

Poverty

Today's \$40 trillion global economy is characterized by dramatic developmental differences and stark contrast among the world's 6.2 billion inhabitants.

Global demographic divides and consumption chasms perpetuate poverty and degrade the environment. Addressing these inequities and enhancing the quality of life for current and future generations are among the central aims of sustainable development.

Population, Poverty and Pollution

Population, poverty and pollution are linked through complex interactions. Without doubt, the health of Earth's environment is closely related to both demography and consumption patterns. But generalizations about the negative effects of population growth on the environment have long caused misunderstandings.

Wealthy developed nations with stable population levels are now the driving force behind environmental degradation. Developed nations release most of the harmful emissions affecting the environment and generate the most waste. With 20 percent of the population, developed nations account for 86 percent of private consumption.

In contrast, the poorest 20 percent of global population accounts for only 1.3 percent of private consumption. A child born in the developed world will have an ecological impact equal to that of more

than 30 children born in developing countries. But poverty can also have serious environmental consequences. Without the technology, knowledge and rights needed to achieve sustainable development, poor people may severely damage the environment in their quest for food, fuel and water.

Three billion people live on less than \$2 per day. More than one billion people lack access to clean water, and almost two billion do not have basic sanitation. Two billion people do not have access to modern energy services. Basic health is elusive as well: 800 million people are chronically malnourished and two billion people lack food security (access to enough safe and nutritious food to maintain a healthy life). Food production will need to double in coming decades in order to keep pace with population growth and human requirements.

Too often, discussions of sustainable development focus disproportionately on demographic issues, implying that a stable population size is a requirement for sustainable development rather than a result of it.

Demographic Dimensions of Poverty

There are close correlations between persistent poverty and rapid population growth. Fertility rates are highest in the poorest countries. And rapid population growth constrains economic progress by creating an age structure weighted heavily with dependent young. Population pressures and

environmental degradation cause the rural poor to migrate to urban areas, overwhelming infrastructure and creating new economic and environmental challenges.

Abundant evidence shows that slowing population growth helps nations achieve economic growth. Since the 1970s, developing countries with slower population growth have achieved greater gains in productivity, more savings and enhanced development. Countries that invest in basic health, education and social progress are the ones achieving major economic progress.

Poverty and Gender

Poverty's face is feminine. Women account for as much as 70 percent of the world's poor. Traditional women's work—caring for children, cooking, household chores, tending to livestock and subsistence crops—goes unpaid. And women are particularly affected when poverty and resource degradation combine, making basic resources like wood and water scarcer and more difficult to collect.

Women are also denied many opportunities that might help them contribute more to economic progress. The gender gap in education, for example, means that 60 percent of children out of school are girls. Women often lack certain rights—to own and/or inherit land, to acquire credit—essential for conservation and opportunity. Women also bear particular health burdens, especially related to childbearing. Pregnancy is the greatest threat to the health of reproductive-age women in developing countries.

Investing in Health, Fostering Sustainable Development

Where residents of wealthy nations enjoy a life expectancy of close to 80 years, those in

developing nations can expect to live only about 50 years. Women in the poorest countries face a risk of dying in pregnancy that is 600 times greater than those in industrialized nations. Something as basic as sanitary conditions and a skilled attendant at childbirth are a faraway dream for most of the world's poor.

Investments in health, including reproductive health, are central to sustainable development. Most of the Millennium Development Goals adopted in 2000 are related to basic and reproductive health. These include investments in education; child survival and maternal health; and stemming the global HIV/AIDS epidemic. Basic health makes better parents, more productive workers and more successful stewards of natural resources.

Improved reproductive health services will help lower fertility, temporarily lower dependency ratios and raise the relative size of the workforce. Decades of social and economic research have demonstrated that investments in reproductive health are among the most cost-effective for development.

At the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in 1994, nations agreed on the costs of a package of reproductive health and related programs: \$18.5 billion in 2005, \$20.5 billion in 2010 and \$21.7 billion in 2015. To date, only about \$10.5 billion is being mobilized annually. As of 2000, developing countries are contributing 75 percent (\$8.6 billion) of what they agreed, while developed countries are contributing only 40 percent (\$2.6 billion) of their agreed-upon share.¹

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Source: United Nations Population Fund, *The State of World Population 2001—Footprints and Milestones: Population and Environmental Change*, UNFPA, New York, 2001, except as noted below.

¹ Commission on Population and Development, *Report of the Secretary-General: The flow of financial resources for assisting in the implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development*, New York, February 11, 2002, pages 1-2