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# POPULATION AND CLIMATE CHANGE: EMPOWERING 100 MILLION WOMEN

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**M**eeting the world's need for family planning is a human right and a climate imperative. Wherever women have been given information and access to family planning, birth rates have fallen – even in poor, low-literate societies like Bangladesh or conservative religious countries such as Iran.

## THE CHALLENGE

Some 220 million women in the world say they want to stop bearing children or delay their next pregnancy – yet are not using contraception. Last year, DfID, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and other donors committed to meet half the world's need for family planning by 2020. The G20 aims to “achieve global economic stability and sustainable growth.” To meet this ambitious goal, the G20 should commit to meeting the fertility needs of the remaining 100 million women. Here is why and how.

## POPULATION AND CLIMATE

Rapid population growth undermines a country's ability to meet the basic demands for health, education, and infrastructure. Other than some oil rich city-states, no country with an average family size of five or more has been able to lift its citizens out of poverty<sup>1</sup>. Population is a multiplier of the negative impacts of climate change.

The Sahel region of Africa is on the verge of a humanitarian mega-catastrophe as the most rapid population growth in the world collides with some of the harshest effects of climate change. The Sahel is

the hot, dry strip along the southern edge of the Sahara where 18 million people were hungry last year. Sahel is Arabic for “shore” – and just as the shores of Kiribati are sweeping over the islands, so the “shore” of the Sahara is steadily advancing on the region. In that same short time the population will grow from roughly 100 million today to 250 million. Climate scientists predict that, in a business-as-usual scenario, the region will very likely get 3 to 5 degrees Celsius hotter by 2050 – with disastrous effects on crops and livestock.

Family planning as a legitimate climate response is not limited to poor countries. Eighty-four percent of global emissions are produced by the G20 countries – many with high rates of unintended pregnancy. Half the pregnancies in the US are unintended<sup>ii</sup>. Analysis shows that voluntary family planning is the most cost-effective way of reducing the carbon footprint of industrialised nations (see Table 1).

A carefully evaluated, federally funded programme subsidising family planning and reproductive health

**Pictured right: Malcolm Potts (top) and Alisha Graves (below)**  
**Pictured right (bottom): In the Sahel region of Africa, the most rapid population growth in the world collides with some of the harshest effects of climate change**

**TABLE 1: COST-EFFECTIVENESS OF SELECTED CARBON REDUCING STRATEGIES**

Strategy	Cost of abating CO <sub>2</sub> US\$ per tonne
Family planning	7
Wind	24
Solar	51
Coal (new power station)	57
Coal (retrofitted power station)	83
Electric vehicles	131

Source: *Wire, T. 2009. Fewer Emitters, Lower Emissions, Less Cost. A cost-benefit analysis commissioned by: Optimum Population Trust.*



**“FAMILY PLANNING AS A LEGITIMATE CLIMATE RESPONSE IS NOT LIMITED TO POOR COUNTRIES”**

for low income women in California averts 100,000 unintended pregnancies a year which translates to 156 million fewer tonnes of carbon emissions<sup>iii</sup>.

## FAMILY PLANNING IS FREEDOM

Family planning frees women from the shackles of reproductive slavery. Melinda Gates says, “The most transformative thing we can do is give people access to birth control.”

More women have an unmet need for family planning in sub-Saharan Africa than are actually using modern contraception<sup>iv</sup>. We know how to slow rapid population growth in a human rights framework: it is as easy as offering women what they already want.

Making family planning universally and realistically available, and rolling back the age of marriage, will cost billions of dollars. But inaction will cost even more. In addition to problems of food security, the Sahel is becoming a concern for national security. Ever growing numbers of young men with little education and no job opportunities is one factor in the increase of economic and security risks. The World Bank estimates that pirates operating off the coast of Somalia have cost the international economy a stunning US\$18 billion a year<sup>v</sup>.

Climate scientists and environmental advocates have not yet embraced family planning strategies because of fear of a historically controversial topic. Yet there is no need to be afraid to talk about population and family planning.



We call on the G20 nations to commit to meeting the need for family planning among the remaining 100 million women by 2020. Among the Conference of Parties, we call for leadership in prioritising family planning for reducing emissions and adapting to climate change. ■

## REFERENCES

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Professor Malcolm Potts is a human reproduction scientist and the first holder of the Fred H. Bixby endowed chair in Population and Family Planning in the School of Public Health, Berkeley.**

**He has developed the Bixby Center with a team of young experts. Professor Potts is also co-director of the Berkeley International Group (BIG) and founder of the OASIS Initiative.**

**He introduced family planning methods into scores of developing countries while he was the first Medical Director of the International Planned Parenthood Federation for a decade. He has published ten books and over 200 scientific papers. Professor Potts can be contacted at: [mpotts@oasisinitiative.org](mailto:mpotts@oasisinitiative.org).**

**Alisha Graves leads strategy, development and advocacy efforts for The OASIS Initiative. She completed her MPH in International Maternal and Child Health at the UC Berkeley School of Public Health in 2006. She worked for six years as Senior Programme Manager for a non-profit organisation to improve access to misoprostol – a generic, essential medicine.**

**In this role, she worked on policy initiatives, drug registration, and operations research across seven countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia. She can be contacted at [agraves@oasisinitiative.org](mailto:agraves@oasisinitiative.org).**