

People's Rights, Planet's Rights

Holistic Approaches to a Sustainable Population

Today there are over 7 billion humans on earth. While population growth rates have slowed, there are still 80 million people added to the planet every year, and the UN projects a *mid-range* global population increase to 9.6 billion by the year 2050. With positive action, we can limit that number to 8 billion and avoid the human and environmental degradation that will accompany such an increase. In the developed world and emerging economies, it is about ever-increasing, unprecedented levels of consumption. Elsewhere, it is about lifting 1.3 billion people out of extreme poverty and meeting the need of 222 million women for voluntary family planning. Around the world it is about empowering women and respecting human rights.



Orissa Tribal Empowerment & Livelihoods Programme trains women and youth to become barefoot solar engineers.*

How can we balance population growth and the health of the planet while promoting fairness and equality, and while protecting the rights of human beings as well as nature?

Key to keeping population numbers closer to the UN's low-end projections are:

- ▶ promoting women's rights and empowerment;
- ▶ curbing consumption and reducing inequalities;
- ▶ addressing the rights of youth;
- ▶ rethinking how we define economic growth; and
- ▶ living in balance with nature.

Women's Empowerment

The best solution for women and families is to invest in women and girls – through family planning and reproductive health, education, general healthcare, land rights, improved gender equality, greater participation in decision-making, and economic development. This is the answer to significantly slow population growth and improve

lives. Furthermore, investing in programs to alleviate poverty, when combined with empowering women to make their own choices in family planning, will help stabilize population growth, which has often contributed to rapid improvements in economic conditions and overall quality of life.

Empowered women can better support their families and communities, take care of their local environment, and adapt to climate impacts.

In Rwanda, the government increased domestic spending on health by improving its national financial system. This included a model national community-based health insurance system, promotion of the private health sector, and community participation. This commitment to voluntary family planning quadrupled Rwanda's modern contraceptive prevalence

rate from 10 percent to 45 percent in 2010, and total fertility rate decreased from 6.1 percent in 2005 to 4.6 percent in 2010. The total fertility rate (or the *average number of children per woman*) in Rwanda is approximately 4.6.

Consumption and Inequality

The unsustainable consumption levels of the wealthiest 10 percent of the world's population put enormous stress on the planet. The U.S. has approximately 5 percent of the world's population but uses over 25 percent of its resources. For the 21 percent of the global population who live on less than \$1.25 a day, the most pressing issue is poverty.

We need to tackle poverty as well as unsustainable consumption. A sustainable balance between people and resources can be achieved by: 1) using resources better; 2) addressing equity/ensuring basic needs are met

for all people; 3) choosing a slower growth path.

Rights of Youth

The largest number of youth entering reproductive age live in the developing world where access to family planning and reproductive health services is very low. In some areas of the world, young women (ages 15–19) are twice as likely to lack access to contraceptives they desire as women over the age of twenty.

When the sexual health and reproductive rights of youth are addressed, it promotes better health, provides educational and in turn economic opportunities, and ability to care for the environment in the face of ecological challenges.

Ensuring that young people have access to family planning and sexual, and reproductive health services has far-reaching benefits. In addition to reducing unintended pregnancies, family planning is a key strategy to protect the health of adolescent girls, decrease maternal deaths, and reduce the number of abortions.

Rights of Nature

Given the reality of population growth, climate change, finite resources, and a planet already

extended beyond its carrying capacity, the need to find sustainable solutions is urgent. Successfully addressing global problems will require a change in our way of looking at the world. One paradigm-shifting concept is recognition of the rights of nature. This construct is a good way to bridge the concerns of environmentalists, human rights and women's rights activists, and those concerned about stabilizing population growth.

Rights of nature laws eliminate the authority of a property owner to interfere with the functioning of ecosystems and natural communities that depend upon that property for their existence and flourishing. They do not stop all development; rather they stop development and use of property that interferes with the existence and vitality of those ecosystems. Respect for the rights of nature is the foundation for truly sustainable development.

Rights of nature has been recognized in the state constitutions of Bolivia and Ecuador and by more than two dozen municipalities in the U.S.

New Economy

There is increasing concern on the consequences of continued economic growth and population growth in a world of shrinking and finite resources, as well as the

impact of such growth on quality of life. Conventional economic wisdom holds that global growth can continue forever, yet the reality of resource constraints is challenging this mantra.

Implementing new ways of measuring growth that include the well-being of humans and the environment is one solution. This includes measures such as Genuine Progress Indicator and Gross National Happiness. Another solution is an economic system in balance with people and the planet, such as a steady state economy or true cost economy.

Conclusion

How do we build the future we want?

We must learn to live within our means and our planetary limits. Society should recognize resource limits, act together to move past unsustainable levels of economic growth, and respect the rights and well-being of all. The best way to achieve this and positively address population growth is to support global initiatives and policies that promote the rights of women and youth and reduce poverty and inequality. It is urgent that we consider new (and old) concepts that protect people, nature, and the earth that we share.



* Picture credit: <http://inhabitat.com/indias-barefoot-solar-engineers-are-building-a-brighter-future/>

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