Reproductive Health Reform: A Climate Change Adaptation Strategy

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The link between climate change and reproductive health, while often overlooked or ignored and not yet fully understood, exists and deserves in-depth investigation. Compelling scientific evidence shows that climate change can result in record heat waves, increased droughts and flooding occurrences, and an escalation of other disruptive climactic changes that negatively affect families and communities across the globe (NOAA National Weather Service 2011). In many countries food and water supplies have already been hard-hit by climate change, and rapid demographic growth is expected to further escalate the demand for these critical resources (Bryant et al. 2009). This analysis attempts to explain how reproductive health services are a necessary part of climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies. Empowering women through successful family planning programs will help developing countries reach an optimal dependence on their natural resources in the long run.

Reproductive health services can help reduce population size, which decreases pressure on already-stressed water supplies. This is an area that needs more study; population health management is an important factor to consider in the future of water resources in developing countries. In Nigeria, for example, climate change is a significant stressor on the water supply. It causes unexpected alterations in weather patterns that can wreak havoc on low-resource communities unable to adapt their farming practices (Ryan, Interview with Scott Moreland 2011). For instance, when the timing or frequency of rainfall is altered, many farmers who have been consistently growing certain crops are no longer able to maintain productive yields and can lose their farms. These communities do not have access to the irrigation systems and water supplies that support more affluent communities during times of drought. In some cases, families find themselves left with no choice but to move out of areas impoverished by climate change in search of more fertile land and water. The result is dislocation, forced migration and increasing numbers of women refugees (Ryan, Interview with Marissa Mommaerts 2011). Migrating populations and refugees experience greater vulnerability to the harmful effects of economic, social and political unrest.

In countries ill-equipped to cope with overwhelming environmental challenges, including the vast majority of sub-Saharan Africa, reproductive health reform offers the potential to empower citizens to not only confront but also to mitigate the devastating effects of climate change. Women are disproportionately affected by climate change around the globe. They make up a larger share of the agricultural workforce, have fewer income earning opportunities, and are less mobile than men, especially in developing countries (Carlowe 2009). Experts believe that slowing population growth can have important effects on reducing carbon emissions as well as bolstering social resilience to the effects of climate change (Carlowe 2009). Chief among these impacts of climate change and population growth is increasing water scarcity. The ability of women to decide when and how to space their births is particularly important in the developing world where effective, acceptable and sustainable reproductive health services – including access to contraception and adequate water and sanitation practices during childbirth – are lacking. Without these critical practices, the rate of maternal and infant perinatal infections increases dramatically. Coupled with a woman’s inability to plan the number and timing of her own births, climate-related challenges can create unfortunate and undesirable living situations for women around the world.

Some schools of thought maintain that economic development and education lead to smaller families, and thus birth control is thought to be less important. The argument would follow that money should go to on-the-ground extensive education, dissemination and training programs rather than reproductive health clinics and services (Sanger 1929). While economic development is vitally important in population health, it is clear that in the face of changing climate, spreading access to birth control is a more direct, effective means to help communities adapt by directly reducing population pressures on scarce resources.

Implementation of a comprehensive family planning program will require careful consideration and respect for the beliefs and practices of different religious and ethnic groups. Staying with the example of Nigeria, religious and ethnic diversity within the country presents real and ongoing challenges for widespread acceptance and implementation of family planning practices (Avong 2009). This potential barrier can be addressed by 1) including local and religious leaders in discussions of birth spacing and its benefits and 2) teaching family planning with respect for Muslim beliefs. The heavily populated northern states of Nigeria have rapidly growing populations and need to be a focus of family planning efforts (Avong 2009).

Culture and religion are thus important factors in any reproductive health services program. Given the speed of demographic change in the least-developing countries, population growth must inevita-
ably be a key component in strategies addressing natural resource depletion. This is an appropriate time for environmental causes, movements and organizations to connect with the delivery of reproductive health services. Connecting these two issues together will bring positive change for both populations and the environment, ultimately leading to a more sustainable community, adaptable populations, healthier and economically stable families and empowered and productive women. Without acting paternalistically, developed countries should offer education and training regarding reproductive health options, with the local population deciding what to implement so as to respect their culture and religious preferences. Regional and global organizations that assist by offering expertise and tools to build cooperative research and planning in reproductive health will be an effective method of looking out for the future of our Earth.

Works Cited


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1 Dr. Scott Moreland works in the areas of population, reproductive health and human resources as the Futures Group’s principle investigator (PI) on the MEASURE Evaluation Project. He has developed monitoring and evaluation systems for integrated population, health and environment projects through MEASURE. Dr. Moreland has also overseen project activities in Rwanda and Nigeria. He is presently the PI for the DATE Project in Nigeria, a study to inform HIV prevention decision-making.

2 Marissa Mombaerts is Program Officer of the Global Leaders Council for Reproductive Health at the Aspen Institute, a group that aims to increase momentum for improved reproductive health. She works to draw connections between reproductive health and other development sectors, including food security, climate change, and economic development.

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