
FACT SHEET

Sexual and Reproductive Health and Environmental sustainability



Preventing maternal mortality, improving health, enhancing gender equality and advancing sexual and reproductive rights are essential to reducing poverty and achieving sustainable development. All governments, including those wishing to address environmental sustainability, should pursue policies which will ensure universal access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health information, services and supplies.¹

Facts and Figures

The world's population has grown from 2.5 billion in 1950 to 6.2 billion in 2006. Fertility rates are highest in the poorest countries and among the poorest people in these countries. Poor people, especially women and girls, are less likely to have access to information and services, including the reproductive health supplies needed to space births and prevent unintended pregnancies. In Africa the population has grown from 215 million people in 1950 to 924 million in 2006 and is expected to more than double by 2050.² These countries are also among the most severely affected by soil and water degradation, food and water shortages.

As populations grow and demand increases the search for water, food, and energy resources and the resulting impact on the environment are calling sustainability and human development into question.

Why is Sexual and Reproductive health key to environmental sustainability?

- **Rural population growth** can, but does not necessarily, damage the environment. However limited access to fertile land often leads poor people to migrate and either settle in environmentally fragile areas or to urban areas. Constructive policies, including access to reproductive health services and supplies could significantly improve the lives of poor rural populations, namely by enabling them to avoid unintended pregnancies, mitigating the negative impact that persistent high fertility rates have on the environment and broader sustainable development.

- **Increasing urbanization** presents both a challenge and opportunity. Every day about 160,000 people move from rural areas to cities. Today almost half of all people live in urban areas. Many cities in developing countries face serious environmental health challenges and worsening conditions due to rapid growth, lack of proper infrastructure to meet growing needs, contaminated water and air, and poor waste management. Migrants are less likely to have access to health - much less sexual and reproductive health services and supplies – and it is therefore key to address their needs. There is also a belief that although cities concentrate poverty, they can also represent the best hope of escaping it.³
- **Access to information, education and reproductive health services and supplies** can empower women to make informed choices on the number and spacing of their children, protect themselves and their families from coercive sexual and related practices and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV and AIDS, and lead to lower birth rates and alleviation of pressure on the environment.

International commitments

The international community has consistently recognised links between sexual and reproductive health and the environment.

The 1992 Rio Conference: The UN Conference on Environment and Development, held in Rio de Janeiro, acknowledged that fast growing cities would soon be confronted by serious environmental problems.⁴ Participants highlighted the fact that support for family planning services could reduce the impact of population growth upon these problems. In this light, participants also recognised the importance of enabling men and women to plan and space their pregnancies and to choose to have smaller families. They called on governments to set up and improve sexual and reproductive health programmes offering information and services for and by women.⁵

¹ According to the Interagency List of Essential Medicines for Reproductive Health, Reproductive health supplies include: contraceptives, condoms, safe motherhood supplies, supplies needed for safe abortion, HIV/AIDS prevention supplies, etc

² African Union Commission (2006) The State of the African Population 2006. Population Dynamics: Implications for Achieving the Millennium Development Goals. Addis Ababa: African Union.

³ UNFPA (2007) State of the World Population Report 2007. Unleashing the Potential of Urban Growth. New York: UNFPA.

⁴ Article 5.3 of 'Agenda 21', the Rio Declaration, adopted at the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, 1992.

The 1994 ICPD breakthrough: The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) emphasises the numerous linkages between population and development. ICPD was explicitly given a broader mandate on development issues than previous population conferences, reflecting the growing awareness that population, poverty, human rights, patterns of production and consumption and the environment are so closely interconnected that none of them can be considered in isolation.

Millennium Development Goals: In 2000, the international community committed itself to cutting in half the number of people living in absolute poverty by 2015. To this end, world leaders adopted 8 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) intended as a holistic set of objectives to achieve sustainable development. MDG 5 on Improving Maternal Health, which has been formally amended to include the necessity of Universal Access to Reproductive Health⁶, is one of those goals, as is MDG 7 on Ensuring Environmental Sustainability.

What needs to be done: policy orientations

Within the policy framework set out in Rio, ICPD and the MDGs the following policy orientations are relevant:

- **The political commitment to SRHR is only a first step.** Effectively implementing ICPD and the MDGs at the national level in order to achieve tangible legislative and cultural changes, thus creating an enabling environment for change, remains a challenge in many developing countries. In the context of the Global Campaign for the Health MDGs and the attention accorded to environmental issues, it is also important to understand the essential links between these commitments.
- **Providing universal access to reproductive health services and supplies,** thus preventing unintended pregnancies, is likely to help stabilise rural areas, utilize those opportunities provided by urbanisation, enhance women's role as resource managers and balance natural resource use with the needs of the population, therefore managing the pressure put on the environment. Universal access to reproductive health services and supplies is also crucial in the response to HIV and AIDS.
- **Increase funding for reproductive health supplies.** Too much time and resources treating the secondary causes of environmental degradation (e.g. rising number of cars, industry), when we could be treating the primary causes (i.e. poor access to reproductive health services and supplies) much more efficiently. Donors and recipient governments must step up their financial contributions in order to achieve commitments already made.

- **Involving women:** In many developing countries, women bear the brunt of domestic resource management including the management of water and agricultural resources, wood and grazing areas. Environmentally sustainable development is therefore conditioned by women's involvement in decision making at all levels of production, income and employment. Access to reproductive health services and supplies would help prevent unintended pregnancies and empower women to work in the community to develop ways for efficient management of environmental resources. Also, women are most likely to be sensitive to the need for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights and related decision-making.
- **Focus on Africa:** Environmental sustainability and preventing adverse climate change are essential for improving livelihoods, peace and stability and for reducing poverty. The impacts of climate change will most probably affect Africa deeply, and will first be noticed locally, but action needs to be taken at all levels, local, regional and global. In the light of this, the African Union's State of African Population 2006 report clearly underlines the link between environmental sustainability and sexual and reproductive health.

It is widely recognised that to achieve the goals of development policy and programmes to reduce poverty and create more sustainable and equitable families, communities and nations, development interventions must focus on issues of equity, specifically, health and gender equity.

Countdown 2015 Europe

Countdown 2015 Europe is the label under which ten European NGOs will work together with their partners to ensure that development targets are met in relation to sexual and reproductive health and rights, including essential supplies, commodities and medicines. International commitments, including the ICPD Programme of Action and the Millennium Development Goals commit to international action on sexual and reproductive health within efforts to achieve sustainable development. It is now imperative that Europe takes a strong lead, in line with its stated commitments and comparative advantage, by delivering policies and resources that will ensure Universal Access to Reproductive Health services and supplies.

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⁵ Articles 5.49 & 5.51 of 'Agenda 21'. The Rio Declaration, 1992.

⁶ UN, 2007, Report of the Secretary General on the work of the Organisation: General Assembly. Official Records Sixty-second Session Supplement No. 1 (A/62/1), New York: UN.