

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

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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.

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.

Survey participant characteristics

Participant Characteristics	Participant #	Total Participant #	%
Gender			
Female	114	401	28%
Male	286	401	71%
Prefer not to answer	1	401	0.25%
Age			
Under 30 years old	57	401	14.21%
Between 30 and 45 years	268	401	66.83%
Over 45 years old	76	401	18.95%
Country of Origin			
Ethiopia	201	402	50.00%
Ghana	29	402	7.21%
Uganda	44	402	10.95%
Other SSA countries	127	402	31.67%
Organization Type			
Government Agencies	97	402	24.13%
Non-Governmental	140	402	34.83%
Organizations			
Research/Academia	138	402	34.33%
International Organizations	12	402	2.99%
Other Types	15	402	3.73%

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

Perceptions on reproductive rights, education, gender equity, population dynamics and environmental sustainability

Survey question	#/ % participant s who answered YES	#/ % participants who answered NO	Neither agree/di sagree	Total # parti cipa nts
When individuals and couples are given the means to choose the number, timing and spacing of their children, they tend to have fewer children. For this reason, it is sometimes argued that contraception and family planning services can have a positive impact on environmental sustainability. Do you agree with the notion that contraception and family planning services can have a positive impact on environmental sustainability?	274/ 88.67%	16/ 5.18%	19/ 6.15%	309
Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest proportion of unintended pregnancies, the highest proportion of women who began childbearing in adolescence and amongst the lowest contraceptive prevalence rate. Do you think that making contraception and family planning services an integral component of environmental policies/discourse might help accelerate progress for reproductive health and rights in Sub-Saharan Africa?	249/ 82.18%	38/ 12.54%	16 5.28%	303
Population policies aiming to influence fertility levels (whether pro, or anti natalist) can lead to reproductive autonomy restrictions. Do you think that it is possible to promote messages and policies stressing the positive impact of family planning on environmental sustainability without indirectly promoting coercive practices harming reproductive autonomy?	236/ 77.12%	39/ 12.75%	31/ 10.13 %	306
It is well documented that education and women empowerment tend to lower fertility rates. Do you think that environmental policies and programs should, for this reason, promote access to education and women empowerment?	285/ 93.44%	11/ 3.61%	9/ 2.95%	305



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