



Population and SRHR,
thirty years after Cairo



BREAKING SILOS



30 years after Cairo, should we talk about population again?

The International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994 (ICPD) was a landmark moment in the history of concern over population, asserting sexual health and reproductive rights, and promoting gender equality. Since ICPD, discussions of population and family planning have become increasingly divorced. Indeed, a consensus has arisen that discussion of influencing population dynamics is misplaced at best and contrary to the principles outlined in Cairo at worst.

Thirty years on, the goals that Cairo's framers and signatories had aimed for have not been met. Greater numbers of women have an unmet need for contraception, progress in gender equality is incremental at best and reversing at worst, sexual and reproductive rights and health (SRHR) are under threat, funding for SRHR is volatile and inadequate, and women and girls, especially the most vulnerable, are in the front line of a planetary environmental crisis that was barely understood or recognised in 1994.

In 2024, everyone who seeks to achieve the goals set out in the ICPD programme of action must ask whether the "population taboo" consensus has served the needs of those Cairo sort to defend, and whether it will serve their needs in future. Are women and girls and the communities to which they belong best served by ignoring, rejecting or demonising any conversation about the impact of population growth? Or does that conversation perhaps offer an opportunity to bring about greater progress, more quickly?

This document summarises and draws upon the independent *Breaking Silos* report produced by Delacroix, Hardee and Speidel in 2024. We invite stakeholders to read the full report, which explores these critical questions in depth and contains the supporting references for this briefing.



Dissociating population dynamics from reproductive health and rights discussions constitutes a missed opportunity to advance reproductive rights, and downplays their relevance for broader societal goals, including their positive impact on environmental sustainability. Ignoring the interconnected nature of population dynamics and reproductive rights leads to policy incoherence as attention to demographic dynamics is fundamental to the goals of reproductive justice, including improving the economic status of women and the attainment and preservation of a healthy and productive environment.

Delacroix, Hardee and Speidel, 2024

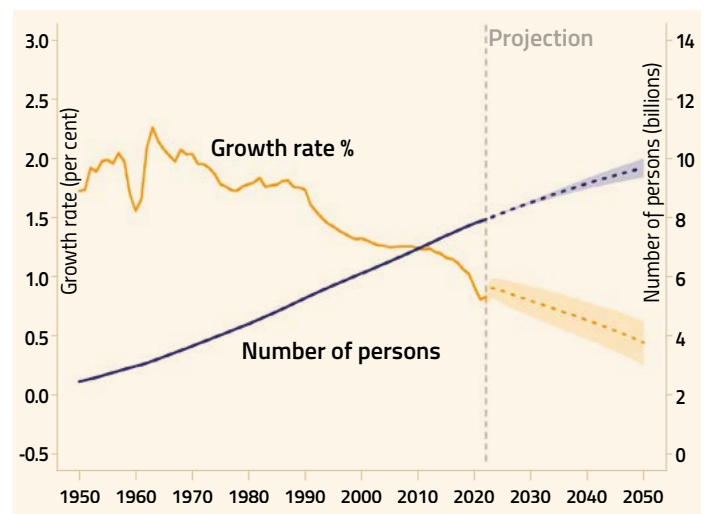
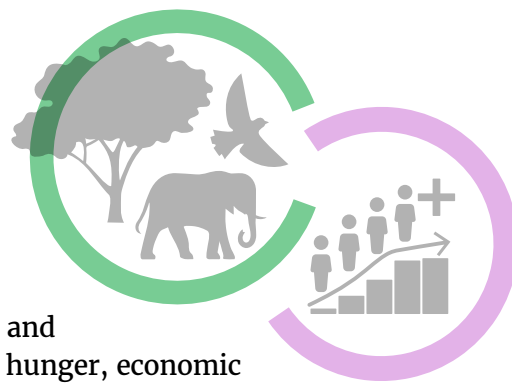


Figure 1
Global population size and annual growth rate: estimates, 1950-2022, and medium scenario with 95 per cent prediction intervals, 2022-2050
Source: World Population Prospects 2022

The demographic and environmental context



The world’s population of just over 8 billion people in 2024 is projected by the United Nations to continue growing by an additional 2.4 billion people, reaching 10.4 billion by 2086. This growth coincides with the need to support improved living standards for billions of people still living in poverty, and to manage and withstand what are, for some, existential environmental threats. Global population dynamics and prospects are, and will continue to be, experienced very differently by different population groups. In some places ultra-low fertility rates will lead to population decline, in others, high fertility rates and/or a large proportion of people of reproductive age will drive continued growth. The most rapid and continued growth is projected to disproportionately take place in lower income countries, with the 46 countries designated as “Least developed countries”^{*} among the fastest-growing.

This growth will exacerbate current challenges to sustainable development across almost the entire range of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including in relation to universal access to

healthcare and education, hunger, economic development and vulnerability to climate change.

Economically, evidence shows that slowing population growth is almost always an essential precursor for nations to emerge from poverty. While fertility decline can be influenced by economic development, it creates economic opportunities through enabling the demographic dividend which can arise from transition from high numbers of dependent children to higher numbers of working age adults, able to drive growth and development. Many countries have achieved low fertility despite high levels of poverty and illiteracy, but none have done so without a strong family planning program. Meanwhile, high fertility and population growth places pressure upon public services, infrastructure and resources, most particularly in low-income countries, sustaining poverty and restricting opportunities, most particularly for women and girls.

The environmental impact of population growth to date and in the future is profound. While inequalities in affluence and consumption are deeply significant, with overconsumption by the most wealthy driving most (though not all) environmental destruction, ample scientific evidence and opinion affirms the impact of rising numbers. In 2022, the Sixth Assessment Report (AR6) of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) identified population growth *and* gross domestic product (GDP) per capita as the two strongest drivers of CO2 emissions through fossil fuel use. The equivalent organisation for

^{*} The UN report stresses that this designation is intended for statistical purposes and does not express a judgment about the stage in the development process reached by a particular country or area.

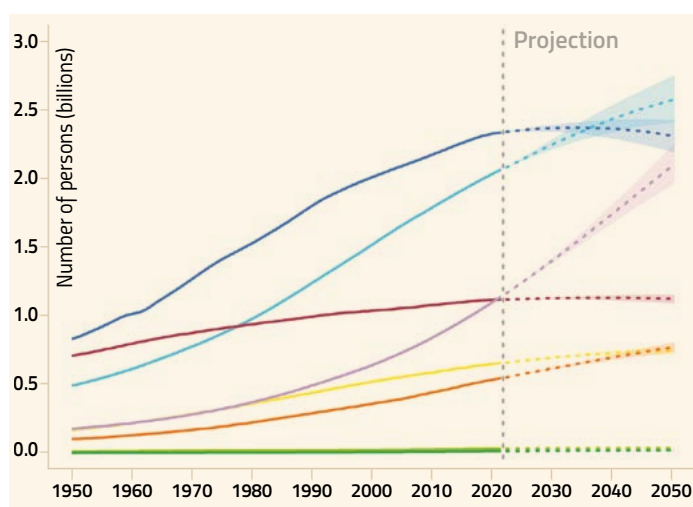


Figure 2
Population estimates, 1950-2022, and projections with 95 per cent prediction intervals, 2022-2050, by region
Source: World Population Prospects 2022

- Graph key**
- Sub-Saharan Africa
 - Northern Africa and Western Asia
 - Central and Southern Asia
 - Eastern and South-Eastern Asia
 - Latin America and the Caribbean
 - Australia and New Zealand
 - Oceania (excl. Australia and NZ)
 - Europe and Northern America

biodiversity, the Intergovernmental Science–Policy Platform for Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), identifies population growth as a key underlying driver of biodiversity loss. Meanwhile, the Global Footprint Network acknowledges population as one of the key drivers of overshoot in the use of planetary resources – we are at present using the Earth’s resources 1.7 times the rate at which they can be renewed.

There remains, however, remains profound resistance to acknowledging the linkage between

Rapid population growth is both a cause and a consequence of slow progress in development; rapid population increase can exacerbate the challenge of ensuring that future development is both sustainable and inclusive.

UNDESA, 2022

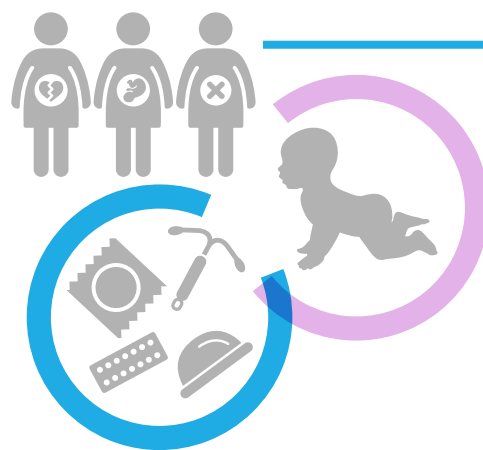
population and environmental destruction. This rejection of evidence and scientific consensus is profoundly harmful to those most vulnerable to these effects, including, of course, women and girls.

Population and reproductive rights

The UN’s 2050 global population projections range from 9.4 billion under the low-fertility scenario, 9.7 under the medium fertility scenario, and 10.0 under the high-fertility scenario. Achieving the UN’s ‘lower variant’ population projection of global population peaking at 8.9 billion in 2054, instead of the medium projection at 10.4 billion in 2086 is possible by advancing reproductive health and rights, education, improvements in child health and gender equity.

However, achieving demographic goals is viewed with suspicion, concern and sometimes strong hostility by many in the SRHR field. The Cairo conference is widely recognised for moving away from demographic targets and focusing global attention on reproductive autonomy and sexual reproductive health and rights. This was rightly seen as a necessary corrective to abusive policies intended to reduce population growth, especially those in India and China. However, the Programme of Action (PoA) from ICPD covered a broad range of issues related to population and sustainable development, including, for example population growth and structure as well as gender, equality, equity and empowerment of women.

Coercive programs that prioritised reducing fertility over the fulfillment of individual reproductive rights were inexcusable – but do not represent the vast majority of programming that has emphasised voluntary family planning. The ICPD PoA was clear



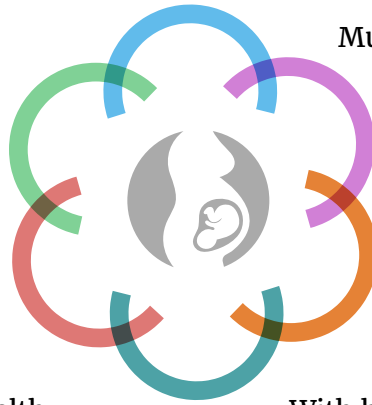
that “demographic goals [are] legitimately the subject of government development strategies”, while stressing that they “should not be imposed on family planning providers in the form of targets or quotas for the recruitment of clients”. ICPD reinforced that governments have a role to play in addressing population issues but in ways that respect human rights for people of all ages and address social and gender inequities. It did not discredit population policies or goals, and the widespread consensus that it did and that such goals and modern SRHR principles are incompatible is an increasingly harmful fallacy.

Measures to achieve sustainable population are rights-based and consistent with the Sustainable Development Goals

- Ensure people have access to and are able to freely use effective modern family planning (Goals 3 and 5)
- Ensure a high standard of education for all (Goal 4)
- Gender equality (Goal 5)
- End poverty and inequality (Goals 1,2 and 10)
- End child and maternal mortality (Goal 5)

Holistic approaches

A holistic view of reproductive justice encompassing human rights, social justice and reproductive rights recognises that the human right to control sexuality, gender, work, and reproduction “can only be achieved when all women and girls have the complete economic, social, and political power and resources to make healthy decisions about our bodies, our families, and our communities in all areas of our lives”. While many of the proponents of reproductive justice remain suspicious of the population agenda, it is precisely that wider context of justice that population growth acts against. In the words of

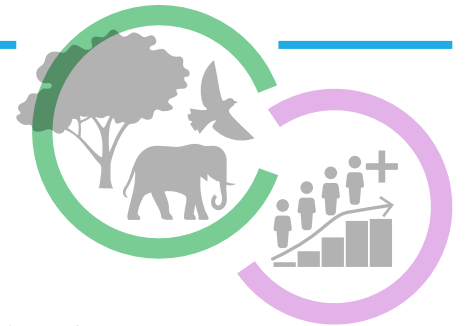


Musimbo Kanyoro, former CEO of the Global Fund for Women:

No one doubts the value of empowering women through education, but when population grows this fast, countries are simply not able to sustain their development. And when education and health systems are overwhelmed or fail all together, I can assure you that it is women and girls who suffer first and most. (2009)

With high fertility rates and population growth rates that outpace the ability of countries to provide services including schooling, employment opportunities, and infrastructure, the poorest people are becoming even more vulnerable to changes in climate – and more people will be born into the communities most threatened.

Strengthening SRHR through acknowledging and embracing population



Given the critical benefits achievable through ending unsustainable population growth and the lack of progress in achieving Cairo’s goals, change is needed. Reintegrating population dynamics into the SRHR frame presents opportunities to strengthen SRHR, without *in any way*, diminishing principles of reproductive justice grounded in respect for the rights and autonomy of individuals. These include widening its support base by appealing to new audiences concerned with environmental degradation, increasing the legitimacy of SRHR, and expanding funding options by accessing new funding sources.

Recognising that fulfilling SRHR influences population dynamics by lowering fertility levels means acknowledging the positive impact of family planning on broader development sectors, including health and education systems, food security, peace and security, climate change adaptation and mitigation, and environmental sustainability. These represent additional, wider framing for SRHR, with the potential to appeal to citizens, policy makers, researchers and activists concerned with such sectors.

Research indicates broad support among SRHR advocates, environmental advocates, and sub-Saharan African actors for framing SRHR in a manner that reflects its positive impact on environmental sustainability, including to accelerate progress for reproductive health and rights. Meanwhile, broad concern among the general public around the world for environmental degradation and climate change also suggests that recognizing the synergistic nature of SRHR and environmental sustainability carries potential to catalyse support for SRHR far and wide.

Those international organisations, government agencies, NGOs, think tanks and advocacy organizations concerned with sustainable development across all its factors would find it easier to reach their goals if the development community adopted and acted on a common agenda supporting SRHR and reproductive justice without ignoring the important role population dynamics play.

Funding opportunities

Population policies devised prior to the ICPD had mobilised funds, under a global crisis model that focused on overpopulation, famine and environmental degradation. ICPD in 1994 was the first UN conference that went beyond calling for action and presented a budget for carrying out the agreed-on program – but it did not succeed in bolstering sufficient investments in SRHR, including family planning. Furthermore, funding has not kept up with growing needs, including arising from population growth.

All SRHR stakeholders understand that a chronic shortfall of needed funds has hampered efforts to implement family planning and SRHR programs. Overall, investing in SRHR, including family planning, remains a volatile and politicised topic. Looking forward, the future of donor investments in SRHR does not look bright and will compete with other emerging donor priorities. Yet providing the needed funds to adequately support the full range of SRHR activities in Low and Middle Income Countries would foster reproductive justice, improve health, diminish poverty, and protect the environment and climate. Supporting family planning and eliminating unintended pregnancies would make each of the elements of SRHR easier to address and less costly. This suggests that among the components of SRHR, family planning deserves high priority.

Donors, including governments, interested in achieving environmental and development goals can, and to an increasing extent, do provide funding for SRHR because its corollary benefits in reducing population growth are seen as being of value. If SRHR practitioners voluntarily cut off this source of support for their work because of reluctance to address population, their communities' needs will not be met.

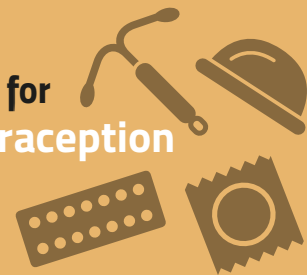
Raising global SRHR funding to \$12.6bn could:

Decrease unplanned births from **30 million** to **9 million** per year



Decrease unintended pregnancies from **111 million** to **35 million** per year

Satisfy the unmet need for modern contraception in developing countries



Decrease induced abortions from **68 million** to **23 million** per year



Result in an estimated **70,000 fewer maternal deaths** each year and a decline in maternal deaths due to unsafe abortion, from **23,000** to **5,000**



Source: Guttmacher Institute, 2019.

Fundamental change

A transformative process is already underway, as the framing of sustainability and development goals increasingly adopts cross-sectoral approaches. At a local level, the interdisciplinary Population, Health and Environment programmatic approach illustrates the effectiveness of integrating reproductive rights and environmental objectives to achieve long term sustainability benefits. The Sustainable Development Goals highlight the integrated nature of the three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental. Environmental bodies such as the IPCC and IPBES are increasingly adopting models based on the need for transformative change across economic, social political and technological factors.

Silencing talk of population in relation to biodiversity and ecosystem services and to climate change is a detriment to this approach.



Population dynamics, SRHR, and gender equity are influential drivers of these inter-sectoral approaches. Population and SRHR can be framed within, and by each one of them, along a holistic and integrated approach to sustainability.

Conclusion

Evidence of failure is currently widespread across the Sustainable Development Goals. The need for change is urgent. Ample evidence exists that it is possible to help protect natural systems and improve human welfare through two major avenues that are now neglected compared to the attention that they deserve. First, preservation of the environment and stabilisation of climate through major changes in production technologies and consumption patterns. Second, and as detailed in this briefing, the expansion of SRHR, family planning and reproductive justice, along with education.

The emergence of new health, development and environmental sustainability frames signal a shift towards less siloed, and more holistic approaches. The discussion of population dynamics must go beyond the study of numbers and be recognised as fundamentally linked to equity and environmental justice, having both short- and long-term impacts. Similarly, discussions of SRHR must evolve to embrace their broader implications.

Making the link between population and SRHR represents an opportunity to strengthen the SRHR movement through better policies appealing to broader audiences, and increased funding.

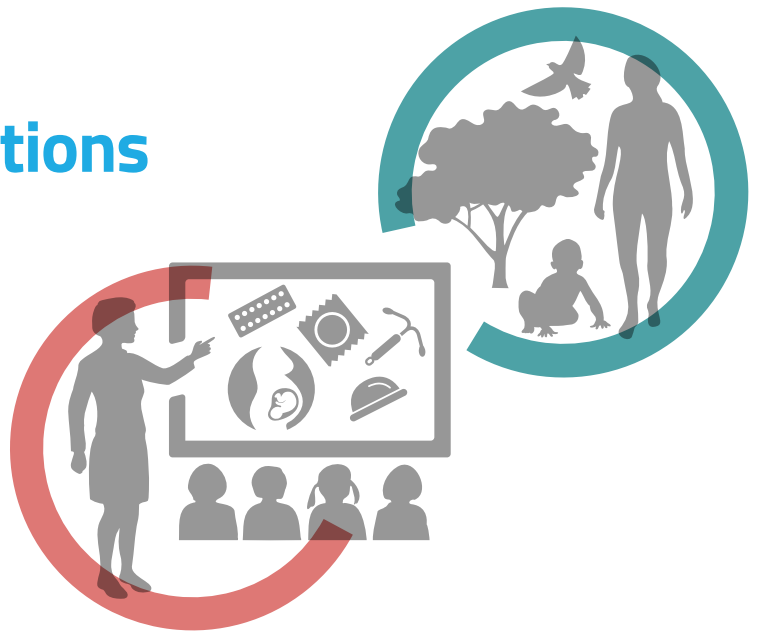


Harnessing such opportunities is important as a chronic shortfall of needed funds has hampered efforts to implement family planning and SRHR programs, despite their high returns in terms of health outcomes, lives saved, and cost savings.

Concerns about population policies and their implications for women and vulnerable communities are legitimate and must be recognised and addressed in any and all policies intended to influence reproductive choices, whether directly or indirectly. Respect for individual choice and rights is non-negotiable and must never be narrowly defined – the wider social, political and economic contexts and justice issues which affect the most vulnerable most of all must lie at the heart of population action. Concerns, however, are not a justification for neglecting or rejecting opportunities that could bring immense benefit to those in need. Thirty years on from Cairo, it is time for a reproductive rights and population concern paradigm fit for the critical challenges of the world today.

Population and SRHR: Strategic Recommendations

1. Acknowledge that reproductive health and rights and environmental sustainability have a mutually reinforcing relationship. A healthy environment contributes to reproductive health and rights, and reproductive health and rights, through their influence on fertility levels, benefit environmental sustainability.
2. Provide funding streams for family planning across all relevant sustainable development sectors, including climate, the environment and health.
3. Educate policy makers and the public to ensure widespread knowledge about population dynamics, and SRHR and their importance to the environment and other aspects of human and planetary welfare.
4. Communities of interest including those concerned with women's health, equality, rights and welfare; those focused on preservation of the environment and climate stabilization; and those addressing poverty and economic welfare should become strong advocates of universal implementation of reproductive justice and achievement of the UN's low variant projection of world population peaking around nine billion in 2050.
5. Adopt needed laws and policies and provide adequate funds to implement programs that advance reproductive justice through reproductive health and rights including voluntary family planning, gender equity, and education.
6. International development assistance donors should close the \$5 billion funding gap to ensure universal access to family planning in low- and middle-income countries.





ABOUT POPULATION MATTERS


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.

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While based on the independent *Breaking Silos* report by Delacroix, Hardee and Speidel, this briefing is independently produced by Population Matters and does not necessarily represent their views. See www.breakingsilos.info for the full report.

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Every choice counts