

# Population growth, reproductive rights and environmental sustainability: Perspectives from sub-Saharan African stakeholders

Céline Delacroix\*, Nkechi S. Owoo\*\*

\*University of Ottawa, Interdisciplinary School of Health Sciences, Ottawa, Canada

\*\*University of Ghana, Department of Economics, Accra, Ghana

## Background

- Transformative change requires efforts to document needs and opportunities for environmental sustainability from a diverse array of stakeholder perspectives, reflecting that human-nature relationships vary with culture and knowledge systems.
- Despite their transversal and far-ranging implications for environmental sustainability, demographic trajectories are largely regarded as set in stone by the development and environmental communities, creating a missed opportunity for transformative change. But population trajectories are influenced by the advancement of reproductive rights, gender equity, and educational outcomes.
- Advancing reproductive autonomy, by ensuring that individuals are given the means to choose the number of children that they wish to have, carries significant benefits for climate change adaptation and mitigation, and environmental sustainability. This is because when individuals are given the means to choose the number, timing and spacing of their children, they tend to have fewer children. It is estimated that if the sustainable development goals targets for contraceptive use and education are met, global population size would reach, in 2100, 6.29 billion, instead of the United Nations medium projection of 10.3 billion.
- The voices of sub-Saharan Africans on population dynamics are uniquely relevant, as this global region has experienced the fastest growing population since the 1980s, is projected to almost double in size by 2050, has the highest proportion of both unintended pregnancies and unmet need for family planning, and is disproportionately vulnerable to the impacts of environmental degradation.

## Results

- Our findings echo previous research indicating broad ranging public concern for population growth, which was overwhelmingly perceived by sub-Saharan African actors as a phenomenon representing challenges for social, economic and, especially, environmental pursuits.
- Our results reflect the concerns associated with the need to acknowledge the role of excessive consumption, global inequities, and to center reproductive autonomy and human rights in discussions of population dynamics. However, they overwhelmingly point towards a non-binary and holistic outlook—one where the disproportionate role of consumption and production (associated with a responsibility of the Global North) does not preclude acknowledging the role of population growth (associated with the Global South) as a driver of environmental degradation.
- Participants stressed that responses to anthropogenic environmental destruction must integrate population dynamics as a central and transversal component.
- We find broad support for the integration of population dynamics and reproductive health and rights dimensions at international environmental meetings and in environmental sustainability instruments. Participants also stressed the under-representation of sub-Saharan Africa in discussions of population dynamics and in international environmental governance
- Demonstrates support for the development of cross-sectoral policies acknowledging the interrelated nature of gender equity, reproductive rights, population dynamics and environmental sustainability goals

## Methods

- A mixed methods qualitative project documenting the perspectives of sub-Saharan African stakeholders on the interconnections between population growth, reproductive rights, and environmental sustainability.
- We conducted a survey (N402) and follow up interviews (N18) with participants from 42 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa.

## Acknowledgments

We acknowledge the support of the Population Institute (US) for their financial assistance and are deeply grateful to Robert Engelman for his comments and insights.



Céline Delacroix

fearthproject@gmail.com