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Sustainable Development and the World at 8 Billion

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Sustainable Development and the World at 8 Billion

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IN 2015 UNITED NATIONS Member States adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,¹ a 15-year plan to end poverty, protect the planet, and improve the lives and prospects of everyone, everywhere. As the world's population approaches 8 billion people – a milestone the United Nations projects for 15 November 2022² – it is worthwhile to reflect on the implications of population growth for efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).³

Over time the growth of the world's population has become increasingly concentrated among the poorest countries, most of which are in sub-Saharan Africa. Continued population growth in such low-resource settings poses challenges to progress in social and economic development by necessitating an ever-increasing investment of resources to meet the needs of growing numbers of people, in particular with respect to health, education, housing, energy, water, and sanitation.

At the same time, achieving the SDGs, particularly those related to health, education, and gender equality, can contribute to slowing global population growth. High fertility is often linked to a lack of choice and empowerment among women and girls. Expanded opportunities for education and employment contribute to fertility decline by changing incentives and intentions around marriage and childbearing and by promoting individual autonomy and decision making, especially for women and girls. Universal access to sexual and reproductive health care, including family planning, and the protection of reproductive rights enable individuals and couples to better realize their fertility intentions, reducing the number of unintended pregnancies and often leading to lower levels of fertility.

If countries where the population has been growing rapidly achieve a substantial and sustained decline in fertility, smaller cohorts of dependent children and youth will result in an increased concentration of the popula-

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tion in the working ages, favoring faster growth in income per capita (often called the “demographic dividend”).

Despite a gradual slowing in the pace of growth of the world’s population, the United Nations projects that it will surpass 9 billion around 2037 and 10 billion around 2058. This growth will contribute to increasing consumption and production and thus magnify the harmful impacts of economic processes on the environment, such as global warming, deforestation, and loss of biodiversity. Yet overall, the rise in per capita income has been more important than population growth in driving increased production and consumption; and the countries most responsible for creating the current climate emergency are those with the highest per capita incomes and relatively slow or even negative rates of population growth.

While lower-income countries have a much smaller material footprint and have so far contributed little to climate change, their energy consumption will need to increase substantially if they are to develop economically and meet the needs of their growing populations. To ensure access to clean and sustainable energy sources that can fuel economic growth while minimizing environmental damage, lower-income countries will need substantial financial and technical assistance.

Changes in population size and composition are largely foreseeable, having been shaped by demographic processes that unfold over decades. Population estimates and projections, such as those in the United Nations *World Population Prospects*, enable Governments to anticipate and adapt to demographic changes. Policymakers should incorporate present and future population trends in all aspects of development planning, identifying where programmes can be scaled up to reach growing numbers of people in need, and where shifting demographic profiles offer opportunities to accelerate progress towards sustainable development while ensuring that no one is left behind.⁴

References

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4. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2022). Policy Brief no. 140: A World of 8 Billion.