

Recognizing and communicating relationships among population dynamics, sexual and reproductive health and rights, climate change, and the environment

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A discussion paper co-authored by Sono Aibe, MHS; Joan Castro, MD; Lynne Gaffikin, DrPH; Karen Hardee, PhD; Charles Kabiswa, MPM; Clive Mutunga, MA with several other experts and scholars

The authors are members of the long-standing Population-Health-Environment Policy and Practice Group, who bring over 100 years of combined experience around the globe on SRHR, sustainable development, climate change, and environment. We have long embraced intersectional approaches to solve global challenges, and we enthusiastically welcome a wider appreciation of the intersections between population dynamics, health, human rights, gender equity, livelihoods, sustainable development, and global environmental change, towards greater resilience, equality, ecosystem health and human well-being. We would like to ensure that the long history, messages, and achievements of SRH programming, conducted historically under the label of “family planning” around the world, are not undermined and discredited, and that voluntary family planning continues to be recognized as an important component of gender justice as we strive for global sustainable development.

As the climate, poverty, gender inequality, and environmental crises become ever more acute, and the urgency of finding and implementing solutions is upon us, there are increasing voices around the world (many of whom are women and young people from low- and middle-income countries) recognizing the intersection of comprehensive SRHR, social and climate justice, and environmental sustainability.

We, as practitioners, experts, advocates, and researchers, affirm our convictions that:

- Comprehensive SRHR upholds the ability to decide whether, when, and how often to have children as a fundamental human right.
- Comprehensive SRHR—in particular access to voluntary, rights-based family planning—is linked to wide-ranging multisectoral benefits at the individual, family, and population level, with demonstrated benefits tied to each of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- Population dynamics and demography cannot be divorced from consideration of the impacts of access to comprehensive SRHR. Population dynamics go beyond population growth; they include complex interplays of patterns of human movement and interaction that help us understand development and other societal outcomes, as well as human impacts at a planetary level.
- Individual benefits of access to voluntary, quality, and rights-based family planning include improved maternal and child health, improved economic and educational outcomes for women and families, and increased individual and household resilience to shocks (including climate-induced shocks such as changes to agricultural, freshwater, and marine resources productivity; extreme weather events; drought; and sea level rise, among others).
- Population-level benefits of access to voluntary, rights-based family planning include changes in demographic makeup that are foundational for attaining a demographic dividend, improved gender equity, women’s participation in education and in the workforce, and ensuring births are planned, which at the community level can help ensure availability of local natural resources for future generations.

- Population dynamics and its study, demography, play a role in climate change. Indeed, population is a variable in climate models. However, we recognize unequivocally that consumption in high-income countries and continued reliance on fossil fuels are the primary drivers of climate change, and thus are the foremost targets for climate mitigation activities. We also fully support the urgent need for comprehensive climate finance to flow from high-income countries to low and middle-income countries (LMICs) for the three pillars of mitigation, adaptation, and loss and damage.
- Over 200 million women today in LMICs are in need of access to modern contraception as their basic health right, yet it is grossly under-funded along with other SRH services.
- Meeting every person’s needs for comprehensive SRHR, including voluntary and rights-based family planning, is a global priority to ensure health and human rights. Furthermore, SRHR also generates cascading benefits across sectors, including the potential for reducing climate impacts (particularly in high-income countries), when the aggregate impacts of population dynamics are considered.
- Family planning itself is *not* a climate change mitigation strategy (especially in low-income countries where per capita emissions are very low) but a resilience building and adaptation strategy. When people everywhere can exercise bodily autonomy about whether and with whom to have sex, exert control over their fertility through the realization of universal access to SRHR, and ensure all births are planned, *the end result* of slower population growth can contribute to a long-term reduction in global emissions through global demographic shifts. Disparaging contraception and family planning run counter to achieving universal access to SRHR.
- Successful advocacy across sectors is aided by using relevant entry points for those sectors. Population is a variable in climate and natural resource models. Access to sexual and reproductive healthcare is consistently worse in rural areas in low-income countries, where conservation and sustainable livelihood programs most often take place. As in the past, family planning is a way to bring broader SRHR issues to climate and biodiversity actors, inviting more people (especially men) to the table to support SRHR.
- By using the language of family planning as an entry point and talking about the unmet need for contraception and related reproductive health services, we are able to bring conservation organizations on board to support broader SRHR and gender justice issues.¹
- To our knowledge, no historical harmful and abhorrent population control policies and reproductive abuses were carried out with a primary goal of environmental conservation or climate change mitigation. Nor are there significant credible organizations today advocating for SRHR as an explicit means of reducing population growth for climate mitigation; to be clear, we do not support policies or organizations that advocate for limiting births as a climate mitigation strategy. Without denying or minimizing the horrors of past abuses, we encourage embracing a nuanced recognition of the multiple, intersecting benefits of meeting global unmet need for comprehensive SRHR, as a united community in the face of the existential challenge posed by the climate crisis.
- Human rights, gender justice, indigenous sovereignty, and bodily autonomy must be centered; while unequivocally rejecting racial or ethnic-based supremacy, colonialism, and patriarchy, as well as unsustainable resource extraction and exploitation by high-income countries. Over-

¹ The IPCC Sixth Assessment Report states that “Increased access to reproductive health and family planning services, contributes to climate change resilience and socioeconomic development through improved health and well-being of women and their children, including increased access to education, gender equity and economic status.”

consumption of the global elite is the predominant driver of the current climate emergency; fossil fuel companies must be held accountable, and resistance and advocacy for better policies must be financed.

- Family planning programs must not be side-lined by country governments and donors, leaving no options for marginalized people and families experiencing poverty but to forgo services and risk unwanted pregnancies, or to pay out-of-pocket for poor quality medicines. The benchmarks of “universal access to RH (and now SRHR)” have been missed repeatedly, first during the Millennium Development Goals and now with the SDGs.
- While we focus on women’s rights and bodily autonomy, numbers also matter (in addition to consumption, which is the primary factor) at a global level when we consider natural resources sustainability, the survival of other species, and the capacity of earth’s ecosystems to rebound.

Call to Action

- We call on funders outside of the health and development sectors, in particular the multilateral climate finance institutions, to join SRHR funders and invest meaningfully in SRHR in recognition of its cross-cutting impacts for health, development, climate, and the environment.
- Collectively, we need to create a world where consumerism and a never-ending accumulation of capital is not the basis of human happiness. We should build institutions and societies that can thrive regardless of whether population sizes are growing or declining.
- To achieve the full realization of bodily autonomy and comprehensive SRHR for all, we seek to build a strong, inclusive, and trust-based movement for social justice and human rights, standing on the strengths of a diverse set of partners working towards the same goal, with approaches and messaging that resonate with different audiences, cultural contexts, and policy frameworks.