

Linking Environment, Women and Population



UNFPA

United Nations
Population Fund

FACT SHEET

PROMOTING REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH SAVING WOMEN'S LIVES

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Overview

Population, poverty and pollution are linked in a complex web of interactions. Without doubt, the health of Earth's environment is closely related to demographic trends and patterns of consumption and waste. But generalizations about the negative effects of population growth on the environment have fostered misinterpretations.

Demographically stable developed nations are now the driving force in global environmental degradation. They are responsible for most of the harmful emissions and generate the bulk of the world's wastes. With 20 percent of the global population, developed nations account for 85 percent of private consumption. In contrast, the world's poorest 20 percent

account for only 1.3 percent of private consumption. A child born in the developed world has an ecological impact equivalent to more than 30 children born in the least-developed countries.

But poverty itself can also have a powerful effect on the environment. When the poor do not have the technologies, knowledge and rights required for sustainable development, their search for basic needs of food, fuel and water can do significant damage to natural resources.

Clearly, basic human needs are not being met now. More than one billion people lack access to clean water, and almost half of Earth's population does not have basic sanitation. Eight hundred million people are chronically malnourished, and two billion people lack access to enough safe and nutritious food for a healthy life. Food production will need to double by 2025 to keep pace with population growth and human needs.

Too often, talk of sustainable development focuses disproportionately on demographic issues, implying that stable population numbers are a requirement for sustainable development rather than a result of it. In fact, meeting basic human needs is essential to achieving both a stable population and sustainable development.

A new, more integrated approach was developed in 1994 at the historic International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD). The ICPD forged goals for human rights and health, equality and environmental protection, and economic and social justice as the means of ensuring a better quality of life and sustainable future for all. This hopeful vision recognized that economic, social and environmental progress

all are critical, interrelated elements of a comprehensive approach to population, environment and development.

The ICPD underscored the need to empower women as full partners in sustainable development. In most countries, women are responsible for family health, raising children, caring for the sick and elderly, and meeting basic family needs. Women gather the water and wood for cooking, grow household crops, and tend to livestock. Women are therefore most affected by environmental change. Women and girls account for two-thirds of the yearly deaths associated with air pollution—two million in all. But with rights and opportunity, women are effective conservationists, efficient producers of goods and active promoters of family health. Ensuring women's rights around the world is basic human rights policy—and good for the environment.

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) provides major assistance toward sustainable development, including:

- Support for universal access to comprehensive reproductive health services for all by 2015, and efforts to stem the global HIV/AIDS pandemic.
- Assistance to prevent maternal mortality, consistent with the Millennium Development Goal of reducing maternal mortality by three-quarters by 2015.
- Advocacy for women's rights and opportunities.
- Technical assistance to enhance global understanding of the links among population, environment and development, and to produce integrated national plans to achieve sustainable development.

—August 2002