Editors’ Note: Our Beyond Apocalypse Series focuses on creative, constructive human responses in the face of urgent climate and environmental challenges. There are critical questions to address about the relationship between gender and climate change mitigation, adaptation, and community survival. However, the recent rebranding of population alarmism as a “justice-based” intervention endangers a vision for a climate movement that successfully connects the struggles for reproductive, environmental, and climate justice. In this issue, researcher Jade Sasser questions the individualist focus of “population justice” and warns of the destructive impact it can have on true social justice movements.

— Co-editors Katie McKay Bryson and Betsy Hartmann

In late 2009, a group of youth activists created a document called, “COP15 -- Global Youth Support Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) for a Just and Sustainable World.” The statement was designed as a youth-centered policy advocacy piece linking population, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), and climate change through what the authors referred to as a social justice approach. It outlined a strategy for slowing carbon emissions, increasing community resilience to climate change, empowering young women and contributing to a “more just and sustainable world.”

How could these goals be achieved? Through a shared program of global youth SRHR advocacy—advocacy that would lead to greater access to contraceptives, thereby slowing population growth and climate change. Arguing that “meeting the SRHR needs of young people around the world can help stabilize population and contribute to comprehensive strategies to reduce CO2 emission,” the authors invoked a familiar framework identifying women’s fertility as a source of, and thus a solution for, pressing environmental problems like climate change. What was different about this strategy, however, was the claim that the youth’s approach was situated in the realm of social justice for women.

This youth policy statement was published just before the 2009 UN COP climate change
meetings in Copenhagen, amid hopes that a legally binding global climate treaty would be enacted. At the time, several American NGOs working on population and environment issues were advocating to insert population and SRHR into the international climate change policy debate. They saw Copenhagen as an opportune moment for population advocacy to assume a prominent role in international environment and development negotiations, a position it hadn’t occupied since the 1992 Earth Summit at Rio. Unlike the conference at Rio, however, population interventions would now be presented as strategies supporting women’s empowerment, human rights, and progressive politics — a sharp departure from the focus on addressing population through demographically-driven, aggregate population targets promoted at previous environmental conferences.

But what exactly does the new focus on “justice” mean? Although never explicitly defined, the youth policy statement vaguely associates the term justice with addressing inequalities in gender relations, contraceptive access, and the distribution of environmental burdens throughout the world. This approach to justice is also reflected in wider efforts among environmental organizations to develop a youth cadre of population activists.

In early 2009, the Sierra Club’s Global Population Environment Program (GPEP) campus youth campaign launched the “Population Justice Environment Challenge”. This campaign borrows from environmental justice and reproductive justice frameworks to make the case for why international family planning and population stabilization can empower women and communities. While the campaign partners with women’s, youth, population and family planning organizations to train youth as lobbying activists on a host of SRHR policies, it primarily focuses on increasing awareness of the role of international family planning in slowing population growth and reducing human pressure on natural resources.

Through a national training in Washington, D.C., bi-annual youth summits, campus-based “sex and environment” workshops and a national book tour, the campaign is designed to recruit existing student leaders from college environmental and SRHR communities, and train them to do cross-sector advocacy work as population-environment advocates. They are well supplemented with resources, from posters, fact sheets, pins and stickers, to t-shirts and condoms trumpeting the campaign slogan: “The fate of the world is in your hands… and in your pants” — an approach that emphasizes individual responsibility for limiting fertility as an environmentalist strategy.

At first glance, the Sierra Club program is somewhat familiar. The largely college student-run Zero Population Growth (ZPG) movement of the 1970s also focused on encouraging Americans to take personal responsibility to limit childbearing as a form of ethical environmental practice. With an advocacy platform focused on the legalization of birth control and abortion, changes in welfare regulations, and the elimination of tax breaks for children, ZPG swelled rapidly in its membership on American college campuses across the country, growing to over 30,000 members. However, it is important to draw a distinction between the former ZPG efforts and the current Sierra Club campaign. Along with personal responsibility, the Sierra Club emphasizes a focus on rights and justice when advocating for slowing population growth around the world—a stance that the more alarmist ZPG efforts did not promote.

How are current youth population-environment advocacy campaigns rooted in justice? Or perhaps the better question is, how is justice defined in the context of these efforts? One answer can be found in the edited volume, A Pivotal Moment: Population, Justice, and the Environmental Challenge, which lays out the population justice framework that youth activists are drawing on today. In the book’s introductory chapter, population justice is defined as drawing on reproductive justice and environmental justice to urge “attention to the inequalities — both gender and economic — that underlie both rapid population growth and the destruction of the natural environment.” The author outlines population justice on the basis of an individual approach to human rights, “including the right to bodily integrity and autonomy and free decision-making about sexuality, reproduction and family,” as well as a larger framework of obligation to future generations in the context of growing environmental crises.

Yet, questions of reproductive health, rights and autonomy have never been individual questions. Rather, these issues are largely shaped by broad social-structural forces that determine whether, when, and how women access the tools available to support reproductive decision-making. For women of color and poor women in the U.S., this decision-making has historically been constrained by state-level policies.
that restrict women’s ability to act as autonomous individuals, including coerced sterilizations and the use of experimental contraceptives during clinical trials specifically targeting women of color. Thus, the ability to have children, and to raise the children one has, emerged as central concerns of reproductive justice organizing in the U.S. as a counterpoint to the overwhelming focus on limiting women’s childbearing.

And when it comes to the global ‘population problem’, the focus has historically been on reducing the fertility of women of color. Historically, the banner of population control has been utilized to justify egregious human rights violations around the world, from coerced sterilizations in India and Bangladesh, to the restriction of food aid and medical care to women and communities in Haiti and Madagascar who refused to use contraceptives. India, Singapore, and Indonesia denied housing, tax and other benefits to parents who had more than two children. Across sub-Saharan Africa, structural adjustment programs in the 1980s were tied to population control, and demanded that governments develop population policies, including demographic targets, in order to receive loans.

The 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) changed the terms of the debate on international population issues, shifting the paradigm from a focus on top-down, demographically driven targets to an emphasis on individual women’s reproductive health and rights. The Cairo Consensus produced from that meeting, with its emphasis on empowering women in a holistic framework of comprehensive reproductive health care, was meant to do away with narratives blaming women’s fertility for large scale social and environmental problems. In addition to instituting a new focus on women’s reproductive health, the Consensus squarely placed women’s rights at the center of new approaches to international population and reproductive health programs. It is this focus on rights that serves as the basis for contemporary population justice frameworks. However, only certain rights emphasized through the Cairo process have made their way into current framings of population justice. The right to limit one’s fertility through voluntary access to contraceptives is the primary approach which does not take into account the importance of protecting women’s rights to have additional children if they want them, as well as the right to parent the children that they do have.

There are two problems with the use of the language of justice in the population-environment community. First, the lack of clear definition of the term renders the use of this language highly opportunistic. Today, a highly diverse set of actors rally around the language of justice, based on its positive connotations and automatic associations with progressive politics. As one former population-environment program funder mentioned to me at a meeting, “The reproductive justice legacy in the field is a strong positive one for most people, and therefore it’s a good train to get on.” This sentiment was echoed by a manager at a population organization with a long history of advocating population control around the world. When I asked him about the historical controversies generated by his organization’s work, he responded, “The focus is now on justice and rights, and everyone wins.” At the same time, funding for international family planning has fluctuated significantly since the mid-1990s, rendering the future of international family planning funding highly uncertain. As a result, some in the SRHR community have been willing to forge alliances with a wide range of partners, including environmentalists who take a decidedly Malthusian approach.

A second problem with the focus on a vaguely defined justice is that using it as a population-environment organizing tool is disabling to alternative movements. Rather than strengthening progressive social movements, the widespread circulation and use of the term justice makes this language available for use by anyone — and renders it far more difficult for critical movements that address large scale structural inequalities to stake out their own space within advocacy movements. The overcrowded arena of social justice advocacy becomes a messy, muddled space in which the politics behind different movements are difficult to parse out, making it particularly challenging to identify
allies, call out opponents, and continue to work toward the eradication of all forms of injustice and oppression, particularly structural-institutional forms.

A focus on reducing women’s fertility as a potential solution to climate change is dangerous to climate justice movements. It allows multinational corporations, militaries, and other large scale producers and consumers off the hook for the disproportionate impacts of their actions on greenhouse gas emissions. At the same time, the population-climate argument is often offered as a means of linking population growth and climate change with international security concerns, an approach which often targets poor people of color and draws on racialized narratives to justify calls for population and immigration control. Improving women’s access to comprehensive SRHR services is a vitally important goal on its own. This work must be lifted out of the realm of climate change solutions in order to truly protect and promote women’s reproductive freedom.

Jade Sasser is a PhD candidate at UC Berkeley, researching and writing about population politics in the age of climate change. Her research focuses on population-environment advocacy, the increasing recruitment of youth as population activists, and the strategic use of new frameworks to situate population activism in the context of progressive gender politics.

Notes

3. Zero Population Growth has since been renamed Population Connection, proclaiming itself to be the “largest grassroots population organization in the United States.” The organization currently boasts a membership of 130,000 people: http://www.populationconnection.org/site/PageServer?pagename=about_us
11. Private interview.
12. Private interview.