

135-137 Station Road  
London E4 6AG  
t: 020 8123 9116  
w: [populationmatters.org](http://populationmatters.org)



Rt Hon Rory Stewart OBE MP  
Secretary of State  
Department of International Development  
Via email

9 July 2019

Dear Mr Stewart

I am the director of Population Matters, a UK-based charity campaigning for a sustainable global population to protect the environment and improve people's lives. We were very pleased to see your recent comments about the importance of the Sustainable Development Goals and your plans to prioritise environmental protection in UK aid policy. With World Population Day falling this Thursday, we urge you to work with your international colleagues at the High Level Political Forum in New York to put measures to end and reverse population growth at the heart of the action to achieve the SDGs.

As you may be aware, the UN Secretary-General's recent assessment of the role of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development in attaining the SDGs directly addressed the risks of population growth: *"Meeting the demand for resources from a growing and more prosperous population, while protecting the environment and combating climate change, remains a central challenge for achieving sustainable development."* That assessment is borne out by multiple and authoritative recent reports and studies.

For instance, the landmark EAT-Lancet report concluded that feeding a population of over 10bn without negative impacts on biodiversity and the environment is "increasingly unlikely" - the most recent UN projections anticipate a global population of 10bn early in the second half of this century. Meanwhile, in May, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services reported that one million species are at risk of extinction. The IPBES explicitly identified population growth as a key indirect driver of extinctions and its prescription for vital and urgent action states *"changes to the direct drivers of nature deterioration cannot be achieved without transformative change that simultaneously addresses the indirect drivers."*

The human impact of unsustainable population is also profound. As you know, from your departmental responsibilities – and as you are likely to have seen first-hand in Afghanistan – large family size and high population growth are major obstacles to economic development, for families, communities and entire nations. As you also know, many of the positive and empowering actions that address population are part of the Sustainable Development Goals: ending poverty (SDGs 1, 2 and 10); providing universal access to high quality education (SDG 4); women's empowerment (SDG 5) and ensuring access to and uptake of modern family planning (SDGs 3 and 5).

The fifth component of fertility reduction is encouraging smaller families, and it is not clearly encompassed within the SDGs, however. It is necessary and effective in all contexts but particularly important in countries with a relatively high Human Development Index which have usually already met the first four goals to a large extent. These countries usually have *relatively* low fertility levels but contribute significantly to global environmental damage, such as climate change or through demand for imported agricultural products leading to habitat loss and extinctions. (The UK is one

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such country, and we also call on the UK government to introduce a domestic Sustainable Population Policy, to help address our disproportionate impact on the global environment.)

In addition to our research, education and campaigning on population issues, Population Matters also provides support to grassroots family planning and women's empowerment programmes in the Global South and here in the UK, and we see the benefits they bring to people's lives. We commend the UK government for its consistent support for family planning, women's empowerment and education – but it is time for these actions to be integrated into a strategic, multilateral approach to our global population and demographic challenges, one that explicitly recognises the importance of achieving sustainable population everywhere, and that specifically promotes smaller families as a means of achieving the SDGs.

The UK is a world leader in many aspects of international development and environmental protection – please take the opportunity at the HLPF to engage your international colleagues in discussions on population, and to work towards international agreement and co-operation that will allow us all to meet the SDGs' goal of building a better world for people and our planet by 2030. In particular, we urge you to show leadership by addressing the need for sustainable population openly and clearly. The challenges and solutions are all understood within the environmental and development movements, but are often downplayed or addressed in coded language. This taboo is anachronistic and counter-productive. Please help to put this issue at the forefront of discussion about human development and environmental protection, where it belongs.

May I end by taking the opportunity to thank you for your transparently genuine commitment to your brief? I hope you have a productive and positive meeting in New York and would, of course, be very happy to meet you or members of your team to discuss these issues and our shared aspirations for a better future, if helpful. I look forward to your reply.

With best wishes

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of the letters 'RM' inside a circular scribble.

Robin Maynard  
Director, Population Matters

## References

UN Secretary-General (2019) *Review and appraisal of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and its contribution to the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (E/CN.9/2019/2)

<https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/commission/pdf/52/10KeyFindings.pdf>

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>

Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (2019) *IPBES global assessment summary for policymakers* <https://www.ipbes.net/news/ipbes-global-assessment-summary-policymakers-pdf>

More information about Population Matters' support for family planning projects at <https://populationmatters.org/empower-to-plan>