



state of world population 2009

Facing a changing world:
women, population and climate



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The State of World Population 2009

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United Nations Population Fund
Thoraya Ahmed Obaid, Executive Director

How do population dynamics affect greenhouse gases and climate change? Will urbanization and an ageing population help or hinder efforts to adapt to a warming world? What's the best way to protect humanity from extreme weather and rising seas? And could better access to reproductive health care and improved relations between men and women make a critical difference in addressing the challenge of climate change? The answers to these questions are found in *The State of World Population 2009*.



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As greenhouse gases accumulate in the atmosphere, droughts, severe storms and rising seas threaten to take an especially heavy toll on women, who make up a large share of the world's poor.

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The warming of the earth's atmosphere is triggering extreme weather, melting polar ice caps and acidifying the oceans at a much faster pace than scientists had previously expected. What will happen when the Arctic ice is gone and coral reefs are dead?

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Foreword



When climate negotiators gather in Copenhagen in December for the 15th Conference of Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, they will be setting a course that will move the world's governments either forward or merely sideways in tackling one of the most challenging problems human beings have ever faced: how to manage our influence on climate and how to adapt to climate change now and well into the future.

Many of the discussions in the lead-up to Copenhagen revolved around the relative responsibilities of countries for limiting the growth of greenhouse-gas emissions and for funding efforts to shift to low-carbon energy and other technologies.

What's the best approach for reducing carbon emissions? Who should shoulder the financial responsibility for addressing current and future climate change?

These questions are critically important. But also important are fundamental questions about how climate change will affect women, men, boys and girls around the world, and indeed within nations, and how individual behaviour can undermine or contribute to the global effort to address climate change. The poor, particularly in developing countries, are likely to face the worst effects of a changing climate. The poor are more likely to live in areas vulnerable to floods, storms and rising seas. And they are more likely to depend on agriculture and fishing for a living and therefore risk going hungry or losing their livelihoods when droughts strike, rains become unpredictable and hurricanes move with unprecedented force. And among the poor, women are especially vulnerable.

In addition to the ongoing discussion on technical and financial aspects, the climate debate of the future must be further enriched by taking into account the human dimensions, including gender, that suffuse every facet of the problem. A Copenhagen agreement that helps people to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions and adapt to climate change by harnessing the insight and creativity of

women and men would launch a genuinely effective long-term global strategy to deal with climate change.

UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund, is a development agency that promotes the right of every woman, man and child to enjoy a life of health and equal opportunity and helps reduce poverty. UNFPA helps ensure that every pregnancy is wanted, every birth is safe, every young person is free of HIV and AIDS and every girl and woman is treated with dignity and respect. The causes we champion are also causes that are relevant to climate change.

This 2009 edition of *The State of World Population* shows that climate change is more than an issue of energy efficiency or industrial carbon emissions; it is also an issue of population dynamics, poverty and gender equity.

Over the years, the international community's approach to population policies has evolved from a top-down focus on demographic change to a people-centred approach based on human rights and informed choice. Voices that invoke "population control" as a response to climate change fail to grasp the complexity of the issue and ignore international consensus. Governments agreed at the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development that human rights and gender equality should guide all population and development-related programmes, including those aimed at protecting the environment. This begins with upholding the right of women and couples to determine the number and spacing of their children, and creating or expanding opportunities and choices for women and girls, allowing them to fully participate in their societies and contribute to economic growth and development.

Climate change is partly the result of an approach to development and economic growth that has proven to be unsustainable. Halting climate change requires a fresh, more equitable and sustainable approach to the way we live, produce and consume. Reining in the runaway greenhouse effect responsible for extreme weather

and rising seas may therefore require a new definition of "progress" and a new development paradigm.

The complexity of the challenge of reducing greenhouse-gas emissions and adapting to climate change requires us to look beyond the obvious and to marshal innovative strategies. The most effective solutions to climate change, however, will be those that come from the bottom up, that are based on communities' knowledge of their immediate environment, that empower—not victimize or overburden—those who must adapt to a new world, and that do not create a new dependency relationship between developed and developing countries. The only lasting solution will be one that puts people at its centre.

This report shows that women have the power to mobilize against climate change, but this potential can be realized only through policies that empower them. It also shows the required support that would allow women to fully contribute to adaptation, mitigation and building resilience to climate change.

By taking a broader, more nuanced approach to climate change that factors in gender and population, the governments of the world, and indeed civil society and we ourselves in the United Nations, will make a valuable contribution to the Copenhagen conference and meaningful action in addressing this long-term challenge.

Thoraya Ahmed Obaid
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