Population Matters

Contribution to discussion of the Sustainable Development Goals

Over-arching Principle: All realistic goals must take account of the bio-physics of a finite planet. Indefinite growth in physical resource-consumption or the number of physical consumers being physically impossible, growth in both will certainly end at some point. It is vitally important for human civilisation that this is achieved humanely (sooner by fewer births through contraception) rather than by natural process (later by more deaths through famine, disease and war). (cf Maurice Strong, Secretary-General of first Rio Earth Summit 1992: "Either we reduce our numbers voluntarily, or nature will do it for us brutally").

1. Consideration of sustainable population goals

Population stabilisation/reduction should be a cross-cutting factor, affecting the feasibility of attaining all the Sustainable Development Goals. (cf Kofi Annan: "Population stabilisation should become a priority for sustainable development" – Key Recommendation, GHF 2009)

1. Potential goals contributing to population stabilisation/reduction by 2030 might include: population size; the direct drivers of population size - births (but not deaths); and the indirect drivers of birth rates, notably access to family planning, family size preference, education and female empowerment. While goals are presented in global terms, it is important that every individual country should seek to achieve them, since a global agreement on details is impracticable.
2. Clearly we should not seek to reduce the trend of increasing longevity.
3. Net migration increases per capita resource-consumption but does not necessarily reduce the birth rate. In principle, over-populated and/or over-consuming countries unable to provide the resources and eco-system services required to sustain a reasonable quality of life for their people should not export their surplus population, and thus increase pressure on the resources and eco-system services of other countries. Thus reducing migration flows should be a general goal; but given the complexity, we are unable to propose numerical targets.
4. Urbanization is happening at pace and tends to reduce the birth rate. Slower urbanisation (enabling infrastructure expansion to keep pace) provides a better quality of life for city-dwellers; but a numerical goal for this appears similarly infeasible.

2. The sustainable development goals

1. It seems important to have population size as a goal, to emphasize the benefit of stable numbers.

The UN DESA Population Division medium (most likely variant) projection for 2030 is 8.3 billion. This compares with a current fertility projection of 8.7 billion. Limiting numbers to 8 billion is a modest difference, but might be appropriate to establish the principle of the world population limitation goal. Moreover, it will still require a marked fall in the birth rate (see below).

SDG: Limit the world population to 8 billion by 2030.

2. The birth rate. The UN DESA Population Division projects (medium projection) the Net Reproduction Rate (daughters per women) to fall from 1.08 in 2005-10 to 1.02 in 2025-30. We should, however, ignore gender to avoid promoting gender selection.

SDG: Limit average total fertility rate to 2 children per woman.

3. In the climate change talks, we support contraction and convergence between rich and poor countries, with a population base year. (cf Kofi Annan: "Contraction and convergence with a population base year should be the basis for [climate equity]. Key Recommendation, GHF 2009). We also support convergence as a poverty alleviation goal, between and within countries, as this would tend to reduce the birth rate, as well as gross income inequality. Under the MDGs, the proportion of people living in extreme poverty i.e. under $1.25 per day fell by half from 1990 to 2010. However, a smaller proportion of a larger number can still be a larger number, as has happened in Africa; and it is numbers of people, not rates or proportions, that need ever-increasing food, water, soil, energy etc.

SDG: Reduce the number of people in extreme poverty by half, through economic growth in the poorest countries, contraction and convergence between countries, and reduction of income inequality within countries.

4. Child marriage is a human rights abuse, which damages children's health, undermines women's empowerment, and increases population growth rates.

SDG: Eliminate marriage under the age of 16.

5. Secondary education for women strengthens women's rights, and should form one of our goals. Gender parity of participation in primary education was achieved by the MDGs.

SDG: Gender parity in secondary education.

6. Employment of women is an important factor in reducing the birth rate.

SDG: Gender parity in employment rates.

7. Increasing workforce participation would serve to reduce the demand for additional births and is inherently more sustainable. Currently, 200 million people are unemployed (ILO).

SDG: Reduce the number of unemployed and under-employed by more than population growth.

8. Abolishing perverse incentives for increased chidbirths through universal, as opposed to targeted, subsidies for children seems appropriate. However, we should not oppose free or subsidized education and health care.

SDG: No payments or other benefits related to the number of children except for reasons of health, education and targeted poverty alleviation.

9. A goal for desired family size is essential. Social marketing should be used to encourage smaller families.

SDG: Desired family size of two.

10. Access to family planning

SDG: Universal access to a full range of free or affordable family planning commodities and services, including voluntary sterilisation.

11. Sex education is also important, though harder to measure its quality and prevalence.

SDG: Universal sex and relationships education in secondary schools, with particular attention to family planning.

12. Safe abortion is an essential contingency preventing unwanted pregnancy where contraception fails. With good family planning services and education, abortion should be legal and safe (illegal abortions cannot be safe), and increasingly rare.

SDG: Legal and safe abortion on demand.

13. Voluntary incentive schemes to limit family size have been rare, and results mixed. However, there is no moral objection to such schemes, provided they are wholly voluntary; and some have proved successful.

SDG: Assemble comprehensive research on the costs and effectiveness of the voluntary incentive schemes initiated hitherto, and disseminate the results, showing what has and has not worked well, by 2018.