

PERSPECTIVE ARTICLE

Why pronatalism fails the planetary health test

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In their 'World Scientists' Warning of a Climate Emergency 2022', leading climate scientists issued an unambiguous call to action: 'The very future of humanity depends on the creativity, moral fiber, and perseverance of the 8 billion of us on the planet now' (Ripple et al., 2022: 1152). They emphasised the need to equitably reduce ecological overshoot and pursue massive-scale climate mitigation and adaptation. A key recommendation was to stabilise the human population and allow it to gradually decrease in size by strengthening education and reproductive rights for girls and women.

The resurgent wave of pronatalist policies worldwide runs counter to this idea. Pronatalist ideologies advocate increasing birth rates as a rational response to fertility decline associated with the fertility transition – the shift from high to low fertility. Such policies aim to maintain fertility at or above replacement level to avoid the social and economic challenges that may arise from ageing populations. The notion of planetary boundaries, the limits to what the Earth can sustain, is conspicuously absent from these discussions.

This omission reflects a broader reluctance to acknowledge the role of the unprecedented scale of human population growth as a driver of environmental degradation. Human population growth has already imparted significant ecological cost, contributing to the depletion of natural resources, a warming planet, widespread biodiversity loss and a mounting ecological debt that will be passed on to future generations. Proposing to boost birth rates in response to declining fertility may seem like a reasonable strategy from an economic perspective, to avoid the short-term burden of a proportionally higher ratio of retirees to working age people, but only if one ignores the scale and urgency of the environmental crisis and its associated long-term negative impacts.

Recent environmental assessments such as the 2026 Water Bankruptcy report (Madani, 2026) highlight that we have moved beyond an era of temporary, reversible and isolated environmental crises, and that reliance on technological solutions alone is no longer sufficient. The scale and interconnectedness of these pressures point to the need to change our whole development models, a

perspective echoed in the call to move beyond GDP as the dominant measure of progress and to more fully recognise the value of environmental systems (Taylor, 2026). In this context, reducing aggregate demand emerges as a central lever for safeguarding basic human needs while preserving ecological integrity. Science unequivocally tells us that population size is a key variable in driving environmental degradation (Shukla et al., 2022). Every human has an impact on nature, whether their footprint is large or small, and the aggregate impacts are currently overwhelming ecosystems. Moreover, individual footprints are not static; they evolve as wealth grows and consumption increases, and with the conditions of our lives.

Ultimately, investing in reproductive rights and voluntary family planning – across all settings – supports both human wellbeing and environmental sustainability. When women have the agency to make informed choices, they tend to opt for smaller families (Götmark and Andersson, 2023). Yet when demographic objectives are prioritised over individual reproductive choice, pronatalist policies often pave the way for restrictive or coercive measures that undermine women's agency and limit their ability to reproductive self-determination (Bajaj and Stade, 2023).

Family planning plays a role not only in advancing reproductive self-determination, gender equity and justice, but also indirectly, in shaping population trends. Since peaking at a 2.3 per cent annual growth in 1963, global population growth has slowed to under one per cent today – a shift that could hardly have occurred without increased access to voluntary contraception and reproductive agency (Götmark and Andersson, 2023). Despite the immense need for family planning – with hundreds of millions still unable to make free and informed reproductive choices (United Nations Population Fund, 2022) – support for these services is dwindling. The US, long the largest donor – providing forty per cent of global family planning aid in 2023 – abruptly cut funding in 2025, ending the world's leading source of support (Singh et al., 2025).

Finally, the pronatalist discourse is largely misconceived. Perceptions of fertility decline often conflate lower birth rates with a shrinking population (Dowd, 2025). In reality, while global fertility is declining, the number of women of reproductive age is projected to rise from 2 to 2.2 billion in coming decades (United Nations, 2025). The global population is projected to expand from 8.2 billion in 2024 to

a peak near 10.3 billion in the mid-2080s, adding over 2 billion people (United Nations, 2024). For perspective, the global population in 1950 was just 2.5 billion. Fears of ‘population collapse’ are thus largely bogus; while certain countries will experience shrinking populations, the world as a whole faces continued growth – with profound implications for planetary health. It is with all these dimensions in mind that we must examine the ideological shift toward pronatalism.

Recent setbacks in both environmental efforts and reproductive rights are not isolated events – they are intertwined, and both are symptoms of the same phenomenon: the belief that human ingenuity can endlessly outrun planetary limits. Population growth and decline pose different challenges, and they are not reciprocal problems. We are better equipped to manage low fertility’s social and economic consequences than the cascading effects of growing environmental destruction. As Vegard Skirbekk suggests, the challenges associated with ageing societies are manageable and can represent opportunities to develop good policy interventions (2022). Efforts such as implementing progressive tax policies, strengthening intergenerational social safety nets, easing labour migration and integrating seniors into meaningful roles in society are rights-based and effective approaches that should receive our full investment to support an ageing population and stay within ecological boundaries.

Taking a planetary health and evidence-based assessment of both demographic trends and ecological trajectories supports the view that encouraging the human population to stabilise and gradually decrease in size – by advancing reproductive rights and ensuring universal access to education and healthcare – remains a valid policy objective.

Disclaimer

The views expressed in the paper are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the positions of their respective institutions.

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