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New Security Beat

Family Planning and Environmental Sustainability Assessment Aims to Shed Light on Pop-Environment Link

August 4, 2014 By [Robert Engelman](#)



As global environmental change accelerates, understanding how population dynamics affect the environment is more important than ever. It seems obvious that human-caused climate change has at least something to do with the quadrupling of world population over the last 100 years.

But the evidence that slower population growth is good for the environment – logical as that statement may seem – has never been extensive, with conceptual models, empirical research, and data often lacking on key issues.

An ambitious new Worldwatch project, the [Family Planning and Environmental Sustainability Assessment](#), hopes to help redress this, shedding light on how increased access to voluntary family planning services can support environmental sustainability.

Assessing the Field

Arguments that family planning is environmentally beneficial mostly rely on its role in slowing population growth. For 40 years the IPAT equation (Impact = Population x Affluence x Technology) has been a useful teaching tool, but beyond this simplistic formula, the development of models and conceptual frameworks for population-environment connections has been limited.

Since the turn of the millennium, empirical research outputs have been few and far between

In the mid-1970s, some of the [Worldwatch Institute](#)'s first reports explored the connection between the environment and population dynamics, including women's status, girls' education, and family planning. By the early 1990s, [Population Action International](#) and some of the largest U.S. environmental organizations had small programs devoted to population and the environment. Around the same time, the population-environment link was firmly embedded in the Wilson Center's work through ECSP.

In the 1990s, a handful of important reports and papers made a reasonable case based on data that slower population growth could slow certain kinds of environmental degradation – for example, Nancy Birdsall, then of the World Bank, on [population and greenhouse-gas emissions](#), and Malin Falkenmark, a Swedish hydrologist, on [population and water availability](#).

Since the turn of the millennium, however, empirical research outputs have been few and far between. Even harder to find is data and other evidence for assertions that family planning helps improve the environment, whether through demographic pathways, non-demographic pathways (e.g., empowering women and girls to become better stewards of the environment or opening up educational opportunities that build appreciation of sustainability), or both.

Building a Network of Collaborators

Few if any researchers specialize in family planning and environmental sustainability combined. The linkage cuts across multiple disciplines in the social, biological, and physical sciences. Academia rarely rewards such holistic work. And although there has been an uptick in recent years in funding for community-building fieldwork related to population, health, and environment ([PHE](#)) programs, there remains no significant body of peer-reviewed literature assessing the effectiveness of PHE as a concept.

The Family Planning and Environmental Sustainability Assessment project aims to change this by identifying the strongest and most recent research on how increased use of family planning might strengthen or accelerate a transition to environmental sustainability, with a focus on work that is peer reviewed and published in academic journals. The project also seeks to build an international network of collaborators to assess the existing literature and advance new research on the linkage, with special emphasis on engaging researchers who are women and/or in developing countries.

[ECSP's latest film, *Scaling the Mountain*, follows a PHE program in action in Nepal](#)

To date, we have assembled a network of 20 collaborating researchers from 11 countries and a literature inventory of well over 200 reports and papers, most from peer-reviewed journals, that mention family planning or population along with environmental topics. Many of these papers involve mere mentions of the terms, but some examine the connections between them.

For example, one [paper](#) by Nigerian researchers and [another](#) by an Ethiopian author find correlations between household and family size and food insecurity. A [case study](#) of a small rural community by Ghanaian researchers suggests that gender matters significantly in how such communities can adapt to climate change. And a [paper](#) out of Canada pursues a rather novel aspect of the link, exploring how the use of hormonal contraception affects water quality and the health of aquatic species, and concluding that the net effect is positive due to demographic impacts.

Making the Link

We are also [building a conceptual framework](#) illustrating the many ways in which improved access to family planning services and increased use might contribute to the attainment of environmental sustainability. Despite the complexity of the draft framework, we're still missing many aspects. For example, where is consumption? As women give birth to fewer children, might their families

increase their consumption and thus counterbalance any gains to the environment from adding fewer people to the population? These are just two among the many questions we'll explore.

Few of the papers we've seen so far try to puzzle out how family planning or population-environment connections actually work

There has been a recent proliferation of output that at least mentions family planning or population in environmental contexts, much of it coming out of developing countries. But few of the papers we've seen so far try to puzzle out how family planning or population-environment connections actually work. Fewer still test hypotheses with data, randomized trials, control groups, cross-country comparisons, or other methodologies that can be replicated to falsify or lend further support to hypotheses. Moreover, little of the research we've seen explores micro-scale or non-demographic pathways from family planning to environmental sustainability.

While this may be a long journey, we're taking first steps to better understand the population-environment link and help build a research base supporting that understanding. We're speaking with researchers and think tanks in developing countries about the possibility of joining us in active partnerships to expand this work. The project is drawing growing interest from funders and accomplished researchers with diverse backgrounds.

Perhaps the most encouraging comment we've received, despite the hurdles, is "what you're doing is really important."

That much we do know.

Robert Engelman was president of the Worldwatch Institute from 2011 to 2014 and now directs the Family Planning and Environmental Sustainability Assessment. If interested in learning more about or working with the project, contact Yeneneh Terefe at yterefe@worldwatch.org.

Sources: Climatic Change, Developing Country Studies, Journal of Agricultural Extension and Rural Development, PLOS One, Population Reference Bureau, World Bank.

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