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Global Population Growth and Sustainable Development

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Given the intrinsic momentum of population growth, the range of plausible trajectories for the size of global population is quite narrow over the next few decades. For this reason, increased action by Governments to limit the growth of populations can do little to mitigate the forces of climate change between now and 2050. A lower birth rate over the next few decades could begin to have a significant impact on global trends only in the latter half of the century, after the current momentum dissipates. At the same time, in many low-income and lower-middle-income countries, rapid population growth remains a matter of concern.

*The following key findings are based on the report *Global Population Growth and Sustainable Development*, prepared by the Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA).*

Ten key messages

1. Rapid population growth is a common feature of the demographic transition.

Rapid population growth is a typical feature of the demographic transition from high to low levels of mortality and fertility. For many countries, this transition has already ended, and the population is growing slowly if at all; for many others, the demographic transition is still at an early or intermediate stage, and the population is growing rapidly.

2. Most of the world's future population growth will take place in developing countries.

Since the middle of the twentieth century, the world has experienced unprecedented population growth. World population continues to grow but is expected to peak around 2100 at a level of almost 11 billion. Most of this growth will take place in low-income and lower-middle-income countries.

3. Rapid population growth is both a sign of success and a challenge to be met.

Rapid population growth is a result of one of the greatest successes of social and economic development: the substantial lengthening of the average human lifespan due to improvements in public health, nutrition, personal hygiene and medicine. It is also the result of a failure to ensure that all people, everywhere, have the knowledge, ability and means to determine whether and when to have children.

4. Global population is expected to continue to grow rapidly over the next few decades.

Because of the momentum created by population growth in the recent past, it is unlikely that the reduction in global population increase over the next 30 or 40 years will happen substantially faster than already anticipated in the population projections of the United Nations.

5. Rapid population growth is both a cause and a consequence of slow progress in development.

Rapid population increase can exacerbate the challenge of ensuring that future development is both sustainable and inclusive. Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly those related to health, education and gender equality, can contribute to slowing global population growth.

6. Access to reproductive health-care services can accelerate social and economic development.

Ensuring that individuals, in particular women, can decide the number of children that they will have as well as the timing of their births can help to disrupt intergenerational cycles of poverty. Increased access to high-quality reproductive health-care services, including for safe and effective methods of family planning, can facilitate a drop in fertility and help to accelerate economic and social development.

7. A decline in fertility can create a window of opportunity for accelerated economic growth.

In countries with relatively high levels of fertility today, investments in education and health and the promotion of full and productive employment for all, including for women, can significantly increase the positive, but temporary, economic impact of a favourable age distribution created by a sustained decline in fertility (the “demographic dividend”).

8. Higher incomes contribute more to environmental degradation than population growth.

Whereas population growth magnifies the harmful impact of economic processes on the environment, the rise in per capita income has been more important than population growth in driving increased production and consumption and emissions of greenhouse gases. More affluent countries bear the greatest responsibility for moving rapidly to achieve net-zero emissions of greenhouse gases and for implementing strategies to decouple human economic activity from environmental degradation.

9. Developing countries require support to reduce future emissions and to develop sustainably.

Low-income and lower-middle-income countries need rapid and sustained growth of their economies to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. Wealthy countries and the international community can help to ensure that these countries receive the necessary technical and financial assistance so that their economies can grow using technologies that will minimize future greenhouse gas emissions.

10. Food systems must transform to feed a growing population and limit environmental damage.

While population growth is a key driver of the increasing demand for food, changes in the amount and types of food consumed also play a major role. Food systems need to incorporate more sustainable practices, while ensuring access to safe, sufficient, affordable and nutritious food and the enjoyment of a diversified, balanced and healthy diet for all.



Prepared by the Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA). These key messages are based on the report *Global Population Growth and Sustainable Development*.

More work of the Population Division is available at <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/>.