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## Birth Control Could Help the Environment, but Not Quickly

Family planning could help reduce the pressure human population puts on the planet, but not for decades

ClimateWire

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This week, a group of researchers promoted a different kind of global approach to addressing climate change: voluntary family planning.

Though their proposal may raise eyebrows, researchers at the Population Reference Bureau and Worldwatch Institute say what they are advocating will both empower women and preserve the environment. They recently formed a joint working group of health, climate and population experts from around the world. They are drafting a report on how family planning could be incorporated into governments' environmental policy.

With an estimated global population of over 7.2 billion people, there is increasing concern that finite natural resources will no longer be able to keep up with increasing demands. According to a 2013 U.N. report, the global population is expected grow to 9.6 billion by 2050 and 10.9 billion by 2100.

Reducing population growth and lowering fertility will improve communities' resilience and adaptive capacity in the short term, as well as reduce greenhouse gas emissions. In the long term, population reductions could reduce the risk of climate impacts, according to the working group. It presented its proposals at a forum at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, D.C., yesterday.

"Far too often in the past, it has been approached as giving up freedom, rather than looking at family planning as creating greater freedom and greater happiness," said Alexander Ochs, director of the Climate and Energy Program at the Worldwatch Institute.

He described the working group's promotion of family planning as a "women-centered rights-based approach" that focused on the "urgency and right of determining the timing and spacing of having children."

Efforts to control fertility improve maternal and child health and welfare, while also conserving natural resources, he added.



Families wait for a food delivery in the malnutrition-prone Sahel region of Africa.  
 Photo courtesy of EC/ECHO/Anouk Delafortrie

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"This is not a new connection that we're making; even in Washington, these things are being discussed," said Jason Bremner, the associate vice president and program director of the Population, Health and Environment Program at the Population Reference Bureau. "Yet family planning benefits for climate change have not trickled into policy."

The speakers at the forum said that while the concept of governments implementing voluntary population control measures used to be more controversial, more countries are recognizing that growing populations are putting a strain on natural resources, food security and human health.

### **Gaps in implementation, funding**

In its latest report, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) included a section on the relationship between family planning and climate, stating that a growing global population is one cause of increased greenhouse gas emissions. The report cited a study estimating a 30 percent decrease in emissions by 2100 if women without access to birth control were provided with contraceptives.

In particular, the IPCC identified the Sahel region of Africa as being especially in need of family planning efforts because of a combination of high fertility and high vulnerability to climate change in the area.

"This is important not only in poor countries, however, but also some rich ones like the USA, where there is unmet need for reproductive health services as well as high CO<sub>2</sub> emissions per capita," the 2014 report said.

Other countries are also recognizing the need for family planning. Among the 39 U.N. National Adaptation Programmes of Action, which identify priorities for adapting to climate change in the poorest nations, 37 connected population growth to climate change.

Six recognized family planning or reproductive health as a component of an adaptation strategy. But only two had actual projects in place, according to a presentation by Karen Hardee, a senior associate and Evidence Project director at the Population Council.

Still, lack of funding remains a barrier to project development, said Clive Mutunga, a family planning and environment technical adviser for the U.S. Agency for International Development.

"Now trying to link the policies into the programs is the challenge. We need to move forward to specific programs to implement on the ground," he said at the forum.

### **Soaring growth vs. ominous climate impacts**

Even if family planning is widely adopted across the globe, a recent study suggests that the effects on climate change will be minimal in the near term.

Researchers at the University of Adelaide in Australia found that even dramatic population reductions would not be enough to have much of an environmental effect for most of the 21st century.

They [published](#) their findings in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* on Tuesday.

Using scenario-based matrix modeling, the researchers tested what the global population would look like after a hypothetical catastrophe killed 2 billion people over a five-year period around 2060. They found that the population by the end of the century would still reach 8.5 billion by 2100.

A second scenario in which 6 billion people were killed around 2040 would result in a population of 5.1 billion in 2100.

The researchers wrote, "Even if the human collective were to pull as hard as possible on the total fertility policy lever (via a range of economic, medical and social interventions) the result would be ineffective in mitigating the immediately looming global sustainability crises (including anthropogenic climate disruption), for which we need to have major solutions well underway by 2050 and essentially solved by 2100."

"I hope this is taken as a wake-up call and a sobering reminder of how long we've neglected the population issue," said the study's lead author, Corey Bradshaw.

The computer modeling was not meant to predict what the population is likely to be in coming decades, but rather to see how quickly the population size could respond to likely and unlikely scenarios, according to Bradshaw, the director of ecological modeling at the University of Adelaide.

### Long lead times for solutions

He pointed out that population growth has been so dramatic in recent decades that roughly 14 percent of the humans who have ever lived are alive today. At the same time, people are consuming more per capita than ever before in the world's most affluent nations.

The researchers predicted that it would take about 100 years to halve the population and perhaps many more years after that to reverse the environmental impacts. "We don't have that much time; we have decades," he said.

A more immediately effective approach that could reduce environmental harm would be policies and initiatives focused on curtailing the consumption of natural resources, according to the researchers.

That is not to suggest that family planning is not an important strategy. If, for instance, the world adopted a policy of one child per woman by 2045, that would reduce the population by 3 billion.

More realistic measures could also produce tangible population reductions.

"If you could work slightly towards reducing unwanted pregnancies, that could be hundreds of millions of fewer people born," Bradshaw said.

Taken a step further, if the worldwide average fertility could be down to two children per woman by 2020, rather than the current 2.37 average, that would result in 777 million fewer people by 2050.

"That's nothing to sneeze at," he said.

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