivated by racism^{ix}
- following criticism on social media, WWF recently withdrew and apologised for a video on global solutions to environmental crises because it included eleven words addressing population^x
- 200 Green Party activists, including 28 elected members of the London Assembly, Scottish Parliament and local councils, signed an open letter accusing Population Matters of racism, sexism and xenophobia, and associating us with genocidal policies and values. (The publisher subsequently retracted and apologised for these claims.)^{xi}

The authors of the report should in no way underestimate the resistance that discussion of population solutions – however positive, ethical and empowering – may face in the environmental movement, especially if this appear to be directed solely at people in the Global South. This will have an influence on some policymakers' support for them. It is therefore important that the final report:

- places stronger emphasis on the corollary benefits of measures such as family planning and women's empowerment, both to individuals and communities, and as a cost-effective policy intervention
- addresses the value of people choosing small families in the Global North
- makes an explicit statement repudiating and condemning any population solutions which infringe people's human rights
- acknowledges concerns but makes an unambiguous statement of the importance of open discussion of issues surrounding population and for policymakers to address it.

As the review authors are likely to be aware, relatively small changes in average global fertility can have significant impacts on population growth. The UN *calculates that if, on average, every other family had one fewer child than is assumed* (i.e. global fertility will fall from just under 2.5 births per woman in 2019 to around 2.2 in 2050 and further to 1.9 in 2100^{xii}) in its medium projection, there will be 8.9 billion people by 2050 and nearly four billion fewer by the end of the century (within the lifetimes of many children born now). If that happens, our population will be less than it is today. With one more child the global population will be 10.6 billion by 2050^{xiii}.

The UN's *2019 World Population Prospects* report stated clearly the need for increased investment and commitment to achieve even the medium projection:

*"To achieve the substantial reductions in fertility projected in the medium variant, it will be essential to support **continued** improvements in access to reproductive health care services, including family planning, especially in the least developed countries, with a focus on enabling women and couples to achieve their desired family size^{xiv}."*

In 2019 authors of a study published in PLOS Medicine^{xv} used data from 185 countries and found that globally in 2019, approximately 270 million had an unmet need, up from 232 million in 1990. By 2030, this number is expected to rise to 272 million because family planning services are not keeping pace with rapid population increase in developing countries.

The Review rightly points out that only 0.6% of overseas development assistance is geared towards family planning at present. Family planning needs to reinstate itself as a global priority and come out

of the shadows and an exclusively individual 'rights-led' framework. While it must *never* be inconsistent with human rights, its value extends beyond individual benefits. Its inadequate resourcing is a social injustice and failure of the global community to recognise the human and socio-economic development value family planning represents to sustainable development.

As the Review already recognises, effective, ethical population interventions are essential to protecting biodiversity and the ecosystem services on which the human race relies. It is essential that policy recommendations in the final version reflect the analysis, and are given sufficient emphasis to persuade policymakers of the need to implement them.

What Population Matters is doing

We are currently engaging with DEFRA and their Convention on Biodiversity Stakeholder Group to provide them with ways to constructively include positive language around population growth. We hope to progress with this to not only influence the UK's domestic policy but also to inform the next stage of the CBD. In addition we are building relationships with DFID. We wholly believe that what is needed is a convergence of the development sector with those in the environmental movement to develop holistic approaches to address the catastrophic destruction of biodiversity.

We hope you will consider our responses.

About Population Matters

Population Matters campaigns to achieve a sustainable human population, to protect the natural world and improve people's lives.

We promote positive, practical, ethical solutions – encouraging smaller families, inspiring people to reduce excessive consumption and helping us all to live within our planet's natural limits. We believe everyone should have the freedom and ability to choose a smaller family. We support human rights, women's empowerment and global justice.

ⁱⁱ Legagneux, P., et al., 2018. Our house is burning: discrepancy in climate change vs. biodiversity coverage in the media as compared to scientific literature. *Frontiers in Ecology and Evolution*, [e-journal] 5:175. doi: 10.3389/fevo.2017.00175

ⁱⁱ Niger CO2 emissions per capita, 2018, 0.1 metric tons (Source: <https://knoema.com/atlas/Niger/CO2-emissions-per-capita>); UK CO2 emissions per capita, 2018 . 5.59 metric tons (Source: <https://knoema.com/search?query=UK+CO2+emissions+per+capita&pageIndex=&scope=&term=&correct=&source=Header>)

ⁱⁱⁱ UNFPA, 2019 figures <https://www.unfpa.org/data/world-population-dashboard>

^{iv} <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20191017-does-it-make-sense-to-pay-people-to-have-kids>;
<https://www.economist.com/international/2015/07/25/breaking-the-baby-strike>;
<https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/09/23/forget-one-child-beijing-wants-china-to-make-more-babies/>

^v <https://wwf.panda.org/knowledge-hub/all-publications/living-planet-report-2018/>

^{vi} IPBES, 2019. Summary for policymakers of the global assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. [pdf] Bonn: IPBES secretariat. Available at: <https://ipbes.net/system/tdf/ipbes_7_10_add.1_en_1.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=35329>

vii [https://www.iucn.org/sites/dev/files/iucn_position_paper - zero draft post-2020 global biodiversity framework - oewg2_09022020.pdf](https://www.iucn.org/sites/dev/files/iucn_position_paper_-_zero_draft_post-2020_global_biodiversity_framework_-_oewg2_09022020.pdf)

viii <https://populationmatters.org/news/2019/04/05/population-growth-slows-progress-towards-sustainable-development-goals-says-un>

ix <https://www.doubledown.news/watch/2020/20/may/george-monbiot-on-michael-moore-planet-of-the-humans>

x https://twitter.com/wwf_uk/status/1268933761573490689

xi bright-green.org/2020/03/21/over-100-greens-sign-open-letter-condemning-population-matters-at-green-party-conference/

xii <https://population.un.org/wpp2019/>

xiii <https://population.un.org/wpp2019/>

xiv <https://population.un.org/wpp2019/>

xv <https://populationmatters.org/news/2020/02/27/family-planning-services-still-falling-behind-population-growth>