

IAP Statement on Population and Consumption

The world's science academies, through the IAP, have published over the last 20 years joint statements calling upon governments and international bodies to take decisive action on population¹, consumption and sustainable development². While progress has been made in some areas, the challenge of finding a path to global sustainability has not been met and the consequences of failure are now clearer and increasingly pressing. As policy makers prepare for the Rio+20 UN Earth Summit, the IAP re-examines these important issues and again calls for urgent and coordinated international action to address these profound challenges to humanity³.

The Challenges

Increasing population growth and unsustainable consumption together pose two of the greatest challenges facing the world. The global population is currently around 7 billion and most projections suggest that it will probably lie between 8 and 11 billion by 2050. Most of this population increase will occur in low-income countries. Global consumption levels are at an all time high, largely because of the high *per capita* consumption of developed countries. At the same time, 1.3 billion people remain in absolute poverty, unable to meet even their basic needs.

Population and patterns of consumption should be of major concern to policy makers because:

- They determine the rates at which natural resources are exploited and the ability of the earth to sustainably provide the food, water, energy and other resources required by its inhabitants. Current patterns of consumption, especially in high-income countries, are eroding natural capital at rates that are severely damaging the interests of future generations.
- Population is an important component of a complex nexus of processes that determine the economic and social development of a country. Rapid population growth can be an obstacle to improving standards of living in poor countries, to eliminating poverty and to reducing gender inequality. If the right conditions are in place measures that reduce fertility rates while respecting human rights can stimulate and facilitate economic development, improve health and living standards, and increase political and social stability and security.
- Changes in population age structure may occur as a result of declining birth and death rates and can have important social, economic and potentially environmental ramifications. Ageing of populations in the high, many of the middle and some of the low-income countries is occurring at historically unprecedented rates, while in some low-income countries the proportion of children and young people is very high.
- Population growth can contribute to movements of people (for example from the countryside to cities or between countries). By 2050, 70% of the world's population is expected to live in cities with significant challenges for urban planning and logistics. While urbanisation and migration may present opportunities for economic and social development, and resource efficiencies, if unexpected and unplanned, they can be economically and politically disruptive and have serious environmental impacts.
- The combination of unsustainable consumption patterns, especially in high-income countries, and of the number of people on the planet, directly affects the capacity of the earth to support its natural biodiversity.

¹ IAP Statement on Population Growth (1994) <http://www.interacademies.net/10878/13940.aspx>

² IAP Statement on Transition to Sustainability (2000), <http://www.interacademies.net/10878/13933.aspx>

³ See also Royal Society (2012), *People and the Planet*. Royal Society, London.

Addressing the Issues

Population and consumption are at the heart of sustainable development and efforts to move the world towards the sustainable use of its natural resources. Both are politically and ethically sensitive, but it is essential that this does not lead to them being neglected by policy makers. The world needs to adopt a rational and evidence-based approach to addressing the issues raised by population growth and unsustainable consumption patterns, one that respects human rights and the legitimate aspirations of people and countries with low-income to improve their living standards and levels of well-being.

The IAP science academies recommend that national and international policy and decision makers act:

- To ensure that population and consumption are considered in all policies, including those related to poverty reduction and economic development, global governance, education, health, gender equality, biodiversity and the environment.
- To make global consumption sustainable; to reduce levels of damaging types of consumption and develop more sustainable alternatives. Action is critically needed in higher-income countries. It is also urgent that options be available and implemented in the least developed countries by which they can move out of poverty, increase their health and well-being, and protect their own environmental resources.
- To encourage development strategies that help to reduce population growth. Programmes that promote education, in particular of women and girls, should be central to these strategies.
- To make certain that everyone has access to comprehensive reproductive health and family planning programmes. This issue requires substantial additional resources and policy attention from governments and international donors.
- To encourage modes of development that do not repeat mistakes made in the past by today's developed countries but which allow low-income countries to "leap frog" to sustainable patterns of consumption.
- To encourage "green economy" innovations designed simultaneously to increase human well-being and reduce environmental impacts.
- To develop policies that maximise the benefits of greater life expectancy, that improve the quality of life of older people, and that create new opportunities for their continued contribution to society.
- To develop policies that maximise the economic and social benefits of migration to both source and recipient countries.
- To recognise that continuing population growth will contribute to increased urbanisation, and to develop and implement urban planning policies that take into account consumption needs and demographic trends while capitalising on the potential economic, social and environmental benefits of urban living.
- To use existing knowledge more effectively and to prioritise research in the natural and social sciences that will provide innovative solutions to the challenges of sustainability.

The Need for Urgent Action

The Global Network of Science Academies' common goal remains the improvement of the quality of life for all, for those living now and in the future, and in particular to help build the knowledge base required to achieve these aims. The choices made about population and resource use over the next fifty years will have effects that last for centuries. There are a range of possible futures. If we act now, it is realistic to imagine trajectories where population growth comes to a halt, consumption becomes sustainable, human-induced global change is kept within manageable limits, and human well-being increases. A failure to act will put us on track to alternative futures with severe and potentially catastrophic implications for human well-being. The longer the delay, the more radical and difficult measures will be needed. Everyone has a role to play: individuals, non-governmental organisations, and both the public and private sectors. It is critical that national and international policy makers, acting individually and collectively, take immediate action to address these difficult but vitally important issues.

Signed by IAP - the global network of science academies (www.interacademies.net)

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