

# POPULATION MATTERS SUBMISSION TO ALL-PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP ON POPULATION, DEVELOPMENT AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

18 DECEMBER 2020

## INTRODUCTION

Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) and the empowerment of women and girls are fundamental to meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as well as to improving lives directly on an individual basis. Set entirely within a voluntary, equitable and human rights framework, Population Matters' submission will primarily address the interaction of the current SRHR situation with population dynamics and environmental sustainability, identifying synergistic opportunities and consistency with the intentions established in Cairo. We will also identify barriers, including from a pro-natalist agenda, which poses a growing threat to reproductive justice.

Although growing human population in the Global North challenges many SDGs and particularly environmental aims, for reasons of space we will mostly focus on the Global South where SRHR and girls' education has the greatest role to play. In so doing, we will also seek to give voice to partners and stakeholders we work with whose insights are essential to our understanding.

## CAIRO'S INTENTIONS

The International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994 saw an essential assertion of the primacy of considering issues related to population and development in a human rights context, focussed on the individual, and on the centrality of reproductive rights and the empowerment of women. In so doing, it provided an explicit and vital rejection of abusive, coercive and discriminatory population programmes, which treated women's bodies as reproductive machines to be manipulated or controlled in order to achieve macro policy goals. Those underlying principles must never be resiled from.

Cairo also, however, recognised the interrelationship between population, development and sustainability, and that there is no contradiction between absolute respect for individual reproductive rights and wider benefits. Principle Six of the Programme of Action states:

*"Sustainable development as a means to ensure human well-being, equitably shared by all people today and in the future, requires that the interrelationships between population, resources, the environment and development should be fully recognized, properly managed and brought into harmonious, dynamic balance. To achieve sustainable development and a higher quality of life for all people, States should reduce and eliminate unsustainable patterns of production and consumption and promote appropriate policies, including population-related policies, in order to meet the needs of current generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."*<sup>i</sup>

The decades since Cairo have seen much – though insufficient, unequal and frequently precarious – progress on individual rights, but less attention to the wider issues of sustainability and intergenerational justice. Its framers were, of course, unable to comprehend the scale of the

environmental crisis due to unfold in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – the document makes just three passing references to climate change and none to biodiversity loss – a crisis which threatens the most vulnerable first.

## LIMITED PROGRESS FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS

Many of Cairo’s aspirations have not yet been fulfilled. That the proportion of women using modern contraceptives has increased by only 6% to 58% today is perhaps the starkest reminder of how much work is needed<sup>ii</sup>. The FP2020 initiative has also failed to deliver against its goal, increasing the number of women using modern contraceptives by only 53 million since 2012. FP2020 states: *“countries are also seeing a greater number of family planning clients simply due to population growth. There are now 100 million more women of reproductive age (WRA) in FP2020 countries than there were in 2012”*<sup>iii</sup>. Approximately 270 million women had an unmet need for contraception in 2019 - an *increase* from 232 million women in 1990, due to rapid population growth and slow progress in improving access to modern contraceptive methods<sup>iv</sup>.

As a measure of women’s empowerment, unmet need is not unique in that regard. To end child marriage by 2030, progress needs to be at least 12 times faster<sup>v</sup> than it is now. According to UNFPA: *“Population growth, however, means that unless prevalence rates see a dramatic decline in the near future, a larger number of women and girls than ever before will endure [practices such as child marriage and genital mutilation] in the coming decades”*<sup>vi</sup>.

Meanwhile, in the words of a 2020 UNICEF report, the drop in numbers of boys and girls out of school has “stagnated” since 2007: in sub-Saharan Africa, the number of girls out of secondary school has *increased* by 7 million due to the region’s population growth<sup>vii</sup>.

Targets expressed as percentages can, and do, mask the reality of a world in which more women and girls than ever suffer from the failure to deliver on, or the abuse of, their fundamental rights.

## SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

***“I understand why, when my French husband visited Uganda for the first time in 2018, he was shocked by the number of children he saw everywhere – to me it was a common sight, as almost half of the population is under 15. These young people (all potential parents) put pressure on the already scanty education and health services in the country, and the environment is not spared either.”***<sup>viii</sup>

**Florence Mujaasi Blondel, Ugandan journalist and population campaigner**

The relationship between population and the Sustainable Development Goals is explored explicitly in Population Matters’ 2020 report, *Hitting the targets: the case for ethical and empowering population policies to accelerate progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals*<sup>ix</sup>. It details how, in addition to the opportunities and dignity offered to individual women and girls by reproductive rights and education, addressing rapid growth in population provides many economic, social, health<sup>x</sup> and gender benefits to individuals and communities, especially in low income countries. This is well-understood, albeit sometimes only spoken of in euphemisms in the development community – although, like Florence above, those in the Global South will often address it more explicitly<sup>xi</sup>.

The connection between population and environmental sustainability is more rarely addressed. As in all other sustainability challenges, population growth is far from the only driver, with unsustainable consumption key among the others, but is a critical component in the unfolding crisis.

***“We should be talking about consumption and we should be talking about population. It’s not either/or. It’s and/with. It’s not a binary issue.”***

**Dr Muhtari Aminu-Kano, Nigerian Conservation Foundation**

The role of population is identified directly in the most authoritative, independent assessments. In 2014, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change stated that “globally, economic and population growth continued to be the most important drivers of increases in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from fossil fuel combustion”<sup>xii</sup>. It has subsequently identified potential future high population growth as a “key impediment” to hitting the critical target of limiting global warming to 1.5°C<sup>xiii</sup>. The world-leading study of climate change solutions, Project Drawdown concluded that the effects on population growth of improving girls’ education and voluntary family planning would save 85Gt of emissions by 2050, making it the fifth most effective solution of 80 it evaluated in limiting warming to 1.5°C<sup>xiv</sup>.

Meanwhile, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem services Global Assessment identified population growth as a key indirect driver of our extinction crisis and stated “changes to the direct drivers of nature deterioration cannot be achieved without **transformative change that simultaneously addresses the indirect drivers**”<sup>xv</sup>. Multiple studies bear out this relationship<sup>xvi</sup>.

Deforestation, exacerbating both climate change and biodiversity loss, is driven not just by logging and intensive commodity farming, but also urbanisation, subsistence agriculture and fuel wood harvesting – all exacerbated by population growth<sup>xvii</sup>. Food production and land use change is also a critical driver of environmental threats. The landmark 2019 EAT-Lancet Commission on feeding the world concluded that today, with radical changes, feeding everyone sustainably is possible, but “Healthy diets from sustainable food systems are possible for up to 10 billion people but becomes increasingly unlikely past this population threshold”<sup>xviii</sup>.

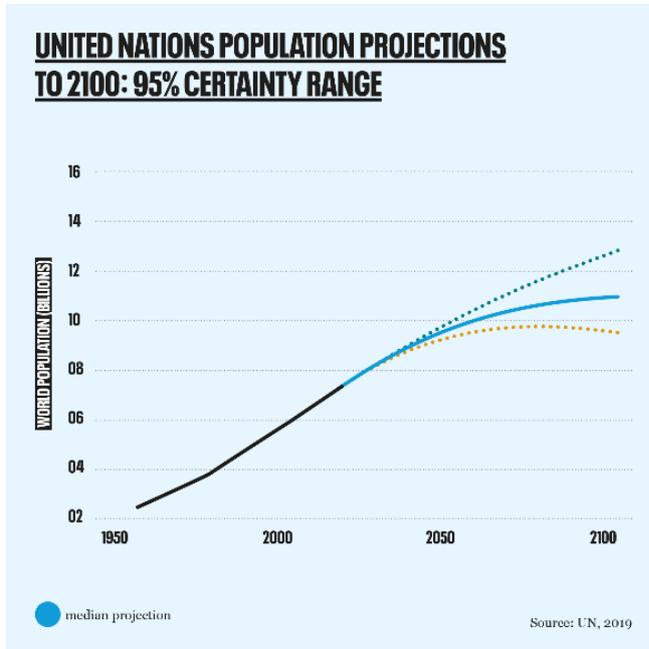
***“It’s better to have fewer people, a family you can cater for, and a good environment.”***

**Kadogo, Barsaloi village, Kenya**

The disastrous effects of our environmental crisis will most severely impact those in poorest countries and those projected to see the highest rates of population growth, especially women and girls: UN figures indicate that 80% of people displaced so far by climate change are women<sup>xix</sup> while a recent report demonstrates the link between environmental problems and gender-based violence (GBV)<sup>xx</sup>.

## THE POPULATION CONTEXT

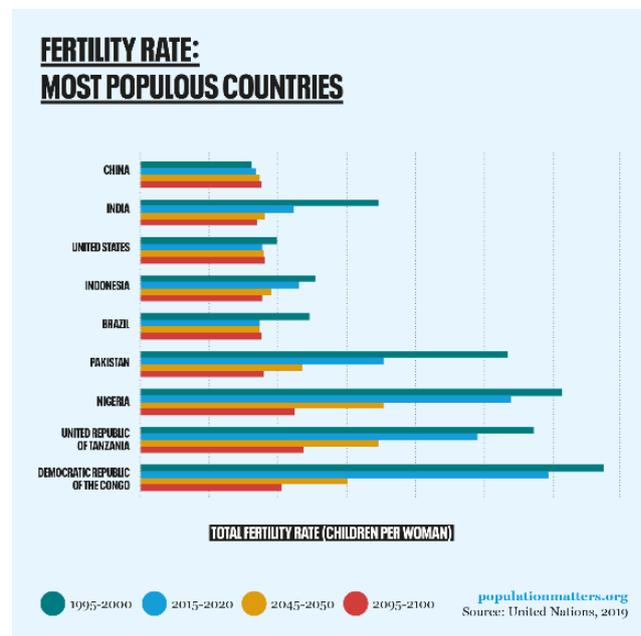
The UN currently projects that there will be between 9.4 billion and 10.1 billion people in 2050<sup>xxi</sup> and the chance of population peaking by 2100 is just 1 in 4.



Critically, these projections are not “business as usual” scenarios: all assume continued progress in various development indicators (including education and progress out of poverty) and delivery of family planning more effectively than we are currently achieving: *“If the international community does not follow through on its commitment to ensure that all men and women are informed and have access to safe, effective, affordable and acceptable methods of family planning of their choice, then future fertility declines may occur more slowly, and future population growth may be faster”<sup>xxii</sup>.*

Lower population projections have attracted attention recently<sup>xxiii</sup>. However, such projections rely on more optimistic assumptions of future progress – which must be considered doubtful in light of current evidence.

Only three of the SDG targets due to mature in 2020 have been met: as things stand, most of the goals are expected to be missed by 2030<sup>xxiv</sup>. Moreover, the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on aid, trade and multiple development indicators, including in particular SRH service provision and uptake, child marriage, education and GBV are very likely to mitigate against continued positive progress.



*“People on [Kenyan] social media joke that*

*nine months from now, the children who will be born, in some tribes, will be called Corona Andrews, Quarantine Molo and such like. But the reality is that thousands of women who will not be able to access contraceptives will have one more child they cannot afford to feed, one more pregnancy denying them time for productive work and one more reason to stay in abusive relationships.”<sup>xxv</sup>*

Wendo Aszed, Dandelion Africa

*“India’s health system has been hard hit by the COVID-19 pandemic and its long-term implications will result in fatalities for women. COVID-19 threatens to reverse the progress made towards the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 3, which aims to ensure healthy lives and wellbeing for all.”<sup>xxvi</sup>*

Sanghamitra Singh, Population Foundation of India

## THE PRO-NATALIST PUSHBACK

Barriers to RSE and reproductive rights are evolving. In Cairo, the spectre at the feast was coercive population control programmes and the shadow of eugenics. Twenty-five years on, the clear and present danger to reproductive freedom is a recidivistic “family values” agenda, now increasingly allied to the implicit or explicit desire to increase populations, sometimes arising from economic concerns about ageing, but increasingly underscored with a nationalistic, neo-eugenicist agenda.

In the most disturbing example, Iran has blocked public hospitals and clinics from providing contraception and performing vasectomies in an attempt to boost birth rates<sup>xxvii</sup>. Meanwhile, many populist, nationalist and/or far-right governments are pursuing domestic pro-natalist policies, encouraging or pressuring women to have larger families, in order to boost the “native” population (sometimes against a perceived “threat” from immigrants) and/or to conform to conservative or religiously determined norms of women as defined (and controlled) by their reproductive capabilities<sup>xxviii</sup>.

Most disturbingly for reproductive rights and gender equality, the population/family values nexus is active in countries with authoritarian systems or leaders with authoritarian tendencies, including Iran, China, Russia, Turkey, Hungary, Belarus and Poland. Disentangling population goals from policies intended to limit women’s freedom is not straightforward, but the shared agenda is evident, not least on the critical battleground for abortion rights: in 2018 one Hungarian minister declared that its population would be double if abortion had not been legal<sup>xxix</sup>. Meanwhile, the pushback on abortion freedom in Russia forms part of the government’s demographic agenda<sup>xxx</sup>: Vladimir Putin has said “Russia’s fate and its historic prospects depend on how many of us there are ... it depends on how many children are born in Russian families”<sup>xxxi</sup>.

One tool used in resistance to the spread of reproductive rights and women’s empowerment is the deliberate association of family planning with colonialist and eugenics agendas - among others, Turkey’s President Erdogan<sup>xxxii</sup> and Tanzania’s President Magufuli<sup>xxxiii</sup> have both made this claim. While advocates of sustainable population, such as Population Matters, must be acutely sensitive to the risk of our messages and activities being misused for the purpose of reinforcing that association, so too must those in the development community who identify population concern with coercion or eugenics. In so doing, they too risk feeding this same narrative, and endangering uptake of family planning.

There is no room for complacency regarding potential abuses in pursuit of reduced population growth, but if the SRHR community in the 2020s focusses on the history of population control rather than the *Handmaid’s Tale* future threatened (and in some respects, already here) of the nationalistic pro-natal agenda, critical gains of SRHR and girl’s education stand to be lost.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

We all know that sexual and reproductive health and rights and girls' education are not just basic rights, essential to individuals, but fundamental to achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals focussed on human wellbeing. If we are honest, we acknowledge that their role in limiting population growth is one of the key reasons for that. The independent evidence is also compelling that in the world a generation after the Cairo conference, we cannot avert environmental crisis unless, among much else, we also address population – through those same positive mechanisms.

***“The environment and family planning, it goes hand-in-hand, together”<sup>xxxiv</sup>***

**Brian, Barsaloi village, Kenya**

We also know that current investment in SRHR and girls' education – both financial and political – is grossly inadequate<sup>xxxv</sup>, not least in regard to the basic demographic challenge of ever more people needing them. The challenge for those of us who support them is to provide every possible impetus for policymakers, influencers and voters to recognise their value.

Being explicit about the population benefits they provide is an essential part of that process. Twenty-five years after Cairo, we must lay the ghosts of coercive population control to rest and celebrate that population solutions are empowering, choice-based, ethical solutions. Population needs to be reinstated on the global agenda, to come out of the shadows and into a global, multi-sectoral framework. While it must never be inconsistent with human rights, the value of ethical, empowering population action extends far beyond individual benefits. It is in everyone's interests to reinforce that.

### Recommendations

- Set sustainability targets and report progress based on absolute number of people benefiting, not on percentages of the population.
- Reaffirm the Cairo principle that rights-based population policies are a legitimate and essential part of achieving the essential goals enshrined in the SDGs.
- Promote the value of SRHR and women's empowerment in achieving environmental goals and seek opportunities to embed them in environmental policies and agreements.
- Monitor and respond to the threats to reproductive rights and gender equality posed by the nationalistic population growth agenda.

***“Please start talking about population growth and its effects on the environment and on young girls and women. Much more could be done to ensure that all women have access to modern contraceptives and have the decisional autonomy over how many children they have.”<sup>xxxvi</sup>***

**Florence Mujaasi Blondel, Uganda**

## ABOUT POPULATION MATTERS

*“Addressing the factor of population, alongside and in harness with consumption, is progressive, pro-people, and pro-planet - grounded as it is, in empowering choice, enabling rights, and promoting positive, available, wanted solutions.” - Robin Maynard, Population Matters Director*

Population Matters is a UK-based charity which 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 consume sustainably, 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.

Our [Empower to Plan](#) crowdfunding platform provides support for grassroots empowerment, family planning and environment programmes in the UK and across the world.

For more information, see [populationmatters.org](http://populationmatters.org)

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## Further reading

Population Matters report (2020) [Hitting the targets: the case for ethical and empowering population policies to accelerate progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals](#)

Population Matters briefing (2020) [The unmet contraceptive needs of women and girls](#)

Population Matters briefing (2020) [The climate crisis: why population matters](#)

Population Matters briefing (2019) [Human population and biodiversity](#)

<sup>i</sup> ICPD Program of Action (1994) [programme of action Web ENGLISH.pdf \(unfpa.org\)](#)

<sup>ii</sup> UNFPA (2019) *State of world population 2019: unfinished business* [UNFPA PUB 2019 EN State of World Population.pdf](#)

<sup>iii</sup> Family Planning 2020 (2019) *FP2020: Women at the Center 2018-2019*

[http://progress.familyplanning2020.org/sites/all/themes/custom/progressreport/pdf/FP2020\\_2019Report\\_WEB.pdf](http://progress.familyplanning2020.org/sites/all/themes/custom/progressreport/pdf/FP2020_2019Report_WEB.pdf)

<sup>iv</sup> Kantorova et al (2020) Estimating progress towards meeting women’s contraceptive needs in 185 countries: A Bayesian hierarchical modelling study, *PLOS Medicine* <https://journals.plos.org/plosmedicine/article?id=10.1371/journal.pmed.1003026>

NOTE: this study included unmarried women and those not in relationships, who are often not included in other estimates.

<sup>v</sup> UNFPA (2019) <https://www.unfpa.org/news/we-are-working-against-all-odds-despite-progress-fgm-and-child-marriage-numbers-cause-alarm>

<sup>vi</sup> UNFPA (2020) *State of world population 2020: against my will* <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/ENGLISH-v6.29-web.pdf>

<sup>vii</sup> UNICEF (2020) *A new era for girls* <https://data.unicef.org/resources/a-new-era-for-girls-taking-stock-of-25-years-of-progress/>

<sup>viii</sup> Blondel (2019) Population Matters blog <https://populationmatters.org/news/2019/11/04/cracking-knuckles-and-counting-kids>

<sup>ix</sup> Population Matters (2020) *Hitting the targets: the case for ethical and empowering population policies to accelerate progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals* <https://populationmatters.org/sites/default/files/Hitting%20the%20Targets%20-%20Population%20and%20the%20SDGs.pdf>

<sup>x</sup> Bradshaw et al (2020) Testing the socioeconomic and environmental determinants of better child-health outcomes in Africa: a cross-sectional study among nations, *BMJ Open* <https://bmiopen.bmj.com/content/9/9/e029968>

<sup>xi</sup> Among multiple examples: “The persistence of high fertility in Nigeria, especially in the poorest parts of the country and among the poor, makes it impossible for the government to attain its [development agenda](#) as outlined in the Sustainable Development Goals. This includes eradicating poverty and inequality, combating hunger and malnutrition, expanding employment and educational enrolment and health

- care.” Prof Uche Charlie Isiugo-Abanihe, University of Ibadan *The Conversation* 27 October 2020; <https://theconversation.com/why-nigeria-cant-fix-its-development-agenda-and-where-the-solutions-lie-123638>; “In the 1980s we had 60-70 million people ... We now have 200 million people on the same land area ... And we are still looking for why we are poor, why our forests are going, why our wildlife is diminishing, why our quality of life is poor?” Dr Muhtari Aminu-Kano, Nigerian Conservation Foundation <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vCOc2dkZBYI> ; “The high population is exerting a lot of pressure on our economy. As a country we have made tremendous gains over the years but the impact is not reflected on our economy because the gains have been dissipated by population growth.” Goodall Gondwe, Minister of Finance, Malawi, *Nyasa Times*, March 20 2017 <https://www.nyasatimes.com/malawi-facing-population-explosion-time-bomb-teen-pregnancy-soars/>
- <sup>xii</sup> The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2014) *AR5 Synthesis Report: Climate Change 2014* <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar5/syr/>
- <sup>xiii</sup> The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2018) *Special Report: Global Warming of 1.5 °C* <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/>
- <sup>xiv</sup> Project Drawdown (2020) *Sector Summary: Health and Education* <https://drawdown.org/sectors/health-and-education>
- <sup>xv</sup> IPBES (2019) *Global assessment summary for policymakers* <https://www.ipbes.net/news/ipbes-global-assessment-summary-policy-makers-pdf>
- <sup>xvi</sup> Amnet et al (2019) Compatibility between agendas for improving human development and wildlife conservation outside protected areas: Insights from 20 years of data, *People and Nature* <https://besjournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/pan3.10041> ; Bradshaw et al (2019) Socio-economic predictors of environmental performance among African nations, *Nature* <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-019-45762-3> ; UNEP (2019) *Global resources outlook* <https://www.resourcepanel.org/reports/global-resources-outlook> ; Gerardo Ceballos, Paul R. Ehrlich, and Rodolfo Dirzo (2017) Biological annihilation via the ongoing sixth mass extinction signaled by vertebrate population losses and declines, *PNAS* <https://www.pnas.org/content/114/30/E6089>
- <sup>xvii</sup> Global Forest Watch [globalforestwatch.org/dashboards](http://globalforestwatch.org/dashboards)
- <sup>xviii</sup> Willett et al (2019) *Food in the Anthropocene: the EAT-Lancet report on healthy diets from sustainable food systems* <https://www.thelancet.com/commissions/EAT>
- <sup>xix</sup> United Nations Development Programme (2016) *Gender and Climate Change: Overview of linkages between gender and climate change* <https://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/gender/Gender%20and%20Environment/PB1-AP-Overview-Gender-and-climate-change.pdf>
- <sup>xx</sup> IUCN (2020) *Gender-based violence and environment linkages* <https://portals.iucn.org/library/node/48969>
- <sup>xxi</sup> United Nations (2019) *2019 Revision of World Population Prospects* <https://population.un.org/wpp2019/>
- <sup>xxii</sup> *ibid*
- <sup>xxiii</sup> For example, Vollset et al (2020) *The Lancet* [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)30677-2/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)30677-2/fulltext) For an analysis of the limitations of this study, please see Population Matters blog <https://populationmatters.org/news/2020/07/20/two-billion-fewer-people>
- <sup>xxiv</sup> UNDESA (2020) Sustainable Development Goals Report 2020 <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2020/>
- <sup>xxv</sup> Aszed (2018) Population Matters video interview <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ga0ub9o-ncs>
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Singh (2020) Population Matters guest blog <https://populationmatters.org/news/2020/09/21/impact-covid-19-women-s-reproductive-health-india-safeguarding-women-s-rights>
- <sup>xxvii</sup> *The Guardian* 15 June 2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/15/iran-bans-vasectomies-and-contraceptives-to-improve-birth-rate>
- <sup>xxviii</sup> *The Guardian* 4 March 2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/04/baby-bonuses-fit-the-nationalist-agenda-but-do-they-work/> ; *Belarus Digest* 27 August 2017 <https://belarusdigest.com/story/lukashenka-wants-to-double-belarus-population-will-that-work/>
- <sup>xxix</sup> Balkan Insight, Nov 2020 <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/11/19/activists-fear-abortion-at-risk-in-hungary-from-orbans-family-first-crusade/>
- <sup>xxx</sup> *The Moscow Times* 27 October 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/10/27/putin-orders-government-to-improve-abortion-prevention-efforts-a71865>
- <sup>xxxi</sup> *The Guardian* 4 March 2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/04/baby-bonuses-fit-the-nationalist-agenda-but-do-they-work>
- <sup>xxxii</sup> *T-vine*, 29 December 2019 <http://www.t-vine.com/is-erdogans-call-for-turks-to-have-at-least-3-children-failing/>
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> *The Citizen* (Tanzania) <https://www.thecitizen.co.tz/News/Magufuli-advises-against-birth-control/1840340-4751990-4h8fqpz/index.html> Accessed 18 September 2018. Note: this page has now been removed. It is also reported by CNN <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/09/11/africa/tanzania-birth-control-magufuli-intl/index.html>
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> Population Matters video (2020) *Barsaloi people and environment* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h3TvFxPREmw>
- <sup>xxxv</sup> United Nations Population Fund (2020) *Nairobi summit on ICPD 25 report* <https://www.unfpa.org/publications/nairobi-summit-icpd25-report>
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> Earth Overshoot Day (2020) *Population voices blog* <https://www.overshootday.org/florence-blondel-population/>