



Check Against Delivery

UNFPA Statement

Population and Climate Change

Framework of UNFPA's Agenda

February 11, 2008

Climate Change, Environmental Concerns and Population

1. The issue of climate change is deservedly receiving greater attention from the international development community. The Fourth Assessment Report (AR4) of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), released in 2007, formalized a global consensus on this irrefutable threat. Since every new day brings additional substantiation of this menace, the heightened urgency can entice us to treat climate change as an independent chapter in human history, and to center attention mostly on its probable consequences. This is particularly true in the population field, where attention tends to focus on the impacts of climate change in terms of its consequences for vulnerable populations and on the impending need for migration and population redistribution. However, climate change is part of a larger web of issues involving interactions between development, population and environment and it is critical that decision-making aimed at integrated mitigation and adaptation efforts be situated within this broader picture.
2. Reduced to essentials, climate change is ultimately produced by the pressures placed on the earth's ecosystem by humankind's development efforts, especially over the last half-century. Population dynamics are an integral part of development efforts as both cause and effect, and they add to the pressures placed on the environment in different ways. This note focuses on the contribution of a population-based development agency to a better understanding and more effective responses to the threat of climate change.

The Role of Population Dynamics in Environmental Change

3. Good policies are based on proper understanding: the linkages between population and the environment are often perceived in the oversimplified terms of a race between numbers and resources. However, the relationship between environment and population is complex because it is mediated by development practices, institutions and social organization. Recognition of this complexity is critical for policy formulation. Moreover, population dynamics involve not only demographic size and rate of growth, but also the changing distribution of population over space, as well as its evolving composition over time. The various impacts of these different and inter-related components of population dynamics on sustainability, as well as the impacts of environmental change on demographic processes, are also mediated by development efforts.
4. Most environmental problems, including those arising from climate change, tend to be aggravated by population growth and greater population size. Thus, the fact that the world's population has reached 6.7 billion and continues to grow by some 78 million additional people a year is unquestionably relevant. The latest United Nations projection shows that world population could theoretically reach a high of 10.8 billion, or remain as low as 7.8 billion, in 2050. The 3 billion difference between these two limits is certainly meaningful for the future of humankind, since population size generally makes any environmental challenge more difficult to address. However, the impacts of population size and growth are not direct or linear, since distinct population groups impinge on the environment in different ways. In this connection, it is useful to reason in terms of a continuum ranging from poor and fast-growing countries to rich countries that are marked by slow or even negative rates of population growth. Such differentiation can help to delineate approaches and policies that are tailored to real needs.

5. At one end of the scale, rapid population growth combines with poverty and lack of access to resources in a number of poor countries to exacerbate problems of local environmental degradation, resource depletion and inhibitions to sustainable development. Population, environmental degradation and poverty are linked in the search for fuel-wood, food, water and other basic needs, making impoverished people unwitting agents of environmental change. Environmental footprints are thus also related to poverty and unfulfilled basic human needs as well as to key civil and social rights.
6. For the most part, however, countries at this end of the scale contribute relatively little to greenhouse gases and other irreversible global ecological threats. By contrast, they are likely to be among the most affected by environmental change. Indeed, the impacts of population dynamics on climate change are most keenly felt in the poorest countries where population growth is high and where the resources, including technological assets, for mitigation and adaptation are least available, and the prospects for economic growth and development are most challenging. Slowing the rate of population growth in these countries may help give them time and resources to reduce vulnerability. It would also help, together with heightened international assistance, to create conditions for poorer countries to design and implement effective adaptation policies and practices when confronted with the impacts of global climate change.
7. At the other extreme of the continuum, we find rich industrialized countries whose economic growth has been responsible for a large part of the accumulated global environmental menaces. The increase of greenhouse gases responsible for climate change is largely driven by unsustainable patterns of production and consumption of these wealthier nations. Although having less than 20% of the world's population, these countries are responsible for a massive scale of natural resource consumption, much of it wasteful, as well as for the bulk of pollution. Since demographic growth in this group of countries has stagnated or is even negative, fertility reduction is less pertinent than reduction of per capita consumption. It should also be noted that wealthier countries will, because of their geographic characteristics and resources, be better prepared to face global climate change and, in general, be much less affected by it.
8. Between these two extreme groups and located along the middle of this continuum are found several large and populous developing countries whose development efforts, paradoxically, can be viewed as the main potential threat to future global sustainability. The urgency of efforts aimed at promoting economic growth often leads to environmental corner-cutting. Such countries have widely adopted civilization's current model of development within the context of globalized economic competition and, in the process, are consuming increasing resources at an alarming rate.
9. The dimension of the population stock in this mid-continuum group of countries is unquestionably a critical factor for longer-term sustainability. Given their size, the Earth's remaining ecosystem resources would be quickly depleted if these countries were to achieve anything close to the levels and types of consumption per person that are typical of industrialized countries. What is generally not understood, however, is that in many cases, the expectation that this problem can be significantly alleviated through population stabilization is not founded on demographic realities and can divert attention from other necessary approaches to mitigation. That is, in some of these countries, most of the

population growth is now inertial, that is, it reflects age compositions and fertility patterns of the past. Thus, although achieving rapid population stabilization would certainly be helpful to global sustainability, the practical possibility of reducing absolute growth significantly in some of these countries is much less realistic, given the relative weight of inertial growth.

10. In short, understanding the ways in which population and environment affect each other requires consideration of development paths. Under current models, the world's developing areas are pressing to emulate the production and consumption patterns of industrialized countries. The environmental consequences of their eventual success in this endeavor are worrisome, given the enormous numbers pursuing economic growth. Adoption of the consumption practices and living standards typical of the affluent by the world's majority would seriously deplete existing resources and further threaten dangerous global environmental change. The current lifestyles and consumption patterns of the rich simply cannot be generalized to the world's entire population without causing severe environmental imbalances. Yet, the inequities of hampering economic growth efforts in developing countries while industrialized countries maintain their standards of living would be even more unthinkable.
11. This evidently presents humanity with difficult decisions concerning equality, styles of development, poverty alleviation, and sustainability. Optimists trust market factors and technological development to resolve whatever imbalances arise between the expected dimension of increased consumption and its environmental implications. Though technological progress will undoubtedly be important in efforts to conciliate economic growth with environmental values, it will likely be grossly insufficient without changes in behavior, consumption aspirations and social organization. The choices that are made now will determine the quality of life and environmental conditions left to future generations. Because these choices involve issues of lifestyles and allocation, and because they are long-term in nature, they are undeniably difficult to address.

UNFPA's Agenda on Climate Change

- 12. Support Advocacy for Mitigation of Climate Change.** Strong evidence-based arguments are critical in helping the growing global environmental concern with climate change reach its own tipping point in terms of mobilizing world opinion, national governments and international agencies towards urgent and effective action. Since the impact of population dynamics is at once critical but misunderstood, as shown above, UNFPA considers it its responsibility to contribute to a better understanding by providing evidence-based arguments on what is actually known and to promote research on issues that are not sufficiently understood.
- 13. Promoting Reproductive Health.** As indicated above, reducing population growth rates is not a panacea for the diminution of resource degradation. However, most environmental problems would benefit from slower growth rates and smaller population sizes. Efforts to promote the empowerment of women, promote better social conditions and to make it possible for people to exercise their reproductive health rights would all help to reduce fertility rates and hasten population stabilization. Attending the unmet need for family planning services -- given that it affects almost one fifth of all married women in developing

countries -- would thus help to curb overall pressures on environmental resources. Support in this domain is most critical from the standpoint of human rights in the poorest countries.

14. **Support the preparation of sustainable cities.** The world's urban population will show an increase of 1.7 billion people between now and 2030, most of this in Asia and Africa. The scale of the growth that will be faced by the developing world in coming decades has no parallel in history: its urban population is projected to double in a generation's time. At the global level, practically all population growth in the foreseeable future will occur in towns and cities. Urban centers, especially those in the developed world, are the primary source of greenhouse-gas emissions and thus are implicated in global climate change. Unmanaged urbanization very often tends to outpace the development of infrastructure and environmental safeguards, leading to high pollution and carbon dioxide emissions which impact on climate change. How, where, and in what conditions such growth will occur will have a huge impact on poverty reduction as well as sustainability. This expansion represents at once an enormous challenge as well as a unique opportunity for the promotion of poverty reduction and sustainability. Taking advantage of this opportunity, however, will require a radical change in the anti-urbanization attitudes of many developing country policymakers. Evidence-based advocacy to change mindsets and to prepare for this massive urban growth is thus urgently needed.
15. **Reduce Urban Vulnerability.** Cities are highly vulnerable to natural crises and disasters: sudden supply shortages, heavy environmental burdens or major catastrophes can quickly lead to serious emergencies. Some of the alarming prospects of climate change are its impact on sea level rise and its potential consequences for coastal urban areas. These concentrate people and economic activities: many of the world's largest and fastest-growing cities are on seacoasts and at the mouths of the great rivers. The impacts of global environmental change, particularly climate-related hazards, disproportionately affect poor and vulnerable people—those who live in slum and squatter settlements on steep hillsides, in poorly drained areas, or in low-lying coastal zones. Programmatic activities will have to contemplate both research and action to reduce these vulnerabilities.
16. **Assess Impacts of Climate Change on Migration.** It is generally agreed that the greatest single impact of climate change will be on human migration. It is expected that millions of people will be displaced by severe coastal weather events, shoreline erosion, coastal flooding and agricultural disruption. However, predictions of the number, characteristics and location of probable victims who would be forced to migrate are still very rudimentary, although the number of vulnerable people is sure to be large. Temporary migration as an adaptive response to climate stress is also sure to be significant. The lack of baseline data for analysis of these phenomena needs to be corrected and conceptual and methodological tools for modeling migration need to be developed; within the scope of other efforts aimed at improving the quality and availability of census and survey information, quantifying and locating vulnerable populations is undoubtedly a priority.
17. **Improving Responses to Emergency Situations.** The impacts of severe weather events and other natural disasters are consistently more damaging among the poorest segments of the population. Within the scope of responses to emergency situations and natural disasters, more effective policies and programmes in support of more vulnerable populations need to be designed, tested and implemented with increasing levels of resources.

- 18. Improving knowledge of interactions between other population/environment changes.** Much attention has been focused on the impact of population size and growth on environmental change. However, on a world scale, current population dynamics involve other significant changes that have probable implications for environmental change. Chief among these are changes in the age composition that have resulted from fertility decline and increased longevity. Another relates to family structure and organization. These have little-studied implications for health, management of assets, household organization, population distribution, consumption patterns and international migration and thus, for climate change and environmental sustainability. The promotion of further studies in these domains is thus a necessity.
- 19. Mainstreaming gender into climate change discussions.** It is generally recognized that women living in poverty bear a disproportionate burden of climate change consequences. Because of their greater dependence on local natural resources, their domestic burdens are increased. Beyond these well-traveled observations, it is critical that gender sensitivity be integrated into all mechanisms, policies and measures, and tools and guidelines within the climate debate. This will require an expansion of the gender/climate change agenda in order to go beyond describing the situation of poor rural women as victims and to relate vulnerability, adaptation and mitigation issues to the broader cultural, economic and social processes that are at the root of climate change processes. Focusing on the role of women as critical potential actors in changing mentalities and as a recognizable force in advocating for more sustainable policies would help foster necessary changes in approaches to development.
- 20. Culture and Climate Change.** Climate change is an environmental problem with strong cultural, political and development components. Considerable and deserved attention has already been given to the risks that climate change presents for some traditional cultures and their rich legacy of knowledge. But, another aspect of culture's link to the environment has come to the forefront and will directly determine humankind's ability to mitigate climate change. Ultimately, mitigation of climate change will require drastic changes in the values of humankind with respect to their life goals and aspirations. Some environmentalists have tried to stress this message, insisting that when humankind defines happiness in terms of consumption goals, it is heading rapidly towards extinction. Such messages tend to be viewed as exaggerated and have not yet had much impact on development paths. Recent events in relation to climate change, however, are startling and can help humankind to move past the tipping point in terms of awareness and action. It is critical to take advantage of this conjuncture to press home the need to review our current environmental dilemma in another light and to address the critical issues that markets cannot be expected to resolve. The role of international development agencies can be critical in terms of generating needed massive support for renewed outlooks of our development paths.