

Rethinking the Link: A Critical Review of Population-Environment Programs

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A joint publication of the Population and Development Program at Hampshire College and
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The Population and Development Program at Hampshire College brings a global feminist perspective to the study and investigation of population and environmental issues and challenges traditional views of overpopulation and immigration as the primary causes of environmental degradation, political instability, and poverty. This report launches the Population and Development Program's **Population Policy Initiative**, which brings new research and analysis to policy makers in population, environment, security and related fields. For more information on the Population and Development Program, see <http://popdev.hampshire.edu>.

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RETHINKING THE LINK: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF POPULATION-ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMS

Executive Summary

Over the last ten to fifteen years a new type of integrated conservation project has evolved that links reproductive health and family planning (RH/FP) services with natural resource management and biodiversity conservation. Such programs represent a small but significant trend in both the conservation and the population fields.

Population-Environment (PE) linkages are being promoted by leading actors in the population field such as Population Action International, Population Reference Bureau, and the University of Michigan Population Fellows Programs. PE programs are sponsored and carried out by major conservation organizations including Worldwide Fund for Nature and Conservation International and/or by well-known international development agencies such as World Neighbors, CARE, and Save the Children. Funding has come in large part from US governmental funds through the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and from a small group of private foundations.

The evolution of integrated approaches for addressing population and environment issues dates back at least to the 1960s, with roots in the population, conservation, and international development sectors. The promotion of pre-planned PE projects, however, is newer. The presence of funders committed to this specific form of integrated conservation and development work has led to the creation of a “new generation” of community-based PE projects explicitly designed around theories of natural linkages and the anticipated benefits

from synergies between these two sectors. This paper evaluates the implications of making such PE linkages and looks at the implementation of PE projects where conservation of biodiversity is a specified goal and linked PE activities are a formal strategy from the start. While supporting the goals of extending access to reproductive health care and family planning, and of addressing human needs in conjunction with conservation efforts, the paper identifies and explores four broad areas of concern:

1. Malthusian narratives: To what extent are PE programs and projects based on problematic assumptions about linkages between population growth and environmental degradation and how do such narratives influence which environmental, health and development needs are addressed or ignored?
2. External agendas: Do the participatory methods of PE programs offer real opportunities for local concerns to be addressed or do they function more to get communities to “take ownership of” externally defined goals?
3. Women’s health and community health: Are the isolation and underserved nature of targeted communities taken into consideration such that the medical technologies offered don’t threaten the health and well-being of the women involved? Do program interventions address broad community health needs or are they limited to reproductive health of mothers and the care of young children?

4. Environmental justice: To what extent do projects linking human population and the environment tackle questions of human rights, differential access to natural resources and the impact of extra-local actors on local ecosystems?

Malthusian Narratives

The PE literature describes a variety of benefits for developing integrated population-environment projects. It is argued that integration facilitates entry into communities; allows projects to address a range of needs of hard-to-reach populations; increases involvement of men in reproductive health and of women in natural resource management activities; improves women's overall condition; and reduces costs. Environmental benefits from reduced population are treated almost as an afterthought.

Yet most organizations carrying out community-based PE programs do specify that one important objective of their programs is to reduce population pressure on the environment. Many of the same authors and organizations who emphasize the social and human benefits of PE programs on the ground promote a vision of population threats to the environment on a global scale, with particular emphasis on high and fast growing populations in biodiversity hotspots of the global south.

Unfortunately, generalized assumptions about population impacts on the natural environment simply don't hold in many cases and, as has been amply demonstrated in conservation literature, can blind project managers and policy makers to local realities. Simplistic assumptions about population impacts on the environment can lead policy makers, donors, and project managers into environmentally ineffective and sometimes moral-

ly ambiguous projects. The danger is that PE projects, based—at least in part—on Malthusian assumptions, will promote inappropriate interventions or be blind to opportunities that don't fit that narrative.

Madagascar provides a clear instance where PE programs seem to embrace and use Malthusian narratives to promote reproductive health and family planning as a response to environmental deterioration. It also provides a valuable illustration of the limitations and dangers of using such narratives. A review of the history of deforestation in Madagascar—in the context of factors such as colonial rule and later independence, changing tax regimes, agriculture and labor policies, land tenure laws, and changing demographics—makes clear that the links between population growth and environmental degradation are not nearly as strong as has been suggested. It also demonstrates that a focus on population fails to address key causes of deforestation.

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Whose Agenda?

Advocates of linking family planning services to environmental and development projects make the argument that such linkages respond to community needs. It is not clear, however, that local community demand is the primary source of such linkages in the majority of current projects. There is a real risk that outside agendas will create demand for specific outcomes irrespective of community needs. This is true of any externally initiated project with conservation or family planning goals, but it is particularly complicated in the case of integrated projects.

The integration of health and development activities with conservation work was at one point

considered a way to provide for community needs and encourage community “buy-in” to conservation goals. Now, however, PE projects are being promoted and initiated according to a vision of a particular health-environment linkage. Instead of trading health services for participation in conservation efforts, a particular health intervention (RH/FP) is assumed to address community needs. Under such circumstances, with *a priori* assumptions about a particular intervention, it may be potentially difficult for project managers to direct project resources to community defined needs.

When NGOs arrive with predetermined agendas, the danger is that these will be imposed on local communities. As long as a Malthusian narrative is part of the program vision, such a narrative is likely to be communicated to, and potentially imposed upon, target communities. Information, education, and communication (IEC) campaigns and other educational activities linking reproductive health and environment are a staple of PE programs. A particular concern is the use of “social marketing” practices such as community goal setting and participatory monitoring of outcomes, which can potentially create pressures on individuals to participate in family planning and other program activities.

Women’s Health

The provision of health care by NGOs in remote rural areas can fill a gap where need is either partially or wholly unmet by government, but there are risks involved as well. First, such projects create dependency, yet are unable to guarantee ongoing services given the short-term nature of funding and NGO involvement. Additionally, when health care is linked to biodiversity conservation goals, there is a risk that health care can shift from being treated as a right to becoming a reward which can be withdrawn if conservation goals are not met.

Another concern regarding PE projects in remote rural areas is that the implementing organizations’ population agenda, combined with limited resources, may lead to services being offered based on what’s doable and effective rather than on what’s most appropriate for women’s health. Evidence from some projects suggests that the drive to get *some* family planning services to remote areas has indeed led to choices regarding birth control technologies based on logistical and budgetary factors rather than on the needs, desires, and medical situation of the women and men involved. Additionally, many PE projects promote the use of Depo-Provera and other long-acting contraceptives in spite of the documented health risks involved. Given the difficulty for women in remote rural areas to obtain proper screening and follow-up care, projects that promote the use of Depo-Provera may jeopardize women’s health in exchange for increased contraceptive prevalence rates.

Although “healthy communities” and “healthy families” are part of the titles and language of many PE projects, their contributions to health care frequently are limited to narrow family planning services. This initial review of the PE literature suggests that many of the integrated PE programs, commonly cited as successful examples of linking health and conservation needs, do not seem to address the breadth of health needs typically faced by poor, rural communities. Some projects don’t even fully cover the basics of prenatal and delivery care, family planning services, and health care for young children. Even when project objectives include improved maternal and child health, or improved nutrition, there may be little substance in project activities to address these objectives.

Questions of Environmental Justice

If one looks at the links between humans and environment, as PE programs claim to do, a central consideration has to be human rights, including political and legal rights, rights to land and

natural resources, economic rights, and cultural rights, all of which are linked. Yet PE programs generally seem to omit consideration of such issues in their analysis, and thus also in their choice of interventions.

Although many PE projects promote economic development activities, these often seem to be more of an add-on rather than a central piece of the projects, and there still seems to be significant ambivalence about addressing the economic needs of populations living near biodiversity hotspots. Also, the literature about population and environmental linkages, both globally and in specific PE projects on the ground, tends to ignore or quickly pass over the impacts of external forces on local environments, whether it be northern consumption and the role of multinational corporations, or the monopolization and extraction of natural resources by national elites. In general, it is difficult to find evidence that the impacts of social inequalities on environmental degradation are being considered or addressed.

The Philippines provide an interesting opportunity to compare assumptions, analyses, activities, and outcomes of integrated PE projects with other integrated approaches to complex human-environment problems. A comparison of two PE projects working with fishing communities on issues of coastal management with a third coastal resource management project utilizing a community organizing and rights-based approach highlights the range of interlocking issues influencing both environmental and human health that can be identified if programs look beyond the population dynamics of poor communities. An analysis of such issues points to the role that wealth, class, and political power play in how natural resources are used and

managed, preserved or damaged, and provides local communities with tools for protecting their rights and the environment.

Conclusions

PE projects, with their intertwined roots in development work, conservation, and population programs, seem to have inherited both some of the best and some of the worst aspects of these different ancestries. PE programs promote the idea that strengthening and empowering local communities

are key to both improving lives and meeting conservation goals, yet this urge to take a pro-human approach is undermined by the Malthusian narratives that underpin PE projects. Similarly, the participatory, community-based approaches claimed as an important element of PE projects are frequently weakened by *a priori* assumptions about human impacts on the environment and by their use to promote predefined project goals. In sum, while integrated approaches to conservation offer real opportunities to treat local people as partners and meet human needs and conservation

goals simultaneously, the specific and narrow focus on links between population and environment undercuts many of the benefits of the integrated approach and creates its own problems.

There seems to be little reason for integrated projects to be focused so narrowly on specific linkages between population and environment. The same synergies cited as the benefits of PE projects—ranging from savings obtained by sharing costs and resources between sectors, to advantages provided by drawing connections between the condition of human communities and their environment—can be obtained in broader or more open-ended integrated projects. Just as environmental factors influence and are influenced by

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human health and population, so too do they interact with people's economic condition, their political status, and more. Conservation NGOs willing to approach integrated projects in a more truly participatory way, without an *a priori* population agenda, are likely to discover a variety of potential new entry points to engage local people on issues of conservation, free of the distortions of Malthusian narratives around population and environment.

Recommendations

- Organizations promoting the funding and provision of RH/FP services in the global south should refrain from using environmental and population arguments to promote their goals. The distortions of Malthusian arguments cannot be justified simply because they are effective in winning partners or funding; they need to be replaced with rights-based arguments in favor of making RH/FP available to all women.
- One of the strengths of early PE linkages was that they developed in response to requests from women in the communities being served. Community initiative and local needs should remain central to project planning, and PE program implementation should depend on genuine demand elicited through a participatory process that offers alternative possibilities as well.
- PE programs can avoid some of the risks described in this paper if evaluations consider the following questions: (a) Are opportunities for local participation real and effective throughout all stages of the project? (b) Are RH/FP approaches safe and comprehensive and is there adequate health care available to provide screening and follow-up as well as other basic health services? (c) Are the full range of causes of environmental degradation recognized and does the project support the economic and political empowerment that poor communities need to be able to protect their environment?
- Poor rural populations need to be heard, and their needs addressed, as a matter of right, and not just when and if their needs correspond with conservation goals. As powerful actors in remote rural areas, conservation organizations need to acknowledge this right at the highest level and make partnering with the local residents in the regions where they work a core part of their mission.
- Funders interested in supporting integrated projects need to have a broad enough vision to allow NGOs to respond to locally defined needs rather than simply implement pre-defined objectives. Funders should be willing to have project success based at least in part on criteria provided by beneficiary communities. In particular, programs need to avoid narrow interpretations of success based on family planning measures like contraceptive prevalence or couple-years of protection, and instead focus on broad health and human welfare objectives.
- Funders and implementers need to provide integrated projects with timeframes that are sufficiently long to allow for a genuine participatory process and for meaningful outcomes both for human well-being and conservation goals.