

UK government International Development Strategy: Call for Evidence

September 2021

Population Matters submission

1. How might progress on international development to 2030 be impacted by the trends identified in the Integrated Review? How should the UK respond?

The trends identified in the Integrated Review (IR) are, of course, subject to change as a result of international development progress and policies. Population dynamics and the population policies adopted by other countries have a significant impact on this feedback loop. In considering international development strategy and its response to those trends, the UK must therefore be conscious of its capacity to influence population dynamics. It must also beware of responding to these trends by adopting counterproductive domestic population policies.

Population *growth* in particular will have a significant impact on the trends identified in the Integrated Review. To address the key negative impacts, and as expanded on below, it will: increase competition for resources; exacerbate transnational challenges, principally climate change and biodiversity loss, but also threats from zoonoses¹; alter geopolitical dynamics; and may also exacerbate conflict and terrorism. It is a key obstacle to achieving many Sustainable Development goals, and has a negative bearing on almost all of them².

A number of countries, including China, see population growth as a way of shoring up their economic competitiveness. China and multiple others are pursuing or considering pro-natal policies intended to avoid population reduction or actively boost their domestic populations. These approaches are counterproductive, adding to unsustainable population pressure – in particular, in the case of high-consuming high income countries, on the environment (see below).

¹ UNEP (2016) UNEP frontiers report
https://environmentlive.unep.org/media/docs/assessments/UNEP_Frontiers_2016_report_emerging_issues_of_environmental_concern.pdf

² For more detail, see Population Matters' *Hitting the targets* report, which provides information on the relationship between population and each of the SDGs.
<https://populationmatters.org/sites/default/files/Hitting%20the%20Targets%20-%20Population%20and%20the%20SDGs.pdf>

While outside the field of development policy, it is important that in responding to the trends of geopolitical shifts and competition, that the UK doesn't fall in the same trap. Instead, it should adopt a coordinated and integrated policy approach to secure a sustainable domestic population through ethical and equitable means, by implementing a Sustainable Population Policy³.

The present and future impact of population growth in the UK affects almost every aspect of national life, and beyond our shores through our resource demands and carbon emissions. The average UK resident produces 11 times⁴ more CO2 consumption emissions per year than a person in Nigeria. According to the highly respected Global Footprint Network, if everyone on Earth lived like the average Briton, we would need 2.6 planets to meet humanity's natural resource demand without destroying nature⁵.

In foreign policy terms, including through the provision of aid, the UK's response should be to see policies which tackle population growth as a primary lever for influencing the identified trends in a positive direction, accelerating progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals and mitigating the negative impacts of increased population pressure nationally, regionally and globally.

2. What could success in 2030 look like in terms of meeting the needs of the poorest and most marginalised and increasing opportunities for countries to become self-sustaining?

One of the most effective ways of meeting the needs of the words' poorest and most marginalised is by empowering women and providing full sexual and reproductive health and rights. In addition to meeting their basic right of reproductive freedom, when women are able to choose the size of their families, family size reduces, relieving population pressure on services such as health and education, providing a demographic dividend and helping to mitigate environmental pressures which impact the poorest and most marginalised the most. **Ending unmet need for modern family planning before 2030, therefore, will not only constitute a tangible success in improving individual lives, but increase opportunities for low income and high fertility countries to become self-sustaining.**

³ See <https://populationmatters.org/sustainable-population-policy>

⁴ Carbon Atlas (2020) <http://www.globalcarbonatlas.org/en/CO2-emissions>

⁵ Global Footprint Network, Country Trends: UK
<https://data.footprintnetwork.org/#/countryTrends?cn=229&type=BCpc,EFCpc>

UNFPA researchers assess that there are currently 270 million women with an unmet need for contraception. This is more than in 1990 (230 million), and by 2030, this number is expected to rise further, to 272 million because family planning services are not keeping pace with rapid population increase in Least Developed Countries⁶. As FP2020 notes, there are now 100 million more women in FP2020 countries than in 2012 [REF]. *This absolute, numerical increase in unmet need is a critical and under-recognised indicator of failure in development policy and SRHR, and must be addressed as a matter of priority.*

The scale of failure in meeting unmet need is great. FP2020 has also failed to deliver against its goal of adding 120 million more modern contraceptive users globally by 2020, increasing the number of women using modern contraceptives in its 69 focus countries by only 53 million⁷. The proportion of women of reproductive age (aged 15-49 years) who have their need for family planning satisfied with modern methods has increased by less than 2 percent since 2010 – from 75.7% to just 77% today. Since the first International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in 1994, the proportion of women around the world using modern contraceptives has increased by only 6% to 58% today [REF].

Access to family planning is, of course, only one component of meeting unmet need, and improving the lives of women and girls. In countries with the greatest gender inequalities, women and girls are likely to be poorer, less educated, have less autonomy over their bodily rights. Globally, one in four girls does not attend secondary school and one in five girls is married before her 18th birthday. In the least developed countries, that number increases to 40 per cent, with a shocking 12 per cent married before age 15, according to UNFPA [REF]. Globally, financing to eradicate critical gender injustices (gender-based violence and harmful practices; unmet contraceptive need; preventable maternal deaths) faces a significant shortfall, with [UNFPA estimating](#) a need for US\$264bn, but funding falling short by \$222bn.⁸

Education is also a critical and empowering tool to improve lives and reduce family size, with all the individual and broader population benefits arising. When family sizes are smaller, that also empowers women to gain education, take work and improve their

⁶ Kantorová et al (2020) *Estimating progress towards meeting women's contraceptive needs in 185 countries: A Bayesian hierarchical modelling study* <https://journals.plos.org/plosmedicine/article?id=10.1371/journal.pmed.1003026>

⁷ FP2020 (2019) http://progress.familyplanning2020.org/sites/all/themes/custom/progressreport/pdf/FP2020_2019Report_WEB.pdf

⁸ UNFPA (2020) Accelerating the promise <https://www.unfpa.org/publications/accelerating-promise-report-nairobi-summit-icpd25>

economic opportunities. A World Bank assessment of Bangladesh amplifies this message, stating “women’s educational gains have also supported better labour market options for women and increased female labour force participation, which in turn improved women’s fertility choices and empowerment within the household”⁹.

3. How and where can wider UK government international policy and activity best support long term international development outcomes?

As the IR acknowledges, environmental security and sustainability underpins achievement of all human development goals. Population growth is a significant driver of critical environmental challenges. **In pursuing environmental goals through multilateral agreements (including, of course, as hosts of COP 26) and through mechanisms such as climate and biodiversity funding, the UK must support effective, voluntary population solutions which help secure environmental sustainability.**

Authoritative and extensive scientific evidence of the impact of population growth on the environment is detailed in the Population Matters environmental briefings in the bibliography. Space does not allow elaboration here, but significant endorsement of the influence of population – as one key factor among others – includes by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change¹⁰ and the Intergovernmental Science Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services¹¹, and in the UK Treasury-commissioned Dasgupta Review¹² and the three World Scientists Warnings, now endorsed by tens of thousands of scientists globally¹³.

On climate change, that includes Project Drawdown’s conclusion that “empowering women and girls through universal access to education and safe, modern family planning

⁹ World Bank (2019) *Bangladesh Poverty Assessment: Facing old and new frontiers in poverty reduction* <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/793121572582830383/pdf/Bangladesh-Poverty-Assessment-FacingOld-and-New-Frontiers-in-Poverty-Reduction.pdf>

¹⁰ See Population Matters press release, 8 October 2018, for further information <https://populationmatters.org/ipcc-15%C2%B0-report-hidden-population-warning>

¹¹ IPBES (2019) *Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services* <https://ipbes.net/global-assessment>

¹² *The economics of biodiversity: the Dasgupta review* (2021) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/final-report-the-economics-of-biodiversity-the-dasgupta-review>

¹³ *World scientists’ warning to humanity: a second notice* (2017) <https://academic.oup.com/bioscience/article/67/12/1026/4605229>; *World scientists’ warning of a climate emergency* (2019) <https://academic.oup.com/bioscience/article/70/1/8/5610806>; *World scientists’ warning of a climate emergency* (2021 update), <https://academic.oup.com/bioscience/article/70/1/8/5610806>

would save 85Gt of emissions by 2050, making it the second most effective solution in limiting warming to 2°C¹⁴. The 2019 *World Scientists' Warning of a Climate Emergency* included a call for the global population to be stabilised “and, ideally, gradually reduced – within a framework that ensures social integrity”¹⁵.

In 2019, the IPBES identified population growth as a key indirect drivers of global biodiversity loss¹⁶. The Government has already committed to address indirect drivers in the Trondheim Declaration¹⁷, while the Dasgupta Review has highlighted the significant value of supporting family planning in protecting biodiversity. The Environmental Audit Committee also addressed this issue in its most recent parliamentary recent report¹⁸, in which it specifically called for UK ODA support for family planning and reproductive healthcare, including restitution of UK ODA to pre-2020 levels.

Lastly, the government must robustly, consistently and pro-actively assert and defend gender equality and sexual and reproductive health and rights in its diplomatic and soft power actions.

The government will be well aware of existing and emerging threats to gender equality and to reproductive rights specifically in multiple countries, from Afghanistan to the US. Underlying or contributing to restriction in reproductive rights in many of these cases is a pro-natal agenda¹⁹. For instance, China’s “relaxation” of its one-child policy to, presently, a three child policy may represent an immediate increase (of sorts) in reproductive freedom, but there is genuine risk – based on political rhetoric and its minimal respect for human and reproductive rights - of China progressing to a coercive pro-natal policy (either through explicit limits or restriction of SRHR). Not only must existing restrictions on SRHR be challenged wherever they are, the government must be vigilant of and pro-active in challenging such emerging threats.

4. How and where can Government work on development best support the UK’s wider strategic objectives set out in the Integrated Review?

¹⁴ Project Drawdown (2020) <https://www.drawdown.org/sectors/health-and-education>

¹⁵ Ripple, W.J. et al (2020) World Scientists’ Warning of a Climate Emergency, *BioScience*, <https://academic.oup.com/bioscience/article/70/1/8/5610806>

¹⁶ IPBES (2019) *Global Assessment*

¹⁷ *The Trondheim call for action in the face of the extinction crisis* (2019) <https://trondheimconference.org/assets/Files/TC9%20miscellaneous%20files/The-Trondheim-Call-for-Action-2-July-2019.pdf>

¹⁸ Environmental Audit Committee (2021) *Biodiversity in the UK: bloom or bust?* <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/6498/documents/70656/default/>

¹⁹ See <https://populationmatters.org/news/2021/03/handmaids-reality>

Promoting and financing policies and programmes in the fields of gender equality, sexual and reproductive rights and education are crucial in order to achieve the SDGs, and a number of the objectives set out in the Integrated Review.

In regard to security objectives, in addition to its benefits in promoting economic security, reducing the number of unemployed young men and competition for resources will lower the risk of conflict. Providing education and employment opportunities are crucial to meet the aspirations and potential of young people around the world. A smaller population makes this easier to achieve and helps prevent pockets of social unrest. In 2019, the number of people fleeing war, persecution and conflict exceeded 79.5 million, the highest level recorded since these statistics have been systematically collected²⁰. Research shows that in the absence of economic growth and strong institutions, population growth contributes to conflicts related to scarce resources²¹. In this context, it is important to note that the Taliban's recent success and regressive gender policies in Afghanistan threaten to exacerbate already very high fertility rates and population growth in a nation with profound internal problems and which represents a global security threat.

Reduced birth rates are essential for countries to harvest their demographic dividend – conversely, slow progress will leave nations in a demographic trap. Harnessing the demographic dividend can *only* be achieved through substantial and enhanced investment in family planning and education. UN population projections assume that even the medium projection will only be achieved with continued improvement in development indicators, including provision of reproductive health care and family planning²².

Building resilience at home and overseas will be easier to achieve by ending and reversing population growth as soon as possible. In particular, the effects of climate change are increasing every year and affect the world's poorest in a much higher degree. Climate change is rapidly becoming a contributing factor to migration and internal displacement [REF]. In high-income countries, in addition to the essential measure of reducing per capita consumption, reducing the number of future consumers and is an effective, permanent way of reducing the drain they place on resources, as well as their environmental impact.

²⁰ <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2020/goal-16/>

²¹ Voxdev, 2019, Does population growth cause conflict? [https:// voxdev.org/topic/health-education/does-population-growth-causeconflict](https://voxdev.org/topic/health-education/does-population-growth-causeconflict)

²² United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs *World population prospects 2019: highlights* https://population.un.org/wpp/Publications/Files/WPP2019_Highlights.pdf

5. In what area of international development does the UK have comparative advantage, particular interests, or is best placed to deliver?

The UK is – or has been - a global leader in promoting education and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) for women and girls living in the world's poorest countries. The accompanying expertise, partnerships and experience enhances the value and positive impact of this already highly effective and cost-effective form of aid. However, the recent cuts to the aid budget in particular in regard to our UNFPA contribution, have seriously undermined our country's leadership role in this field, and severely compromised the UK's authority and credibility as a nation committed to justice and achieving the SDGs, including those addressing environmental sustainability.

As the FCDO is aware, UNFPA estimates that this reduction will lead to 250,000 additional maternal and child deaths, 4.3 million additional unsafe abortions and 14.6 million additional unintended pregnancies [REF]. The cut will not only cause devastating direct harm to millions of the most vulnerable women and girls around the world, but also in the longer term exacerbate the climate crisis which is impacting the poorest the most.

Similarly, the UK's objectives as identified in the Integrated Review to promote gender equality, women's economic empowerment and help send 40 million more girls into school in low- and middle-income countries by 2025 are positive and welcome. However, the recent reduction in UK aid spending on girls' education - declining from £672 million since 2016 to £400 million in 2021 – is clearly counterproductive in seeking to achieve those goals. Reversal of these cuts is critical to the UK's reputation and effectiveness as a country committed to, as the IR states, relieving global poverty and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

The UK is extremely well-placed to use ODA and other policy levers promote the most positive solutions to the unsustainable population growth, specifically women's empowerment, family planning and girls' education. These activities have immense positive effects on individuals, communities and in addressing environmental crises which threaten not only the poorest and most marginalised but pose an existential threat to economic security and social cohesion everywhere. Few interventions can produce such a magnitude of critical benefits, especially in promoting resilience against our gravest transnational challenges.

6. How should the UK's approach evolve to build partnerships with new actors and strengthen existing ones?

No comment, other than to note that clearly, reversal of the UNFPA cut is essential to strengthening this critical partnership.

Optional Bibliography

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