

Joining forces across sectors to meet the unmet need for family planning

Objectives: Since the 1994 Cairo conference on Population and Development, the liberty of women and couples to decide freely on the number and timing of their children is widely recognised as a human right. One of the consequences of this consensus, the necessity to provide universal access to modern family planning methods, has however proven difficult to realise. Despite the obvious beneficial impacts of generalised access to family planning services on maternal and child health, as well as on the economic, social and psychological well-being of individuals and communities, the number of women who don't have access to FP today is still estimated at 222,000. In some countries, the percentage of women who are willing to delay or avoid pregnancy but have no access to modern methods reaches 40%. Advocates for providing universal access to family planning are traditionally to be found in circles of health care and women's rights, and their efforts to raise funding and political support for their cause is often hampered by competition with other causes, many of them undoubtedly being of comparable importance. One of these is the preservation of the environment and the fight against climate change. In a world of scarce resources, competition is unavoidable, but identifying synergies between causes and joining forces across sectors may lead to broader support and more successful policies and programmes.

Methods: In this presentation, we explore the interrelatedness between meeting the unmet need for family planning on the one hand, and fighting climate change and environmental deterioration on the other.

Results: Population size is – together with lifestyle and use of technology – one of the main drivers of climate change. Reducing fertility and slowing down population growth have significant impacts on emission of greenhouse gasses, and one would expect that this is reflected in considerable attention and support from political and societal actors in the field of environment, for policies that are aimed at improving access to contraception. In practice however, the issues of family planning and demography are largely absent in the climate change debates. Similarly, population is an important stress factor on many natural resources and vulnerable ecosystems, but conservation activities rarely include family planning initiatives.

Conclusions: We conclude by pointing at opportunities for synergies and mutual reinforcement of environmental and demographic research, policy and action, and we plead for an integrated policy approach to tackle environmental and family planning issues.

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