

Guest Editor's Note

Melodie Holden

Published online: 10 April 2007
© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC 2007

The newscaster furrows his brow as he reports of war, global warming, and poverty. Eight months pregnant, I let my thoughts wander from my growing, achy body to the future and what it holds for the son I'm soon to meet. Are we approaching a doomsday scenario or buying into fiction? Scientists and governments disagree, while the public generally believes that the truth lies somewhere in the middle.

What the reporter fails to see are the broader linkages between violence, poverty, and the environment, which run directly through the population issue. And he misses a chance to identify practical steps that policy makers and individuals can take now to make it better.

Last year, Jane Goodall, founder of the Jane Goodall Institute and UN Messenger of Peace, came to the University of California, Berkeley, to deliver the keynote address at a symposium of researchers and students examining the link between population and conservation. She brought Mary Mavanza, the director of a landmark program in impoverished rural Tanzania where what was initially an initiative to reduce deforestation quickly highlighted the need for family planning to empower women and men and eventually reduce the demands on their fragile environment. Both of these women share personal stories of the consequences of inaction, and both share a hope for the future of our planet and its people.

In this special issue of the Population and Environment journal, we present the ideas brought forward at the symposium based on our collective years of experience in medicine, epidemiology, public health, ecology, physics, economics, and public policy. Our objective is to provide a unique background to the issues and, more importantly, explore opportunities for large-scale improvement.

In the first article, Malcolm Potts ('Population and Environment in the Twenty first Century') delivers the perspective of a physician and evolutionary biologist based on a 40-year career. He describes the availability of family planning as a

M. Holden (✉)
University of California, Berkeley, CA, USA
e-mail: mholden@berkeley.edu

critically needed intervention for meeting basic human needs while opening the door to stronger economies and civil stability.

In the second article, Ndola Prata (“The Need for Family Planning”) addresses the unmet need for family planning of 150 million married women in the developing world who want to delay or stop childbearing yet are not using contraception. The need is most pronounced in areas of high fertility, poverty, and maternal and child mortality, primarily sub-Saharan Africa.

In the third submission, Martha Campbell (“Why the Silence on Population?”) traces the political roots of the controversies around the population issue, and argues that demand theories of fertility do not adequately explain the realities on the ground. She proposes that reducing the wide range of barriers to family planning that are common in low-resource settings has the greatest potential for swift change in empowering women with the choices that we often take for granted in high income countries.

In the fourth article, Joseph Speidel and his team (“Family Planning and Reproductive Health: The Link to Environmental Preservation”) quantifies the financial implications of the family planning strategy, and shows that increased donor funding will be required to meet growing demands. He also identifies a curious danger in mixing family planning funds with those for HIV/AIDS, which has helped marginalize financial support for family planning.

In the fifth article, John Harte (“Human Population as a Dynamic Factor in Environmental Degradation”) offers a new take on the IPAT equation, and demonstrates how nonlinear phenomena amplify environmental impacts. He explains the concept of threshold stresses to the system that when reached, increase their harmful impact exponentially. But Dr. Harte takes the model one important step further with the important concept of “wedges”—opportunities with the potential to change the course by improving emissions, decreasing population growth, etc. to eventually accomplish stabilization.

At this point, we turn to two case studies to show the practical realities of introducing family planning into policy and programs. Farnaz Vahidnia (“Case Study: Fertility Decline in Iran”) outlines Iran’s remarkable program that combines government leadership, religious collaboration, involvement of women in a creative model of service delivery, public education campaigns, and the initiative of the medical community to result in tangible cultural change, a radical reduction in population growth, and with benefits for both the economy and social stability.

Mary Mavanza (“Case Study: Conservation and Family Planning in Tanzania: The TACARE Experience”) brings a personal account of an effective program directly from the field in Tanzania, where a conservation program turned to family planning in response to the demands of the people for methods to control their fertility.

Finally, this special issue concludes with a remarkable personal communication from Jane Goodall who has inspired millions with her dedication to research, unwavering commitment to conservation, and personal belief in Reasons for Hope.

As each generation passing through time comes to recognize its potential and eventually admit its failures, we must choose a path of hope that those who follow will implement the solutions that eluded us. As we work each day to understand the

limits of our planet and engage the public on the impact of policies and individual decisions, let us look into the eyes of the newborn baby and convince him that he can make a difference.

We invite your comments and reactions. In addition, we encourage you to view a recently launched web site co-sponsored by UC Berkeley and the Scripps Institution of Oceanography, <http://pop-env.berkeley.edu>.