

# Population should be on the Johannesburg agenda

High fertility rates continue to threaten both the environment and human well-being.

Sir— On 26 August, the United Nations (UN) World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg will consider strategies with a far broader mandate for action than the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. Population as a key component of sustainable development should figure prominently on the Johannesburg agenda. Yet, after four preparatory meetings for Johannesburg, the topic is still absent.

If we do not put the human population at the core of the sustainable-development agenda, our efforts to improve human well-being and preserve the quality of the environment will fail.

The Johannesburg Summit must heed the first principle of the 1992 Rio Declaration — that “human beings are at the centre of concern for sustainable development” — by taking full account of how population and society interact with the natural environment. This is one of the basic conclusions of the Global Science Panel on Population and Environment, an independent body of experts organized by the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA), the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population and the United Nations University.

Sustainable development aims at improving human well-being, particularly through alleviating poverty, increasing gender equity, and improving health, human resources and stewardship of the natural environment. Because demographic factors are closely linked to these goals, strategies that take population into account have a better chance of success.

The International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994 recognized that population policy should be oriented towards improving social conditions and expanding choices for individuals. The key recognition was that focusing on people — their rights, capabilities and opportunities — would have multiple benefits for individuals, for societies and for their sustainable relationship with the environment. Therefore, in Johannesburg, consideration of sustainable-development policies must include population growth and distribution, mobility, health impacts of environmental change, differential vulnerability, and the empowerment of people, especially of women.

Fertility decline in high-fertility

countries, by slowing population growth, can make many environmental problems easier to solve. It can also have important economic benefits through reducing the number of children relative to the working-age population, creating a unique opportunity to increase investments in health, education, infrastructure and environmental protection.

In high-income countries, the environmental impact of population growth and distribution must be considered jointly with high consumption rates. Even in countries where little growth is envisioned, unsustainable patterns of consumption have global implications for the environment and human well-being, and must be addressed with appropriate policies.

Hence, on the way from Rio to Johannesburg we must go through Cairo. Two key policies are needed: first,

investment in voluntary family planning and reproductive-health programmes; and second, education and empowerment, especially of women, in order to reduce fertility, enhance individual choice, contribute to greater environmental awareness and reduce vulnerability to environmental changes.

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