

Population Matters recognises that there are multiple drivers of water stress, water pollution and people's vulnerability to the increasing risk and incidence of drought and flood events.

However, one factor - despite being widely recognised in the published literature and official reports - is rarely mentioned or addressed by policymakers: our ongoing human population growth.

Along with economic growth/excessive consumption, population growth is cited by the IPCC as one of the two strongest drivers of climate change:

“Globally, GDP per capita and population growth remained the strongest drivers of CO2 emissions from fossil fuel combustion in the last decade (robust evidence, high agreement).”¹

This is not just an omission of the evidence, but risks discounting technologies and solutions for addressing unsustainable population growth, which are readily available, affordable, and would advance the achievement of all the Sustainable Development Goals.

Most importantly, these are technologies and solutions that are desperately wanted and needed by 100s of millions of women and girls in some of the poorest communities, countries and regions of the world.

Human population growth is certainly not the only factor and driver to be addressed, if we are solve the world water crisis, but omitting it excludes a significant contribution for improving the wellbeing of people and planet.

¹ <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/sixth-assessment-report-working-group-3/>

Population growth regionally and globally drives water demand across multiple sectors, in particular through the water-energy-food nexus; increases water pollution, climate change and aquatic biodiversity loss; increases people's vulnerability to water-related hazards; and reduces capacity for adaptation and resilience in the face of those hazards.

Addressing unsustainable human population is essential if SDG6 is to be achieved - for example: The UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) has identified that 23 countries face increased risk of exposure to drought primarily due to population growth, and 38 mostly due to the interaction between climate change and population growth.

Positive actions and solutions for reducing population-driven pressure on water in the most vulnerable regions are available, affordable, and readily deployable – and, of course, that must always be on a voluntary, ethical and rights-based basis.

The essential focus should be upon meeting the rights and unmet need of 100s of millions of girls and women globally by:

- **Enabling universal quality secondary education to girls, including comprehensive sex education²**
- **Providing the more than 250 million women worldwide with the access to and choice over safe, modern family planning that they currently lack.³**

² In sub-Saharan Africa, the number of girls out of secondary school has increased by 7 million since 2007 due to population growth. <https://data.unicef.org/resources/a-new-era-for-girls-taking-stock-of-25-years-of-progress/>

³ <https://www.unfpa.org/press/nearly-half-all-pregnancies-are-unintended-global-crisis-says-new-unfpa-report>

Implementing these solutions would prevent hundreds of millions of unintended pregnancies, unsafe abortions, and child and maternal deaths annually.⁴ Empowering those girls and women to have agency and autonomy over their own fertility, and so enhancing their life opportunities. Additionally, as demonstrated in a comprehensive review of available climate solutions by Project Drawdown, slowing population growth through the combination of educating girls and providing family planning is one of the Top 10 most powerful ways to reduce atmospheric CO2 by 2050.⁵

The value and efficacy of these population solutions are recognised by leading girls' rights group, the Malala Fund:

*"When girls go to school, they learn the skills to overcome climate-related shocks, like the critical thinking capabilities needed to process and act on the risk of weather reports. Countries that have invested in girls' education have suffered far fewer deaths from droughts and floods than countries with lower levels of girls' education. Additionally, if every girl was able to exercise her sexual and reproductive health and rights through quality education and had access to modern contraception, it could reduce total emissions from fossil fuels by 37%–41% by the end of the century."*⁶

Adding population to the conversation about and policy solutions to our water crisis is essential for accelerating the achievement of the UN's Water Action Agenda and for the wellbeing of people and planet.

⁴ <https://www.guttmacher.org/fact-sheet/investing-sexual-and-reproductive-health-low-and-middle-income-countries>

⁵ <https://drawdown.org/solutions/family-planning-and-education>

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https://assets.ctfassets.net/0oan5gk9rgbh/OFgutQPKIFoi5lfY2iwFC/6b2fffd2c893ebdebee60f93be814299/MalalaFund_GirlsEducation_ClimateReport.pdf