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## Population and Development

AS THE WORLD'S POPULATION REACHES 7 BILLION THIS YEAR, WE SHOULD REFLECT ON THE MANY ways in which population dynamics matter to the planet's future. Population growth patterns are linked to nearly every challenge confronting humanity, including poverty reduction, urban pollution, energy production, food and water scarcity, and health. With world population projected to surpass 9 billion by 2050, these issues and the desire to raise living standards at the same time will create a huge challenge. What immediate actions can be taken to deal with growth while ensuring a sustainable future for all of the world's inhabitants?

People are generally living longer and healthier lives, but huge inequalities exist across continents, and analyses of global growth rates, as well as insufficient attention to the region-specific growth mechanisms, mask these disparities. We now know that not all growth is the same around the world. Population growth and fertility rates in some developing countries remain high. Most population growth in the coming decades will come from the demographic momentum arising from young people that currently populate most of the developing world. This group will enter their reproductive years soon and account for 80% of the world population growth. Thus, the population will continue to grow long after replacement fertility has been reached in most parts of the world. Specifically, about 70% of future world population growth (until 2050) will take place in just 20 countries in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia (not including China).

These regional differences have implications for crafting policies that effectively address unsustainable population growth in ways that are universally beneficial but are sensitive to regional and national diversities. Programs that are applicable to certain countries in Africa and Asia, where fertility rates are still high, may not be so in most countries in Latin America or in countries where fertility rates are comparatively lower, such as Japan and most European nations.

The message to the developing world is that worldwide trends toward smaller families (since 1950) are linked to advances in education, health care, family planning, and increased opportunities for adolescent girls and women. Some 215 million women in developing countries lack access to family planning and therefore cannot fully exercise their reproductive rights. Moreover, of the 584 million adolescent girls in the world, 88% of them reside in these same countries. In 1994, nearly 180 countries agreed that universal access to reproductive health should be promoted to ensure reproductive rights and reduce unintended fertility. The objective was not to enforce "population control" policies, but to address the unmet reproductive health needs of women and girls around the world, thereby empowering them, improving their health, and increasing their chances of having healthy children. This is a goal without opponents, as it should be. Evidence now shows that the voluntary reduction of unwanted fertility also helps to reduce poverty rates. In 2007, the United Nations Adolescent Girls Task Force was created to make girls a priority in national development planning. It is expected that by 2015, the task force will have successfully rolled out comprehensive programs in 20 developing countries that will educate girls, improve their health, protect them from violence, and promote their leadership skills. This work has already started in Ethiopia, Guatemala, Liberia, and Malawi.

Efforts like these need to be taken to scale and linked to other initiatives that protect women's rights to education and reproductive health, such as the Global Strategy on Women's and Children's Health; the Partnership for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health; and the Campaign for Accelerated Reduction of Maternal Mortality in Africa. These actions, grounded in human rights, must be the central objective of sustainable development policies in all countries, and they hopefully will create a world in which a stable population with a balanced approach to resource use and consumption will benefit families, communities, and nations.

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