

»» Promoting gender equality is more expedient and effective than active population policy

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Current United Nations studies show that the world's population is growing faster than expected. Primarily in the poorest countries, the phenomenon known as the "demographic transition" (or the adjustment of the birth rate in reaction to the downward trend in mortality rates thanks to improved living conditions and health services) is only slowly taking effect.

High population growth impedes achievement of SDGs

This presents major challenges for countries as they attempt to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). They need to expand (often already deficient) basic infrastructure (schools, health facilities, drinking water, energy supply, roads, etc.) even faster than planned. The impacts on urbanisation, CO₂ emissions (climate change), youth unemployment (social conflicts, migration) and the pressure on natural resources (land requirements, pollution, loss of biodiversity) are manifesting earlier and with more intensity than hoped.

Active population policy is common practice in many countries

In light of these challenges and ever-increasing societal awareness of the planet's boundaries for growth, more voices are joining in to demand active public population policy.

However, such policy is a highly sensitive issue. Complex fundamental ethical questions arise (who decides whether the population growth rate is too high or low, and who is allowed to have children and who is not?). There are also associated concerns that policy could systematically discriminate against or benefit certain population groups, ethnic groups, etc. Some even associate such policy with genocide.

Although there continue to be 35 countries that limit self-determined family planning with at least one law, reproduc-

tion has been recognised by the UN as an international human right since 2004 within the context of the human right to health, including the right to sex education and contraception. Consequently, compulsory government measures and sanctions in this field are unlawful. Positive incentives (such as child benefits in aging societies), on the other hand, are accepted and considered common practice as population policy measures in most countries, even if we must ask ourselves whether these measures leave individuals' freedom to decide intact.

Approaches for self-determined family planning

The right to self-determined family planning ultimately means that each family is allowed to decide for itself how many children it would like to have. Contrary to active population policy, the measures to ensure this right are mostly undisputed. The clearest fields of intervention are:

- better information and sex education for the population and, in particular, strengthening women's rights to take a self-determined position with regard to family planning and contraception, both at the macrosocial and household levels; and
- improved access to modern contraceptives (at affordable prices) and freedom of choice with regard to contraceptive methods.

In developing countries, every fourth woman who would like to use contraception has no access to it. This is also associated with a health risk for women and newborns that should not be underestimated. Each year, around 25 million unsafe abortions are performed around the world. Studies show that this number has the potential to be considerably reduced when safe and legal means for family planning are accessible. Family

planning measures have also proven to be some of the most efficient development policy measures overall (Copenhagen Consensus).

Progress in gender equality and empowerment also reduces fertility rates over the long term

Although the focus is on self-determined family planning through extensive access to family planning methods in the short term (adjusting the number of children to equal the desire to have children), it is also important to broaden and to reinforce the roles and rights of women in society over the long term. This also has noticeable impacts on population growth, as empirical analyses clearly show that progress towards gender equality has a negative correlation to fertility. Here, the focus is primarily on measures promoting girls' schooling and vocational training, and increasing the female employment rate, but also on the expansion of social security systems (relief from unpaid care services in households, substituting the idea of having children as a safeguard in old age with the safeguard of government pension systems).

Conclusion: Self-determined family planning and gender equality are crucial for sustainable development

Promoting self-determined family planning and gender equality are – independent of their impact on demographic trends – separate and important development policy goals. The moderating effect that both have on population growth can make it easier to achieve the SDGs. ■