

# 7 billion people are not the issue - human development is what counts

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As the global media speculate on the number of people likely to inhabit the planet on Oct. 31 an international team of population and development experts argue that it is not simply the number of people that matters but more so their distribution by age, education, health status and location that is most relevant to local and global sustainability.

Any realistic attempt to achieve sustainable development must focus primarily on the human wellbeing and be founded on an understanding of the inherent differences in [people](#) in terms of their differential impact on the environment and their vulnerabilities. These vulnerabilities are often closely associated with age, gender, lack of education, and poverty.

These are some of the messages formulated by twenty of the world's leading experts in population, development and environment who met at IIASA in Austria in September 2011, with the objective of defining the critical elements of the interactions between the [human population](#) and sustainable development. The Laxenburg Declaration on Population and Development, as prepared by the Expert Panel, describes the following five actions as necessary to address sustainable development, achieve a 'green economy' and adapt to [environmental change](#):

- Recognize that the numbers, characteristics, and behaviors of people are at the heart of sustainable development challenges and of their solutions.
- Identify subpopulations that contribute most to [environmental](#)

[degradation](#) and those that are most vulnerable to its consequences. In [poor countries](#) especially, these subpopulations are readily identifiable according to age, gender, level of education, place of residence, and standard of living.

- Devise sustainable development policies to treat these subpopulations differently and appropriately, according to their demographic and behavioral characteristics.
- Facilitate the inevitable trend of increasing urbanization in ways that ensure that [environmental hazards](#) and vulnerabilities are under control.
- Invest in human capital -- people's education and health, including reproductive health -- to slow population growth, accelerate the transition to green technologies, and improve people's adaptive capacity to environmental change.

According to the Panel, "Education increases people's life opportunities in general, greatly contributes to technological and social innovation, and creates the mental flexibility required for a rapid transition to a green economy. This applies to both low- and high-income countries. Hence, the enhancement of human capital from early childhood to old age through formal and informal education and life-long learning is now known to be a decisive policy priority."

Joint convener of the [Expert Panel](#), Professor Wolfgang Lutz from the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis, IIASA, and the Wittgenstein Centre for Demography and Global Human Capital, states that the Panel's findings reaffirm research from several key demographic research teams around the world. "Female education and reproductive health services are the two factors that will bring down unsustainable population growth. There is also increasing evidence that 'human capital', the education and health of people, is one of the most important factors in the capacity of people to contribute to sustainable development and economic growth, and adapt to environmental change. These issues are

becoming ever more profound, as the population grows and we start to see the consequences of climate change."

Rather than seeing the increase in the number of people sharing the planet merely as a 'problem' Lutz and the other members of the global panel believe that with the right policies and targeted investments in people, particularly the most vulnerable sectors or subpopulations, people will be seen as a resource and not simply a 'problem'.

As stated in the 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, "Human beings are at the centre of concern for sustainable development." Therefore, consideration of the changing numbers, characteristics, and distributions of human beings on the planet must be at the core of any serious analysis of the challenges and opportunities for [sustainable development](#).

**More information:** Read the full Statement on the IIASA website at: [www.iiasa.ac.at/Admin/INF/PR/2011/2011-10-27.html](http://www.iiasa.ac.at/Admin/INF/PR/2011/2011-10-27.html)

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