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A Proposal for a United Nations Framework Convention on Population Growth

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Introduction

Recently, an international assembly of scientists from 184 countries endorsed an article published in the journal *Bioscience* entitled “[World Scientists’ Warning to Humanity: A Second Notice](#)”. As the warning states, “We are jeopardizing our future by not reining in our intense but geographically and demographically uneven material consumption and **by not perceiving continued rapid population growth as a primary driver behind many ecological and even societal threats**. By failing to adequately **limit population growth**, reassess the role of an economy rooted in growth, reduce greenhouse gases, incentivize renewable energy, protect habitat, restore ecosystems, curb pollution, halt defaunation, and constrain invasive alien species, humanity is not taking the urgent steps needed to safeguard our imperilled biosphere.” Further, [this 2016 article](#) published in the *Chinese Journal of Population Resources and Environment* presents an instructive discussion of why population growth remains largely

unacknowledged as a primary driver behind such threats. And [this 2010 article](#) published in *The Globalist* introduces then dissects 'Ponzi Demography', asserting that **"the sooner nations reject Ponzi demography and make the needed gradual transition from ever-increasing population growth to population stabilization, the better the prospects for all of humanity and other life on this planet."**

As Population Media Center's President Bill Ryerson asserts, [population is the multiplier of everything else](#). Such knowledge demands action to protect life on Earth in a compassionate and intentional manner. People are receptive to this inclusive message. It compels us to act together.

I propose the establishment of a United Nations Framework Convention on Population Growth—one akin to the Paris Agreement for climate change with Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) in pursuit of a sustainable population *in every country*.

In effect, such a treaty would formalize what was presented in the [preamble of the 1994 United Nations International Conference on Population and Development](#): "The recommendations for action are made in a spirit of consensus and international cooperation, recognizing that **the formulation and implementation of population policies is the responsibility of each country and should take into account the economic, social, and environmental diversity of conditions in each country**, with full respect for the various religious and ethical values, cultural backgrounds and philosophical convictions of its people, as well as the shared but differentiated responsibilities of all the world's people for a common future."

Thomas Paine wisely asserted that "time makes more converts than reason", yet we are running out of time to act without, as the [original World Scientists' Warning to Humanity](#) stated in 1992, "the risk that vital global systems will be damaged beyond repair". This is why I believe the time to act boldly on population is now, and I think the United Nations is the appropriate avenue.

Summary of current activity

I have shared the proposal for this treaty with hundreds of people around the world so far and there is currently support from NGOs, scientists, academics, and/or activists in at least 10 countries across 5 continents. I'm also already in communication with the United Nations via UNEP, the UN Foundation, and the Harmony with Nature programme, and seeking input from leaders at UNFPA, UN Women, and the UN Population Division.

I was recently nominated for one of the [United Nations SDG Action Challenge Awards](#) – specifically, the 'Connector' award– for my efforts to catalyze support for this initiative, and I will be attending the related Global Festival of Action for Sustainable Development in Bonn, Germany in March 2018 to showcase this proposal and mobilize additional support.

The proposal

Goal: To catalyze an international campaign that leads to the UN establishing a Framework Convention on Population Growth. Further, the goal I have in mind is to present a joint international position statement with signatory organizations and/or individuals representing countries from every inhabited continent to the UN in 2018 prior to [COP24](#) and [UNEA-4](#).

Note: I plan to attend the [2018 meeting](#) of the UN's Commission on Population and Development in April 2018 and am seeking fellow supporters to join me.

Context: Several environment-related international treaties exist today, yet none of them address the root cause of our oversized demands on the planet: human overpopulation. Every country deserves a voice at the table and this would provide them that opportunity.

We as a global community can't view the UN's population growth projections as destiny -- 9.8 billion people in the year 2050 should be viewed as wholly unacceptable if we're keeping future generations and other species as well as our own livelihoods in mind. The earth simply can't support this. We are choosing short-term aggregate economic growth over long-term environmental, economic, political, social, and cultural stability, putting the future habitability of the entire planet in jeopardy. We know this is true and such knowledge demands action.

My thought is, if we can get human overpopulation + continued growth to be formally recognized by the UN as a global issue that **must be addressed via national population policies** (like the NDCs for the Paris Agreement), then **people around the world will become more amenable to openly discussing local population matters**, such as unintended pregnancy rates, sexuality education programs, access to family planning information and services, and migration, as well as foreign aid and economic justice.

Vision: My vision for the UN treaty is that it would formally recognize existing human overpopulation + continued growth –**within the context of the IPAT formula**– as a significant environmental issue and existential threat to the survival of humanity (one of several, to be sure). It would also promote a 3-pronged solution at national and international levels to achieve the **goal of sustainable populations in every country**.

3-pronged solution:

(1) **Emphasize education** about the issue of existing human overpopulation + continued growth, including why it poses an existential threat and why embracing small families to achieve a global TFR below 2.0 for the foreseeable future is an essential component of the solution.

(2) **Prioritize the "ease of access" model of fertility decline**, which appears to fit every country's situation and addresses the goals of rapid fertility decline followed by sustained sub-replacement fertility rates by way of freedom to make informed family size choices, not coercion.

(3) **Promote smaller "normal" family sizes** –we need to establish a new normal for the Anthropocene.

Underlying this 3-pronged solution are the 5 principles presented in this [paper](#) written by Population Matters Director Robin Maynard. The 5 principles are (1) Universality, (2) Proportionality, (3) Equity, (4) Equality, and (5) Choice.

For all 3 elements of the solution, Population Media Center President Bill Ryerson's essay from the 2010 Post Carbon Reader Series as well as former Worldwatch Institute President Bob Engelman's [9 strategies to stop short of 9 billion](#) provide excellent context.

Top reasons for pursuing a treaty through the UN

(1) To tell the story, the "whole truth" about human overpopulation

Great opportunity to tell the human overpopulation story, to share the story with a global audience including world leaders and members of the general public, and to publicly and formally assert that human overpopulation is solvable by embracing small families* for the foreseeable future.

(2) To bring the term "overpopulation" and the existing reality of human overpopulation into the mainstream

The UN is recognized globally as a lawful, mainstream international governing body. Formal UN recognition of existing human overpopulation and the solution of embracing small families* could help legitimize the issue and the solution in the eyes of world leaders as well as members of the general public.

(3) To make national population policies necessary and politically expedient

The Paris Agreement has helped apply pressure on governments and the private sector to "act on climate change". Efforts to date have been somewhat misguided since they are focused on "downstream" issues, and that's precisely why our cause could benefit from having a similar international accord –hopefully one that is universally ratified– that prioritizes action specifically on human overpopulation and highlights the clear, compassionate solution: embracing small families*. As our colleague Karen Shragg likes to say, if we don't act on overpopulation then all of our other efforts will never be enough.

** It's worth noting that I **do not** believe this treaty should be overly prescriptive about particular family sizes. I'm including a "1 child, on average" clarification to describe what constitutes a small family as **a prudent guideline** given the depth of overshoot we're already in. While I'm envisioning this as a non-legally binding international accord, it seems like it's high time that we explicitly encourage those family size decisions that will most benefit our shared cause within a reasonable time horizon given the other existential threats we currently face. The "1 child, on average" clarification takes into account the (at least narrowly) accepted notion that 0 children is fine, 1 child is good, and 2 children is enough.*

Language

The specific language used in the treaty (and even preliminary documents as the campaign grows) will likely make or break this initiative. Population size and growth are understandably sensitive issues, and to ignore this is likely to accept failure. Fortunately, I don't have any deep ties to particular terms (e.g. overpopulation) and have no issue challenging those that do. I want big results (as we all do), and the language that will best allow us to get there with a mutual understanding among all member states is the language we should use. Winning some "battles" should not be misinterpreted as winning the "war". Winning the "war" is the focus of this initiative, which I believe will be achieved by breaking the mainstream silence on human overpopulation and the resultant overshoot **compassionately**.

What you can do to help

- (1) Spread the word. If you like this proposal and believe it is important, please share this article with your colleagues and peers. We need all hands on deck.
- (2) Contact me. I welcome your feedback and would be thrilled to discuss this in more detail.
- (3) Reach out to the United Nations to voice your support and urge them to help advance this initiative. Specifically, consider contacting the Global Director of the UN SDG Action

Campaign, Mr. Mitchell Toomey, at support@sdgactioncampaign.org, and reference the Connector Award for which I have been nominated. As a suggestion, also consider referencing [this 2016 article](#) by Joseph Chamie, former director of the United Nations Population Division, which highlights the importance of pursuing world population stabilization as a prerequisite for achieving universally adopted [sustainable development goals](#).

Rob Harding is a [Great Transition Initiative](#) Champion, a signer of [The Ecological Citizen's Statement of Commitment to Ecocentrism](#), and the Sustainability Communications Manager at [NumbersUSA](#). For more information about this organization, including specific objectives and statement of values, [see this page in their website](#). The author can be contacted at rdharding2@gmail.com.

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