

STATE OF THE WORLD 2012

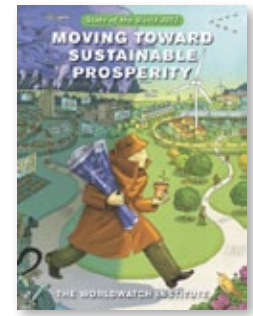
Moving Toward Sustainable Prosperity

POLICY BRIEFS

Chapter 9

Nine Population Strategies to Stop Short of 9 Billion

Robert Engelman



KEY MESSAGES

- ▶ As the world's population continues to climb, there is concern about the future availability of resources. Implementing measures to curb population growth would help ensure that sustainable prosperity is attainable for all.
- ▶ Because of many religious and cultural constraints, finding an ethical solution to population growth is critical. Human rights must be considered when drafting policies to reduce population growth. Ultimately, women should be able to freely make childbearing decisions.
- ▶ The issue of population growth should be addressed by creating smart policies that regard human rights, promote education, and reflect the true costs of having children.
- ▶ By considering the issue from multiple angles, population growth could be curbed so that the world never reaches 9 billion people, but stabilizes at a lower, more manageable level.

THE PROBLEM

According to the United Nations, world population reached 6 billion at the end of 1999. In just 12 years, another 1 billion people have been added to the Earth, with global population reaching 7 billion in October 2011. Demographers project that population growth will climb to 9 billion by the middle of this century. Given current trends in climate change, food production, and energy supplies, confronting population growth is critical to the future sustainability of the planet. Due to a variety of ethical concerns, population has become a taboo topic in politics and international affairs. Ending population growth through higher mortality rates is unethical and there is little public support for policies limiting reproduction.

MOVING FORWARD

A sustainable population can only be effectively and ethically reached by empowering women to become

pregnant only when they themselves choose to do so. Nine policies to stop population growth can be grouped into three categories—rights, education, and policy—that together may effectively halt population growth before 9 billion:

- ▶ *Rights.* Human rights should be at the center of any initiative to effectively cut population growth. Laws and customs that institutionalize gender inequality should be revised. Currently, more than 40 percent of pregnancies worldwide are unintended. Surveys conducted by the U.S. Agency for International Development over the past several decades have shown that in almost all developing countries, women express a desire for fewer children than men want, as well as fewer children than they have. A comparison study in 2011 found significant correlation between lower rates of childbearing and a higher presence of gender equality in the society.

Since the rise of contraceptive use in the early 1960s, the average family size worldwide has decreased. Providing universal access, for both sexes, to safe and effective contraceptive options could help continue that trend. Currently, in developing countries alone, an estimated 215 million women would like to avoid pregnancy but are not using effective contraception. While access to effective contraception will not eliminate population growth by itself, it is a necessary tool for personal fertility control. Growing demographic evidence shows that global population could peak and gradually decline before 2050 if all women could time their own pregnancies according to their desires.

- ▶ *Education.* Guaranteeing education to all children, especially girls, through secondary school could be a significant step toward eliminating population growth. In 2004, researchers from the World Bank estimated that with each year of completed secondary schooling, women's average fertility rates are 0.3–0.5 children lower. On average, educated women have fewer children, and have them

later in life. Education gives girls and boys healthy life skills and allows girls to explore career options beyond motherhood.

Age-appropriate sexual education helps youth understand how their bodies work and how to abstain from unwanted sex. Appropriate sexual education has an important role in reducing unwanted pregnancies. In the United States, data show that exposure to comprehensive sexual education programs tends to delay becoming sexually active and increase contraception use. In addition to sexual education, youth need education on how human development and the natural environment interact. Youth worldwide, but particularly in developed countries, should be aware of the impacts that their childbearing decisions have on the world.

- ▶ **Policy.** Policymakers, while maintaining human rights, should frame policies that make people realize the costs of an increasing population. Any financial benefits regarding reproduction should be aimed at the status of parenthood, instead of on the number of children parents may have. In some northern European countries, for example, new parents of both sexes are given mandatory paid leave, focusing the financial benefits on being new parents. Policies that subsidize high fertility rates, such as the U.S. policy of providing a tax credit for each child under 18 without limit, might inadvertently boost reproduction rates.

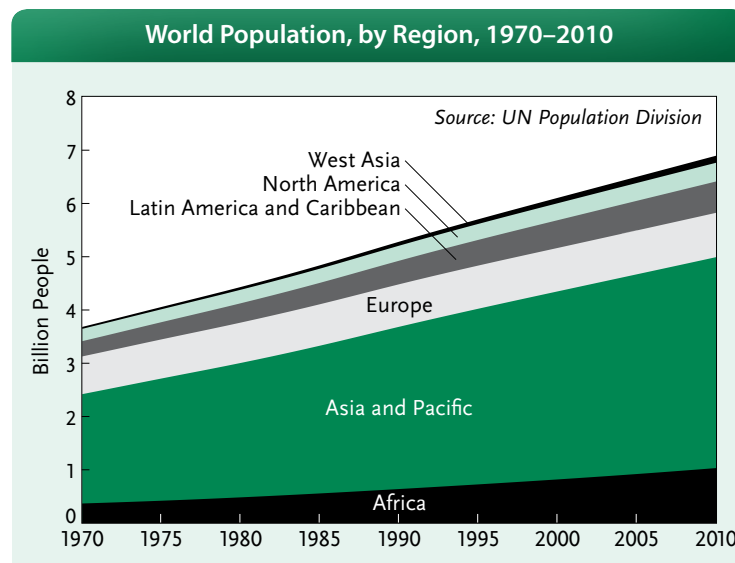
A difficult, but necessary, policy to implement is

the internalization of environmental costs, particularly in developed countries. Large environmental footprints should face some economic constraints. Internalizing the environmental costs of another person may help families make responsible decisions regarding the number of children they want.

LOOKING AHEAD

Little by little, population growth can be curbed through promoting reproductive rights for all humans, ensuring adequate education for boys and girls, and financially realizing the environmental costs of population growth. As the current population ages, political leaders, fearing a shrinking working base, should not exacerbate the problem by offering incentives to have more children. Instead, necessary social adjustments should be made to increase labor participation and engage the older community.

Many of these policies are being used around the world, but implementation is slow. Stabilizing population growth will, by necessity, take a long time. But by following a multi-dimensional approach, world population might indeed stop growing well short of the 9 billion so many believe is inevitable. The fertility declines that could bring a population peak at around 8 billion before the middle of this century, with no increases in death rates, are not unimaginable. If this were to occur, a truly prosperous and sustainable global society would be one long stride closer than ever before.



This brief is based on Chapter 9, “Nine Population Strategies to Stop Short of 9 Billion,” by Robert Engelman, published in Worldwatch Institute’s *State of the World 2012: Moving Toward Sustainable Prosperity*.

To order a copy of the report, visit www.worldwatch.org/stateoftheworld2012.

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