

Essential synergies: Integrating population, environment and development

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Population, poverty and environment

Globally, world population is rising by about 78 million people each year. United Nations population projections for the year 2050 range from 7.3 billion to 10.7 billion (UNFPA 1999). At the same time forest cover is dwindling, freshwater sources are under pressure and increasingly polluted, biodiversity has been lost, natural resources are depleted or strained. More people are using resources with more intensity and leaving a bigger 'footprint' on earth than ever before (UNFPA 2001:2). Increasing pressure is being placed on natural resources by population growth in developing countries and by very rapid increases in consumption in the developed world.

The trends of rapid population growth, sustained but uneven economic growth and environmental degradation are accepted. However, the interaction between population size and growth, environmental change, poverty and development is not well established (United Nations 2001:iii).

Poverty can be seen as both a cause and a consequence of unlimited population growth (Asian Development Bank 1994:8). It is a struggle for developing countries to provide health and education services for expanding populations, while at the household level, children in larger families have less access to food, schooling and medical care. Poverty is gendered. Women and girls make up 60 per cent of the world's poor (Sadik 1999:2). Poverty alleviation is crucial as an end in itself but also as a key contribution towards slowing population growth. It has been demonstrated that when women have economic opportunities, they are more likely to delay marriage and the birth of their first child, as well as space the children that they do have. When maternal and infant mortality are reduced, a demonstrated decline in fertility rates follows. Improving women's economic status and providing quality reproductive health services are thus essential to all poverty reduction and sustainable development programs.

The State of the World's Population 2001, which deals with population and environmental change, finds that 'expanding women's opportunities and ensuring reproductive health and rights are critically important, both to improving the well-being of growing human populations and to protect the natural world' (UNFPA 2001:2).

The ICPD approach to addressing population growth and poverty

For some, the equation of less people equals a better environment seems simple. It is not. While there is little doubt that rapid population growth combined with increased consumption accelerate environmental degradation, to focus projects solely on population growth is not a useful approach to poverty reduction, environmental sustainability or extending reproductive rights. It is in this context that a new Program of Action emerged from the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) held in Cairo in 1994 (United Nations 1995). The Cairo conference saw existing human rights conventions extended to cover the right to reproductive health. The ICPD Program of Action recognises the complex relationships among human rights, development, poverty, gender and the environment and urges for policy in these areas to reflect population issues. It advocates for the enhancement of women's political, economic, social and educational status as a key component of population policy (United Nations 1995). Significantly, this approach was endorsed by 179 countries, including Australia.

While developing countries are progressively fulfilling their commitment to cover two-thirds of the cost of implementing the ICPD Program of Action, OECD countries are falling woefully short of their commitment. For Program of Action costs to be met, OECD countries need to commit 4 per cent of their overseas development assistance (ODA) to reproductive health assuming total ODA to be 0.7 per cent of GNP. As the Australian government's ODA is only 0.25 per cent of GNP, its real contribution to the Programme of Action falls significantly short of ICPD requirements. It is sobering to think that, by contrast, Britain nominates reproductive health as the top health priority in its international aid program and commits 32 per cent of its ODA health spending to achieve this.

Modest investments in reproductive health services generally return substantial health, economic and social benefits. Yet, current spending, from all sources, is little more than half the US\$17 billion that the United Nations estimates is currently needed in the developing countries. As the Population Council (1996) states: 'Policymakers have a choice. They can do nothing, or they can help ensure that in the 21st century the world's population peaks with fewer than 8 billion people, simply by committing the

financial resources to meet the needs of couple who want to have smaller families, later in life’.

Sustained commitment to the ICPD Program of Action will not only improve reproductive health and rights, but reduce poverty and contribute towards achieving environmental sustainability. The interdependent nature of poverty, environment and population is challenging, but not insurmountable. Based on 10 years experience in population, environment and development programs in Asia, the Pacific and Australia, Sexual Health and Family Planning Australia is committed to a rights-based approach which integrates these issues.

Integrating environment and population policies

The ICPD provides a framework for environmental organisations to develop policy and action on population issues, and for family planning organisations to take action on environmental issues. In 1999, with funding designed to help advance the ICPD agenda in Australia, Family Planning Australia drafted a policy framework for these purposes.

Drafted with environmental organisations in mind, the policy framework focuses on the relationship between population growth, human rights, poverty and the environment. Its underlying assumption is that stabilising population growth will help protect and preserve the natural environment. It provides a framework for environmental organisations to support ICPD strategies that have been shown to help stabilise population. These strategies are: education, mortality reduction and the provision of reproductive health and family planning services.

The policy framework recognises the complexity of the relationship between population and the environment with respect to unbalanced patterns of resource consumption. As population is growing fastest in the world’s poorest countries and resource consumption is highest among the wealthier but less populous countries, the policy demonstrates the value of a human rights approach. It states:

No one country alone ever bears the full environmental costs of its own population growth and/or unrestricted resource consumption. [Our NGO’s] policy enables us to demonstrate the links between reproductive health, poverty and population growth, and to advocate for developed countries to contribute to responsible reproductive health and population programs in developing countries as a contribution towards environmental preservation.

[Our NGO] can also use the human rights approach to population and the environment to advocate for greater controls to be placed over resource consumption—particularly in developed countries (e.g. greenhouse gas emissions)...[Our NGO] can also use this policy to support campaigns that would help reduce the economic pressures placed on developing countries to exploit their natural resources (e.g. Jubilee 2000 campaign to write off international debt) in the interests of conservation (Family Planning Australia 1999:4).

In terms of enacting these principles, FPA runs the ‘Common Ground’ series of workshops in collaboration with the Australian Reproductive Health Alliance and the Cairns and Far North Environment Centre. This development education initiative brings together environmentalists, family planning workers and other interested people in two-day seminars that explore population, environment and development issues and further develop resources for use by family planning and other NGOs to communicate these issues to their constituents.

The shared understanding between environmentalists and reproductive health workers is vital.

Putting the population/environment framework into action

Family Planning Australia is often asked why, as reproductive health specialists, we run rural poverty alleviation projects, provide water supply, arrange microcredit and include activities related to environmental sustainability. Our experience has shown that increasing women’s status, improving their access to economic opportunity as well as to education and health services are vitally important in improving reproductive health, slowing population growth, and providing better management of the environment.

In Vietnam and Laos rural women generally identify the need for economic security for their families as their first priority and the projects provide access to small loans, either for individual women or for the community as a whole. Women are then supported with agricultural and other training to help them turn their loans into sustainable, income-generating enterprises. The women collectively make decisions about the allocation of project resources to improve the environmental health of their villages and surrounding areas, and are provided with training to better manage local resources. Examples of environmental improvements provided with FPA support include community forestry initiatives, composting and recycling activities, latrines, smokeless stoves, rubbish disposal and recycling grey water.

As women’s ability to control their fertility impacts on their ability to participate in economic activity, training and community life, it is in this context that reproductive health initiatives are introduced through the projects.

In Cambodia and the Pacific, the program addresses interdependent population and development objectives outlined in the ICPD Program of Action by helping to enhance women’s status and eliminate gender-based violence through comprehensive sexual and reproductive health training programs. The training program is based on adult learning principles and uses participatory training methods to enhance participants’ understanding of anatomy, physiology, contraception and sexually transmitted infections, as well as the psychosocial aspects of sexuality and sexual health. The training includes skills building components in communication, negotiation and relationship building skills.

Lessons learned from implementing the ICPD Program of Action

Our experience in implementing the Program of Action in Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and the Pacific has shown clearly the need for:

- project models that are flexible to individual community needs;
- staff, where possible, able to speak the local languages;
- going slowly and developing trust with the reproductive health worker; and
- getting permission from communities to deliver adolescent reproductive health training.

Implementing programs that integrate population, environment and development and alleviate poverty is challenging, but not impossible. What is required, but often sadly lacking, is the political will to do so.

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