

**Population and Adaptation to Climate Change:  
A Complementary Analysis for the UNFCCC**

**Prepared for the Conference of the Union of African Scientists**

**Ougadoudou, Burkina Faso 2011**

**Abstract**

It is clear from analysis of the NAPAs, from the Joint Position Statement of the Population and Climate Change African Forum (PACCAF), and indeed from common sense that population growth makes all problems of climate change adaptation (and mitigation) harder, and ultimately impossible, to solve. There is thus an urgent need for greater priority and hence resources for the solution - sexual and reproductive health programmes, including universal access to family planning and associated women's education and empowerment programmes, from both donors and recipients alike. But these will not be forthcoming until the scale, scope and urgency of the population growth problem is widely and formally acknowledged. A text recognizing the population/climate change link endorsed in the UNFCCC talks would be a great step towards sustainable populations in Africa. This paper traces efforts to secure such a text, the obstacles, and the range of supporting arguments; and makes a recommendation.

**Item 11.2: Population and Adaptation to Climate Change: a Complementary  
Analysis for the UNFCCC**

**Introduction**

I am not an academic, although I occasionally lecture on population and other environmental subjects at the University of the West of England, from whom I have an Honorary Doctorate in environmental science. Previously I was a senior British diplomat (Deputy High Commissioner in Zimbabwe, eight years in Africa and Asia, four at the UN), before resigning in fury in mid-career. For the last 20 years I have been an environmentalist, elected and appointed as a 'green' representative to numerous local, regional and national government bodies and NGOs. Having noticed long ago that all population growth exacerbates all environmental (and most social and economic) problems, I now chair Population Matters, an environmental charity and NGO raising awareness of the problem through advocacy, education and research.

**The 'Silent Lie'**

There is a paradox at the heart of the UNFCCC talks, top of the world's sustainability agenda, as indeed of all other international negotiations and most public statements on environmental topics such as the UN Biodiversity summit last year in Nagoya: that although individually all delegates will privately agree that population growth is a relevant factor, making all their problems of pressure

on the global environment harder and ultimately impossible to solve if numbers keep rising indefinitely, no Government will say so publicly, and none will table a text recognizing this fact. As a result, all the outcomes ignore population, and thus imply or pretend that the problems can be solved regardless of how many people there are, when they all know it is not true. They tell a 'silent lie'. Why?

The answers officials give when challenged over this vary widely, and reveal a wide variety of misunderstandings: "Yes, but it's a sensitive issue"; "Yes, but it's just too difficult"; "Yes, but population isn't on the agenda"; "Yes, but it's not our business – this is a [Biodiversity] conference"; "Yes, but population is too long-term an issue to be relevant – the problems are now"; "Yes, but it's solving itself, isn't it"; "Yes, but the UN say it will stabilize by 2050 anyway, at [9.2] billion"; "Yes, but we can't tell other people how many children to have"; "Yes, but the developing countries won't talk about it"; "Yes, but population is a distraction from the main issue"; "Yes, but no-one will accept a Chinese-style policy"; etc. There are of course obvious answers to all these; but some irrational fear of being thought controversial (and thus perhaps endangering a career) seems to be a common sub-text. They do not want to think about population, so they don't. The environmental and development NGOs take the same position, with the exception of Save the Children whose policy brief makes the obvious point that: "It would be absurd to deny that it will be infinitely harder to achieve [sustainable low-carbon prosperity] in a world of 10.5 than 8 billion".

Outside official circles, however, the topic appears much less sensitive. The Population and Climate Change African Forum (PACCAF), for instance, clearly represents a wider circle in East Africa, while recent polling commissioned by Population Matters shows that 80% of British people think the UK population is too high. Among the official excuses, however, was one serious point from a senior Western diplomat, who said: "Of course you're right. Population should be tackled in the UNFCCC. But don't expect the developed countries to take the initiative. The scope for malicious misinterpretation is too great. If the African Group took the lead, they would meet very little opposition."

### **Impact on Funding for SRH**

The 'silent lie' has, however, had a disastrous effect on the priority and resources allocated to sexual and reproductive health programmes, including family planning and the associated women's education and empowerment programmes. There are now 215 million women (and rising) with an unmet need for modern contraception; yet globally, aid for family planning totals a mere 10% of the Goldman Sachs bonus pot – a derisory figure - while EU aid for family planning is 0.4% of total EU aid, despite the fact that the other 99.6% will fail to achieve its aims if numbers keep rising indefinitely, overwhelming any development gains.

### **Need for Formal Recognition of the Population/Climate Change Link**

This will not change until the fact that population growth is a climate change issue is formally recognized. Once it is, it will rise up the international agenda; and will have a legitimate claim on far more funding than would be the case while it is marginalized as primarily a health and women's rights issue.

Recognition would also encourage other Government Departments to acknowledge that it affects them all – Finance, Planning, Agriculture, Energy, Environment, Industry, Education, and Security/Defence, as well as Health. Yet oddly, despite the many conferences held, and papers written about the obvious population/climate change link, no organization apart from Population Matters (PM) and its partner Sustainable Population Australia (SPA) - as far as I know - has yet actually proposed a draft text for adoption in the UNFCCC talks; and unless some Government Party tables a text and gets it discussed, population will remain ‘the elephant in the room’, present but not acknowledged; and funding will remain low.

### **The Population Matters Draft Text**

The evolution of our draft text dates from 2009, and the preparations for COP 15 at the Copenhagen Summit. Population Matters was asked to give a workshop on the population/climate change link at the Global Humanitarian Forum in Geneva. Having found no opposition to the principle, I discussed the idea with the Chairman Kofi Annan; who subsequently included in his Key Recommendations: “Contraction and convergence, with a population base year, should be the basis of [climate equity]”; and “Population stabilisation should become a priority for sustainable development”. Further discussions at a workshop in the pre-COP 15 talks in Barcelona confirmed that there was diffuse support from individuals for the principle of a text; and a draft was circulated at a pre-Summit Danish Government seminar at which Population Matters was the invited platform NGO.

It was clear from the beginning that any text would not be widely acceptable if it: focussed exclusively on population growth in developing countries, while absolving developed countries of their primary responsibility for climate change; conversely ignored mitigation altogether, focusing exclusively on aid for adaptation in NAPA countries; or ignored the central role of women and women’s rights. It was also clear that the population issue was not susceptible to incorporation in any treaty text, but would fit well within the Long-Term Cooperation Agreement.

After further refinement at a UNFPA workshop in February 2009, and subsequent consultation, the current draft was endorsed by PACCAF, and circulated by its members in Tianjin and Cancun. It reads:

***Recognises that population growth: increases total carbon emissions, especially in developed countries; increases the number of victims requiring adaptation measures, especially women in developing countries; inhibits economic development, notably in the least developed countries; thus worsens all problems of both mitigation and adaptation; and can be countered cost-effectively by meeting the unmet need for reproductive health care; by women’s empowerment, gender-equality, and the right to family planning; and by non-coercive population stabilisation policies in all countries.***

### **The Mitigation and Adaptation Benefits**

Population Matters' September 2009 report "**Fewer Emitters, Lower Emissions, Less Cost**", corroborated by the Centre for Global Development's Hewlett Foundation-funded report 2010 (i), both concluded that investing in family planning and women's education and empowerment would be more cost-effective than the conventional approach of investment in renewable technology as a complementary mitigation method; and both produced a provisional figure of about \$7 per carbon tonne abated. In later contacts with representatives of Governments and NGOs, these reports were much discussed as rational grounds for admitting a text. The 'Fewer Emitters' report also recognises that carbon emissions per person are far greater in OECD countries than in poorer countries; and recommends improved improved population policies in all countries.

Apart from the main calculations, the general points directly relevant to the UNFCCC are that investment in family planning and women's empowerment would:

- a) Mitigate 100% of the carbon and other environmental impacts not only of the non-existent additional people whose unwanted conception or birth would be prevented, but of all their non-existent descendants in perpetuity;
- b) Do so with very little, one-off embodied energy and cost, compared with the major embodied energy and cost in building, maintaining and replacing renewable energy technologies in perpetuity;
- c) Reduce the number of future victims of climate change, and the costs of adaptation for them;
- d) Encourage OECD countries, with their far higher per capita emissions, to introduce non-coercive population restraint policies too, as an additional cost-effective way of reducing their own carbon tonnage and thus helping to fund their own adaptation in their own long-term interests;
- e) Enable all countries with active population stabilization policies to take credit at the UNFCCC for their mitigation contribution, as China has already done
- f) Give the entire negotiation at least the possibility of actually succeeding in stabilizing climate (which is impossible with ever-increasing numbers);

#### **Additional Indirect Benefits**

Increased investment in family planning and women's empowerment would also achieve a large number of significant indirect benefits, which appeal in different ways to different 'players'. These include the facts that such investment would:

- a) Take a major step towards stabilising human numbers at, and/or reducing them to, a level planet Earth can sustain in the long-term;
- b) Reduce the scale of all future environmental problems, including: the effects of peak oil; deforestation; freshwater shortages; soil erosion and desertification; the mounting food crisis; declining fisheries; loss of biodiversity; rising waste and pollution; ocean acidification; and depletion of all finite resources - all of which would be easier to solve with fewer people, and ultimately impossible to solve with ever more; (*"The fewer we are, the lower our impact"*);
- c) Reduce the pressures contributing to: growing conflicts over land and ever more scarce resources; poverty; mass migration; under- or

unemployment; urban stress; crime; and mental health problems; (*The more we are, the less for each*’);

- d) Free more capital from investment in renewable energy generation to invest in: energy conservation technology; marine and other research; flood defences; climate resilient agriculture; sustainable water resources; social adaptation to lower energy consumption in OECD countries; and all other adaptation programmes;
- e) Empower the poor women of the world to take control of their own fertility, as a necessary pre-condition for any wider empowerment;
- f) Alleviate poverty and increase development through improvements in health, nutrition and education for women and children;

In any case, on a finite planet human numbers must stop growing at some point, either earlier through fewer births (contraception backed by non-coercive policy), or later by more deaths (the natural controls of famine, disease, and predation/war). Indefinite growth is not an option.

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

The case for formal recognition of the population/climate change link in the UNFCCC framework is extremely strong, and would result in increased resources for SRH programmes. But to secure this recognition, a Government Party or group of Parties must table a text and actively seek agreement for it. The African Group, having the greatest interest in urgent increases in funding, and being invulnerable to malicious political charges, are in the best position to do this; and UAPS should encourage African Governments to promote an appropriate text at COP17 and/or later negotiations.

Roger Martin  
Chair, Population Matters

June 2011

(i) The Economics of Population Policy for Carbon Emissions Reduction in Developing Countries - Working Paper 229: David Wheeler and Dan Hammer: 2 November 2010