

Harnessing the positive impact of family planning on environmental sustainability to reduce the global unmet need for contraception.

Delacroix, Céline

PhD Candidate, University of Ottawa, Canada, cdela017@uottawa.ca

Well-established reproductive rights rest on the recognition of the basic right that all couples and individuals have the information and means to freely decide the number, spacing and timing of their children. Nonetheless, over 225 million women have an unmet need for contraception, and over 20 million women perform unsafe abortions each year. Progress on reproductive rights has been unacceptably slow, and numerous barriers to family planning exist, particularly for vulnerable groups such as migrants, refugees, and teenagers.

Reproductive rights and environmental sustainability have synergistic interests: access to family planning is a pathway to environmental sustainability, as one of its well documented effects is the lowering of fertility rates. However, because of the legacy of past population control programs characterized by human rights abuses and of the framing of reproductive rights as individual in nature, the global development, environmental and feminist movements are loath to recognize the family planning, population growth and environmental linkages.

In this paper, I stress that the absence of population dynamics considerations in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development may undermine the long-term progress towards the achievement of its goals. However, a window of opportunity to re-consider the linkages between family planning, population growth and environmental sustainability is created by the combination of the following factors: a) the need to advance reproductive rights and improve health outcomes; b) the prominence of environmental sustainability concerns on international policy agendas and; c) the scale of the global population growth momentum.

Next, I analyse in which ways the family planning movement can increase its prominence, funding, and legitimacy by re-considering these linkages and integrating environmental sustainability in its ideological framework. Examples of existing instruments integrating environmental sustainability in family planning are discussed, and include environmental conservation programs adopting what is known as a “Population, Health and Environment approach”, and National Climate Change Adaptation Programs of Action identifying family planning as a priority activity to respond to their urgent and immediate needs to adapt to climate change. Last, I integrate elements of social movement theory to review how the family planning movement could benefit from social change messaging addressing environmental sustainability.

Conclusion: The positive impact of family planning on environmental sustainability can play an important part towards reaching the Sustainable Development Goals 3.7 and 5.6, aiming to ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health-care services.