

## **A fresh perspective on the population-environment-development ties**

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Extended abstract:

There is little doubt that population growth plays a role in aspects of environmental decline, even though the relationship between the population factor and climate change may be less direct than many people would like to see it. What isn't in question is the relationship between the needs of increasing numbers of people on fresh water supplies, and on forests in many places – as in parts of western Tanzania, for example, where the need for firewood has effectively decimated the forests where families have an average of 7 children. Less well understood is the relationship between population and development. There is a large and well documented unmet need for family planning in nearly all low-income countries, where women want on average fewer children than they are having, yet they commonly run into unnecessary barriers to contraceptive use. A sense of discomfort around the subject of reproduction is one reason most environmental groups no longer talk about population growth. A systematic survey shows that the ongoing controversy around these issues hinders discussion, and hinders any mention of the population growth factor in environmental organizations and in most reports in the written press on environmental challenges. This is based largely on a sense that attempts to achieve lower birth rates might lead to coercive family planning. The ongoing controversy around these issues hinders discussion, and hinders any mention of the population growth factor in most reports in the written press on environmental challenges. Also missing in decisions to leave out the population subject is recognition that the growth of human population hindering environmental conservation is also hindering development. Development is dependent

on education and health, and in countries and regions with rapid population growth, it is difficult or impossible for educational or health infrastructures to catch up with the expanding needs. The bottlenecks are based in large part on misunderstanding about what drives fertility decline. There are now glimmers of hope that a constructive end to the silence is near.

The silence about population growth in recent decades has hindered the ability of those concerned with ecological change, resource scarcity, national security, health and educational systems, and other global challenges to look with maximum objectivity at the problems they confront. Two central questions about population – (1) is population growth a problem, and (2) what causes fertility decline – are often intertwined, in if people think the second question implies possible coercion, or fear upsetting cultures, they can be reluctant to talk about the first. Demographers and economists tend to view the relationship between development and population as causal in terms of what causes fertility decline, and yet we have not succeeded in finding any country in the past half years – with the possible exception of oil-rich Kuwait – that has achieved development, or gotten out of poverty, while maintaining high average family size. And for reasons briefly given above, we haven't found any country that has achieved education for all children, and a high proportion of students progressing through the secondary level of schooling, while birth rates remain high. Looking across the entire developing world, the only factor we can find that is consistent with declines from high to low average family size is the ability of women to have the means and the correct information they need to manage whether or when to have a another child. The implications of this for the links between environment and development may seem startling to some: both of these have a requirement in common, the need to reduce the many barriers between women (or people, but especially women) and their ability to manage their childbearing. This applies in Afghanistan as well as Kenya, Senegal, Uttar Pradesh, and

the Philippines. The good news is that the steps taken to achieve this can be within a human rights framework – it is about letting people have much-needed choices, not telling people what to do.