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Ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all at all ages

Statement submitted by Population Connection, Population Matters, Population Media Center, non-governmental organizations in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council¹

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

¹ The present statement is issued without formal editing.

Statement

Our organizations — Population Connection, Population Matters, and Population Media Center — are deeply concerned about the increasing pressure of population growth, unsustainable resource consumption, and persisting gender inequality. We present new evidence that these issues will have serious consequences for global health and well-being.

We are alarmed funding shortfalls have led to stalled progress for women’s reproductive healthcare, and that the majority of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including those related to health and well-being, are far off track to be met by 2030. We recognize population growth as a driver of rising resource use and environmental degradation, pushing ecosystems past critical tipping points, which will disrupt billions of lives and livelihoods. We also fear the heightened epidemic and pandemic risks caused by increasing human-wildlife overlap driven by human population growth.

Through advocacy, education, and supporting partners on the ground, our three organizations are committed to addressing these challenges. We issue a joint call for increased international investment in integrated solutions that utilize the Population Health Environment (PHE), or One Health, approach, which encompasses action to end unmet need for family planning, ensure quality education for all, halt and reverse biodiversity loss, and improve climate resilience and adaptation for vulnerable communities.

Population growth will increase under-5 mortality rates

The number of under-5 deaths worldwide declined from 12.8 million in 1990 to 4.9 million in 2022, following years of hard work by the global health community. Published projections of future infant and child mortality rates follow this downward trend. Yet we are not on track to meet the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets of reducing global maternal mortality to fewer than 70 deaths per 100,000 live births, and under-5 mortality to fewer than 25 deaths per 1,000 live births. In addition, new research commissioned by Population Matters predicts that due to high population growth in the most climate-vulnerable low-income regions, there will be a reversal in the rate of child survival in these at-risk regions.

Findings

Population Matters’ new research predicts future infant and child mortality rates will be higher than currently projected by the United Nations. Our research incorporates climate-health effects, food insecurity driven by agricultural decline, and the pressures of population growth in the fastest growing regions into projections of future infant and child mortality rates.

Depending on future fertility rates, 3-5 billion children are projected to be born in sub-Saharan Africa between now and the end of this century. This region is the world’s poorest and one of the most vulnerable to climate change. In addition, agriculture is the primary source of income, employment, and subsistence. Climate models predict more frequent extreme heat events, as well as intensified droughts and desertification of drylands, reducing the amount of arable land and posing an existential threat to the population dependent upon rain-fed agriculture.

Population Matters’ models project an average 60% increase in preterm births due to climate change. Preterm births are a major contributor to higher rates of infant mortality. Climate-health effects will disproportionately impact millions of infants and young children, particularly in climate-vulnerable regions, with children at greater risk of asthma, kidney damage, diabetes, heat stroke, and organ failure.

Previously projected declines in infant and child mortality are likely too optimistic, as they are based on

extrapolation of past demographic data with a ‘business-as-usual’ outlook and do not account for the effects of climate change-driven environmental degradation or continued population pressure on child survival. Deteriorating climate conditions and the resource pressures of increasing population will disproportionately affect children in the lowest-income nations, driving up mortality rates.

Family planning to improve health outcomes

SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality) include the basic right for women to exercise autonomy over their own sexual and reproductive health through universal access to family planning. Although contraceptive use has increased globally in recent decades, shortfalls in funding have contributed to there still being an estimated 257 million women of child-bearing age worldwide who have an unmet need for family planning. Projections suggest that by 2030, this number will increase due to population growth outpacing the expansion of family planning services.

Even though ending the unmet need for family planning is part of the UN’s SDGs, it has received relatively little attention. According to a World Bank report, satisfying 90% of the unmet need for contraception in 2015 would have averted 440,000 neonatal and 473,000 child deaths.

The importance of universal access to family planning cannot be understated. When individuals are empowered to choose smaller families, they can invest more resources and time in each child, improving health outcomes, reducing infant and child mortality, and benefiting the well-being of families and entire communities.

Population growth increases risk of zoonotic diseases

Biodiversity hotspots tend to be bordered and inhabited by resource-scarce communities with low reported access to family planning and primary healthcare. Population growth is a major driver of biodiversity loss in these settings, due to habitat loss caused by agricultural and urban expansion, overexploitation of wild species, and increased human-wildlife conflict. The rate of biodiversity loss has been so dire that scientists have declared a sixth mass extinction driven by human activities.

Human pressure on wildlife isn’t “just” a conservation issue; it’s also a significant health threat due to the greater risk of zoonotic disease transfer following increased human-wildlife overlap and interaction, including sharing local water sources and consuming wild “bush” meat. Around 75% of emerging diseases in humans are zoonotic and include highly infectious diseases such as mpox and avian flu, with some having the potential to cause global pandemics such as COVID-19. A study published this year found that overlap between human and wildlife populations is projected to increase across 57% of the Earth’s land by 2070 due to human population growth, with the largest increases in overlap in Africa and South America. Human encroachment on wildlife habitats and consumption of wild “bush” meat increases the risk of zoonotic diseases jumping the species barrier and causing another epidemic or pandemic.

Integrated solutions

Population Health Environment is an integrated approach that recognizes the interdependent links between local communities, their health, and the natural resources upon which they depend. PHE projects that provide voluntary family planning services and teach sustainable resource management alongside conservation efforts can meet communities’ primary healthcare needs, reduce population pressure on natural resources, conserve biodiversity, and reduce the risk of zoonotic disease transfer. Education is a core component of this integrated approach that can also foster greater climate resilience in vulnerable communities through teaching more sustainable practices (e.g. agroforestry) and introducing adaptive technologies (e.g. drip-irrigation).

Recommendations

- **Strengthening access to reproductive health services:** Our organizations advocate for increased global investment in family planning to close the gender funding gap. To meet the goal of zero unmet need for family planning, as recommended by the **2019 ICPD Nairobi Summit** and the **High-Level Commission** monitoring progress on the ICPD+25 commitments, it is imperative for governments to significantly expand their family planning programs. Funding family planning programs must be recognized as an essential measure to improve maternal and child health. Furthermore, scaling up family planning efforts must involve not only increasing the availability of contraceptives and reproductive health services but also fostering an environment that promotes **awareness, education,** and the **empowerment** of women and girls to make informed choices regarding their fertility and their future.
- **Empowering women and girls through education:** Investing in **girls' education** remains one of the most effective strategies for reducing **fertility rates, improving community welfare,** and alleviating **environmental pressures.** Education, healthcare, and employment opportunities for women drive countries' **demographic transitions** to low fertility and mortality rates. Educated women typically choose to have fewer children, have healthier children, and are healthier themselves.
- **Addressing societal norms:** We emphasize the need for **global cooperation** to challenge restrictive **cultural norms** and policies that limit **women's rights** and opportunities.
- **Embracing integrated solutions:** Countries should incorporate integrated PHE/One Health models into climate, conservation, and development plans and budgets. High-income countries should financially support the implementation of these integrated solutions in nations that lack the funds to do so.

At the 58th Session of the Commission on Population and Development (CPD58), we call for stronger partnerships between governments and the private sector to fund cross-sector integrated solutions to family planning and environmental conservation, to achieve a healthier, more sustainable future for all.
