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EDITORIAL

Beyond ideological frames: Population, environment and human welfare – a decade of critical inquiry

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This twentieth issue of *The Journal of Population and Sustainability* (JP&S) marks its tenth anniversary. Instead of a traditional retrospective of the past decade of publication, in this editorial I want to take a broader view and assess the changes in discourses about population over that decade and their antecedents over the previous three to four decades. In particular, I am not only interested in the content of those discourses but in the interpretive frames through which demographic trends have been perceived, understood and, at times, misrepresented. Such frames are not neutral instruments of observation: they are shaped by interests, anxieties, institutional pressures, historical legacies and shared group identity; yet they are experienced by those who rely on them as sources of clarity rather than of distortion.

This epistemological observation speaks directly to one of the journal's foundational concerns: namely that, at the very juncture when evidence for the ecological significance of population dynamics has reached its greatest empirical solidity, the conditions for rigorous scholarly engagement with population questions have, across many institutional and discursive contexts, become more constrained. Such contraction is amenable to explanation, at least in part, through careful analysis of the interpretive frames by which evidence is received, filtered and differentially acted upon.

This editorial examines each of these frameworks in turn before offering an alternative analysis, and then turns to the contributions to this issue, relating them to this wider perspective. First, however, I give a brief exposition of the theoretical framework employed.

Interpretive frames: A theoretical note

Our comprehension of the world is always mediated by interpretive frameworks – what Stones (2005) calls 'hermeneutic frames' – structures of perception, explanation and evaluation that are simultaneously part of our inner lives and of our shared social world. These frameworks are not subjective creations: they are formed through culture, language, institutions and social relationships, and reproduced through the narratives and taken-for-granted knowledge that surround us. Through internalisation, they become embedded in collective identity and serve as a source of ontological security, experienced phenomenologically not as interpretive frameworks but as direct access to reality itself. Crucially, they are also conditioned by the distribution of power, which renders them ideological in the sociological sense – implying neither conspiracy nor deliberate distortion, but a structural shaping of what can be thought. This is as true of scholars working in this field as of anyone else: the starting point for most is a concern about human impact on the environment and, while philosophical scepticism, empirical rigour and academic self-reflection can support objectivity, they cannot dissolve the frames through which evidence is encountered.

This is not to suggest that empirical reality is a collective fiction. Material conditions – climate change, ecosystem degradation, demographic change – impose constraints that no interpretive frame can override indefinitely. What such frames do shape is which facts are noticed, how they are explained, whose circumstances are rendered visible, and which responses appear plausible or even thinkable. Reality is not produced by ideology, but it is invariably encountered through it. The sections that follow examine three such frames that have structured – and in important respects distorted – public and scholarly engagement with population over the past decade.

Underpopulation anxiety: Globalising a northern crisis

Perhaps the most consequential shift in mainstream media coverage over the past decade and more has been the pivot from concern over overpopulation to

concern about underpopulation (Bricker and Ibbitson, 2019; Hou, 2021; Shute, 2022; Ferguson, 2024; Greenfield, 2025; Monbiot, 2025; Morland, 2026). This reframing is so extensive that a substantial part of the audience for mainstream media now appears to believe that global population is already in decline (Nater, 2025) rather than projected to grow by more than two billion before peaking in the 2080s (United Nations, 2024). The recurring conflation of falling fertility rates with falling population numbers confuses rates with absolute levels (see Delacroix et al. in this issue) – a conflation the prevailing media frame tends to reinforce rather than correct.

This particular framing emerged from the intersection of genuine demographic trends in the Global North – sub-replacement fertility in Japan, South Korea, North America and almost all of Europe – with the economic concerns of those societies: shrinking workforces, pension crises, stagnating productivity and consumer markets. In the context of the dominant economic narrative in which GDP growth is the sole metric of societal welfare, population decline is most frequently perceived as a serious challenge (Vollset et al., 2020), while others have noted that the actual impact on social welfare may be exaggerated (Skirbekk, 2022; Bradshaw and McDermott, 2025; Gietel-Basten and Pardo, 2026).

While these concerns deserve serious consideration, their generalisation into a universal demographic narrative applied to the entire planet is unwarranted. Sub-Saharan Africa, which accounts for the majority of projected future population growth (United Nations, 2024) and where rapid demographic increase continues to outpace infrastructure, economic development and, importantly, climate resilience and adaptive capacity, receives comparatively little sustained attention within this framing except as a source of migration pressure (Smith, 2019; Sear, 2024). The frame thus treats the demographic circumstances of wealthy, ageing, Northern societies as though they represented the global demographic situation as a whole.

Prominent public figures have accelerated this process. Repeated warnings about ‘population collapse’ from commentators such as Elon Musk illustrate how a frame can gain currency less through evidence than through repetition and reach. The legitimacy this has lent to a renewed wave of pronatalist policymaking is among the more significant political consequences of frame-driven demographic misperception, and it is examined directly in this issue by Delacroix and colleagues.

The retreat from population in environmental scholarship

While popular media coverage of population dynamics has focused on anxiety over depopulation, the engagement of academic, environmentalist and policy communities with the population-sustainability nexus over the past thirty years is better characterised by reluctance. As Washington and Kopnina (2022) note, population growth has become a polarised topic in sustainability discourse, with responses in parts of the literature ranging from studied ambiguity to explicit objection to what is characterised as 'blaming' overpopulation. At a more popular level, environmental campaigners such as George Monbiot (Monbiot, 2020) and Naomi Klein (Klein, 2015) have dismissed population growth (along with personal agency and responsibility in consumption) as a legitimate topic of discussion in tackling the environmental crisis.

Some of this resistance has its roots in legitimate ethical concerns. The historical association of 'population control' with imperialism, racism and coercion has led to an understandable suspicion of population discourse within feminist, postcolonial, and social justice scholarship (Coole, 2021). As Steven Sinding (2016) reflected in the very first issue of the JP&S, the population movement that emerged in the 1960s was an unstable alliance between those with demographic objectives and family planners principally concerned with the rights and health of women, infants and young children. Demographic objectives dominated the movement's first phase, which saw total global fertility fall from 6 to 2.5, but the coercive and manipulative policies of some governments precipitated opposition, a shift in favour of the rights and health contingent, and ultimately the Cairo consensus of 1994 – a 'paradigm shift' away from halting rapid population growth and towards the promotion of reproductive rights and individual agency. As Sinding observed, the overall effect was reduced priority for contraception, stagnating or rising birth-rates in some places, and a general lethargy in the field – perhaps most emblematically expressed in the decision to exclude population and family planning entirely from the UN's Millennium Development Goals (Sinding, 2016: 12).

Moreover, while this ethical correction was justified, it consolidated into a hermeneutic frame within which population, as a variable and an object of inquiry, became difficult to address without inviting charges of complicity in historical abuse.

The charge of racism functions in a similar way. Its historical basis is genuine: eugenic thinking did influence much twentieth-century population advocacy, and continued vigilance against its recurrence is warranted (Coole, 2021; Samways, 2022). The charge has, however, also been applied in ways that equate all concern with population with racist intent, foreclosing legitimate scientific and policy discussion by making the topic difficult to address in neutral terms (Coole, 2021; Washington and Kopnina, 2022). Where the available vocabulary for discussing a phenomenon has been shaped so thoroughly by one set of concerns that dispassionate empirical engagement becomes structurally difficult, the result is an ideological frame in the fullest sense – one that is not experienced as a constraint because it has been internalised as a matter of conscience and identity.

The consumption turn and the displacement of population

The 'consumption turn' in environmental thinking performed a comparable silencing function, whatever the merits of its analytical motivations. The argument that per capita consumption, particularly in high-income countries, is a more important driver of environmental harm than population size has considerable empirical support (Samways, 2022). As Maxton and Randers (2016) pointed out in the second issue of this journal, the environmental footprint associated with a child born in an OECD country is thirty times larger than that of a child born in a low-income country, and this asymmetry is both real and morally significant. The consumption frame has, however, also operated as a form of displacement, enabling a body of scholarship attentive to charges of neo-colonialism to treat the population question as resolved when it has more often been set aside – culminating in the clearly ideological claim that environmental impact 'has nothing to do with population numbers' (Dorling, 2026:32). In contrast, despite their evident reticence about discussing population growth in public policy fora, bodies such as the IPCC and IPBES are careful to identify economic growth and population growth as distinct indirect drivers of environmental change: the size of the economy and the size of the population each independently scales the practices and technologies that drive emissions growth and ecological change.

Some caution about crude correlations between population growth and environmental harm is warranted: the benefits of, and responsibility for, the Anthropocene are profoundly unevenly distributed, with the greatest environmental burdens associated with the slow-growing populations of the

Global North (Steffen et al., 2015; Samways, 2022). Oxfam has demonstrated that 52 per cent of cumulative carbon emissions between 1990 and 2015 are attributable to the wealthiest global decile, compared with seven per cent for the poorest half (Gore, 2020). Nonetheless, as affluence rises, the environmental burden shifts from population growth to per capita consumption growth – meaning a larger, wealthier population acts as a powerful multiplier of environmental impact (Samways, 2022). Population growth therefore remains a significant driver and, as the populations of the Global South economically develop to meet their welfare needs and aspirations, their environmental footprints must necessarily increase.

The charge that strategies advocating population stabilisation constitute 'climate colonialism' – shifting responsibility from high-consumption, low-fertility nations onto low-consumption, high-fertility ones – has been subjected to sustained scrutiny by Patrick Hassan (2024) in these pages. Hassan argues that the counter-position, which treats population growth as a distraction from rich-world consumption, amounts to a 'compensation thesis' in which reductions in consumption are assumed to offset population growth. The difficulty is that several studies have cast doubt on whether redistribution alone can provide a good life for the current population, let alone the projected peak, without breaching planetary boundaries (O'Neill et al., 2018); and that between 1990 and 2019, emissions attributable to population growth offset roughly three quarters of the reductions achieved through technological change (Chaurasia, 2020). Moreover, if population growth is treated as morally off-limits, a different form of colonialism follows: the imposition of Western-determined consumption limits on the aspirations of people in the developing world (Hassan, 2024). The result of the consumption turn is what Delacroix and colleagues in this issue describe as a conspicuous absence – a gap in environmental analysis that is the more significant because it is understood not as an omission but as a principled position.

Scientific assessment and the filtering of evidence

The operation of these ideological frames is most apparent, and most consequential, in the distance between the conclusions of major scientific bodies and the content of policy discourse. In their most recent Assessment Report (AR6), the IPCC stated: 'Globally, gross domestic product (GDP) per capita and population growth remained the strongest drivers of CO_2 emissions from fossil fuel

combustion in the last decade' (IPCC, 2023a: 217). Similarly, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) specifies 'lowering total consumption and waste, including by addressing both population growth and per capita consumption differently in different contexts' (IPBES, 2019: XXI) as a leverage point for halting biodiversity and ecosystem function loss.

These are not marginal claims advanced by heterodox researchers; they are the considered conclusions of the most authoritative scientific bodies in their respective fields. They have nonetheless been largely filtered out in the translation from scientific assessment to policy agenda. As discussed in the last issue's editorial (Samways, 2026), while the 5th Assessment Report (AR5) (IPCC, 2015) engaged at length with population growth as both a vulnerability risk and family planning as a longer-term mitigation strategy, the following report, AR6 (IPCC, 2023a), signalled a significant pivot away from discussing population beyond the acknowledgement above. Perhaps more importantly, AR6's Summary for Policymakers (IPCC, 2023b) did not mention population growth at all.

The IPBES's acknowledgment of population growth as a factor in the environmental crisis in their 2019 report likewise leaves the issue unresolved, offering no policy recommendations on how it might be addressed. In contrast, their most recent full 'Nexus' report (Harrison et al., 2024) pays significant attention to how sexual and reproductive health rights can slow population growth. Yet, their summary for policymakers (McElwee et al., 2025) plays this down, paying more attention to the vulnerability of populations in developing countries without explicitly connecting sexual and reproductive health rights with either mitigating vulnerability or ecological degradation. The filtering in both the IPCC and IPBES public facing communications is not arbitrary. It reflects a lack of institutional confidence in the face of the frames described above, which render certain conclusions available for policy uptake while leaving others effectively unheard, shaping the reception of evidence in ways that are not themselves apparent to those who receive it.

Escaping the frames: Towards a pragmatic way forward

The academic literature of the past decade has not been entirely in the grip of these frames. A significant body of work has sought to move beyond the consumption-versus-population binary and to examine how population growth, consumption patterns and technological change interact differentially across

ecological domains and income levels (for example: Motesharrei et al., 2016; O'Neill et al., 2018; Bongaarts and O'Neill, 2018; Ganivet, 2020; Belmin et al., 2021). The biodiversity dimension has been particularly instructive (Crist et al., 2017; Tilman et al., 2017; Marques et al., 2019; Naggs, 2019; Dasgupta, 2021; Cafaro et al., 2022): land-use change driven by agricultural expansion is the dominant direct driver of biodiversity loss globally (Jaureguiberry et al., 2022), and in low-consumption, high-fertility regions demographic growth is frequently its primary engine (Maja and Ayano, 2021; Hemp et al., 2025).

The justice dimension has also been subjected to more rigorous scrutiny. The assumption that justice considerations straightforwardly favour ignoring population growth has been contested by scholars who argue that the genuine ethical imperative is to ensure that population stabilisation occurs through rights-based means – voluntary family planning, women's education, economic security – rather than through coercion or neglect (Crist et al., 2017; Cripps, 2017; Coole, 2018; Delacroix and Engelman, 2023; Hassan, 2024). Such approaches are not only ethically defensible but empirically effective: voluntary family planning, girls' education and female economic empowerment consistently produce fertility decline without coercion, and are therefore immune to the objections that have historically foreclosed population discourse (Washington and Kopnina, 2022). Urbanisation, too, is a robust driver of fertility transition across contexts, operating through shifts in labour markets, the opportunity costs of childrearing, and changing gender norms (Adhikari et al., 2025). As Elizabeth Cripps argued in the second issue of this journal, to assume that population growth among the global poor may be set aside because of their low per capita emissions is to assume either that they will remain poor, or that poverty can be ended, for increasing numbers, without worsening environmental impact (Cripps, 2017). Neither assumption survives scrutiny, and both reflect the operation of frames that are more comforting than coherent (see Rosenthal in this issue for an instructive example of rights-based, non-coercive policy instruments).

Crucially, the policy instruments that constitute the ethical path through population discourse are not merely instrumentally useful for sustainability: voluntary family planning, women's education and female economic empowerment improve the welfare of billions of existing people directly and immediately, quite independently of their demographic effects. The case for honestly acknowledging

the population-environment-consumption nexus is therefore not only a case about future generations; it is a case about the billions of people alive today whose life chances depend on access to reproductive health services, to education and to the economic opportunities that drive fertility transition.

A further dimension of the nexus that has received insufficient attention is the relationship between fertility reduction and climate adaptation and resilience. The IPCC's Sixth Assessment Report identifies population growth as a key amplifier of climate exposure and vulnerability, particularly in low-income, high-fertility regions where demographic growth compounds pressure on water, food, and infrastructure systems already stressed by climatic change. At the household level, voluntary fertility reduction – achieved through education, economic empowerment and access to reproductive health services – increases per-capita resources available for adaptation, improving resilience to climate shocks through better nutrition, savings capacity, and investment in more secure livelihoods. At the aggregate level, slower population growth reduces the scale of the adaptation challenge itself: fewer people exposed to the same hazards, lower demand growth on already-stressed systems and a smaller infrastructure deficit to close under deteriorating climatic conditions. As made clear in our 2023 special issue, *Vulnerable Populations: The Role of Population Dynamics in Climate Change Resilience and Adaptation in Africa,* rights-based approaches to population stabilisation are therefore not merely complementary to climate adaptation policy – in high-vulnerability regions they are among its most cost-effective and ethically defensible instruments (Adedini, 2023; Passano et al., 2023; Samways, 2023).

The limits of the demographic transition model as a universal template (Bongaarts, 2022) – and its partial replacement by a recognition of demographic divergence, particularly the slower-than-projected fertility decline in sub-Saharan Africa (Bongaarts, 2017) – represents a case of empirical pressure partially overcoming a frame. The demographic transition model cannot be regarded simply a neutral description of an autonomous demographic processes; it also served as a frame that made deferred action seem reasonable, allowing policymakers and scholars to treat population stabilisation as something development would automatically deliver in due course (Coole, 2018; Samways, 2022). The growing recognition of its limits is, in part, a recognition of the ideological work it has been performing.

The planetary boundaries framework, widely adopted since its proposal by Rockström and colleagues (Rockström et al., 2009), has been central to this re-opening of analytical space, providing population–environment arguments with a new scientific vocabulary and greater institutional legitimacy. While population was not a primary concern of the original framework – which centred on biophysical thresholds for a 'safe operating space' for humanity – subsequent scholarship has drawn on it to develop more population-oriented arguments. Most significantly, O'Neill et al. (2018) used the planetary boundaries framework to demonstrate that, while the basic physical needs of seven billion people could in principle be met within biophysical limits through equal resource distribution, achieving more qualitative dimensions of human wellbeing would require two to six times the level of resources associated with basic needs. They argue that, with radical improvements in social and technical provisioning systems and a global focus on consumption sufficiency, a good life for seven billion people could be achieved without breaching planetary boundaries. In the absence of such changes, their modelling implies that only 1.2 to 3.5 billion people could enjoy a 'good life' within planetary boundaries (Samways, 2022).

O'Neill et al.'s analysis represents a more sophisticated reworking of 'carrying capacity' estimates in the 'equal shares' optimum population tradition which has sought to estimate a sustainable population predicated upon an equal distribution of resources and a good standard of living (Daily, Ehrlich and Ehrlich, 1994; Pimentel et al., 1994; Lianos and Pseiridis, 2016; Tucker, 2019; Dasgupta et al., 2021). Despite differences in methods and assumptions across several decades, these estimates (ranging from 1 to 3.6 billion) tally remarkably well with those implied by O'Neill et al.'s analysis under a business-as-usual trajectory.

However, Joel Cohen (2017) has argued that estimates of carrying capacity have varied considerably as they depend not only on technical questions of resources and technology (as in O'Neill et al.'s provisioning system reforms) but on normative ones: what is to be sustained, for whom and at what standard. As he observed in JP&S Volume 2 No 1:

> How many people the Earth can support depends in part on how many will wear cotton and how many polyester; on how many will eat beef and how many bean sprouts; on how many will want parks

> and how many will want parking lots; on how many will want Jaguars (luxury sports cars) with a capital J and how many will want jaguars (endangered felines) with a small j. These choices change with time and circumstance, and so will how many people the Earth can support. (40–41)

Carrying capacity is in this sense as much a value-laden construct as a biophysical one, and the equal shares figure is better understood as a heuristic device for the expression of a particular distributive ideal rather than as a natural ceiling.

The commendable normative aspirations of the equal shares tradition are also its principal weakness. The binding constraint is *achievability* rather than *desirability*: demographic momentum places the reduction to three billion well into the next century, while the rapid transformations in fertility, consumption and value orientation that any other path would demand (including O'Neill et al.'s achievement of an equally good life for 7 billion) would disrupt the ontological security anchoring agents' everyday lives, generating resistance that renders even the most defensible proposal politically inert. A pragmatist alternative, such as that advanced in Earth4All's Giant Leap scenario (Callegari and Stoknes, 2023), instead treats sustainability as a direction of travel rather than a fixed threshold, pursuing gradual, broadly acceptable transitions that work with existing structures of motivation rather than against them. On this view, a global population of around six billion by 2100, at improving levels of welfare and with environmental degradation in retreat, satisfies none of the equalitarian optima but constitutes a defensible and achievable basis for longer-term sustainability (Samways and Anderson-Samways, 2026). Nonetheless, even these less arduous ambitions, given the current state of global cooperation and governance, would still require a momentous shift in the present geopolitical trajectory.

Articles in this issue

The four articles collected in this issue engage, from different disciplinary and regional starting points, with the core problematic identified above: the disjunction between the urgency of population dynamics as a variable in global environmental and social change, and the inadequacy of the frames through which that variable is currently apprehended.

Delacroix et al.: Pronatalism, planetary boundaries and reproductive rights

In *Why Pronatalism Fails the Planetary Health Test,* Céline Delacroix and thirteen co-authors – spanning population health, ecology, reproductive medicine, law and environmental science – mount a sustained critique of the growing global trend towards pronatalist policy. They argue that efforts to boost birth rates, however economically motivated, are ecologically indefensible, representing a dangerous mismatch between short-term demographic management and long-term planetary health. Pronatalist discourse, they contend, conspicuously ignores the concept of planetary boundaries, framing demographic decline purely as an economic problem while externalising its environmental costs onto future generations. Drawing on recent scientific assessments, including the 2026 Water Bankruptcy report (a major scientific assessment of global freshwater depletion) and the IPCC's Sixth Assessment, the authors show that population size remains a key variable in ecological degradation, from resource depletion and biodiversity loss to accelerating climate change.

The article also confronts the factual premises of pronatalism, observing that fears of 'population collapse' consistently conflate falling fertility rates with absolute decline, obscuring the projected growth of global population from 8.2 billion today to a peak of approximately 10.3 billion in the 2080s; the appropriate response to the genuine challenges of ageing societies, the authors argue, lies in progressive social and labour policy rather than in raising birth rates. They further demonstrate that pronatalist agendas frequently undermine women's reproductive autonomy, and that universal access to voluntary family planning is both a matter of justice and an effective, rights-based mechanism through which population can stabilise – an argument lent particular urgency by recent reductions in US funding for global family planning services.

Greguš: Population growth and global security

Jan Greguš makes a forceful case that population growth is not only an environmental concern but a fundamental and chronically underappreciated driver of global insecurity. Conventional security discourse – preoccupied with military threats, terrorism and geopolitical rivalry – consistently fails to address population dynamics as an underlying cause of the very instabilities it seeks to manage. Drawing on security studies, demography, ecology and public health,

the article proceeds systematically through eight interconnected security threats exacerbated by population growth: food insecurity, water scarcity, pandemic emergence, climate change, unemployment, social conflict, violent extremism and forced migration. Particular attention is paid to sub-Saharan Africa, where rapid growth, large youth cohorts, unemployment and environmental stress converge to produce conditions highly conducive to radicalisation and conflict, with the 'youth bulge' receiving sustained analysis as a structural risk factor for violence.

The article's prescriptive dimension is equally important: the most strategic, ethical and cost-effective response, Greguš argues, lies not in military expenditure or reactive crisis management but in proactive investment in voluntary family planning, contraceptive access, and the education and empowerment of women and girls – a call for long-term, preventive thinking in security policy whose logic is analogous to that of preventive medicine.

OHirsi: The Wheelbarrow Motion Theory of irregular migration

In his contribution to this issue Adam OHirsi introduces the Wheelbarrow Motion Theory (WMT), a novel and imaginative conceptual framework for understanding why irregular migration from the Global South to the Global North persists and accelerates despite increasingly stringent border enforcement. Where existing frameworks – most notably Lee's (1966) classical push–pull model – treat climate change and corruption as separate or merely additive drivers of displacement, WMT reconceptualises them as mutually reinforcing forces that together generate migration momentum substantially greater than either could produce in isolation. A critical narrative review spanning the Horn of Africa, the Sahel, the Northern Triangle of Central America and South Asia reveals a consistent pattern: climate shocks erode livelihoods and household resilience, while corruption simultaneously undermines adaptation programmes, diverts humanitarian aid and restricts access to legal mobility pathways. Where these forces combine, displacement becomes structural rather than episodic, and irregular migration emerges as a rational response to severely constrained choices.

OHirsi also advances a pointed critique of security-centred Western policy responses – deportation, detention, border externalisation and anti-smuggling operations – which are shown to reroute migration flows rather than reducing

them, while frequently generating serious human rights abuses. Such policies, he argues, fundamentally misdiagnose migration as a border-management challenge rather than a symptom of interacting climate and governance failures; the article concludes with recommendations centred on governance reform, anti-corruption safeguards in climate finance, investment in climate-resilient livelihoods and expanded legal migration pathways.

Rosenthal: Child support policy as demographic variable

Michael Rosenthal presents the first large-scale cross-national analysis of child support policy as a demographic variable. Drawing on a novel dataset covering 91 countries across six continents, the article compares the strength and structure of national child support systems against 21 social, economic, health and environmental indicators. The central finding is striking: countries with robust systems – characterised by a substantial number of enforcement mechanisms, a dedicated administrative agency and/or a publicly funded assurance programme – consistently outperform weaker systems across a remarkably broad range of metrics, including substantially lower rates of unintended pregnancy and abortion, reduced infant and maternal mortality, lower adolescent birth rates, higher female educational attainment and greater female parliamentary representation.

Most pertinent here, strong child support enforcement is associated with significantly slower rates of natural population increase – a relationship Rosenthal attributes to the financial accountability that enforceable obligations create, encouraging more deliberate reproductive decision-making. Unlike coercive demographic interventions, child support enforcement operates through economic incentives, commands broad cross-partisan support and is consistent with reproductive rights: an underutilised instrument, Rosenthal argues, of both welfare and population sustainability policy.

Conclusion

The analysis presented here suggests that the principal obstacles to rigorous thinking about population dynamics are not primarily informational. The data, the scientific assessments, and the ethical frameworks for rights-based population engagement are all available. What shapes their reception is the set of interpretive frames – operative in mainstream media, in environmental scholarship, and in policy discourse – through which they are encountered. As argued throughout

this editorial, such frames are ideological not in the pejorative sense of deliberate distortion, but in the more fundamental sense that they are the medium of perception itself, encountered as clarity rather than as constraint, and therefore difficult to subject to critical examination.

The contributions gathered in this issue can be read as an effort to do precisely that: to make those frames visible, to subject them to evidence-based scrutiny, and to reconsider the place of population in debates about environmental sustainability, justice and human futures. As this journal enters its second decade, the challenge is not to resolve these debates conclusively but to ensure that the frames through which population is discussed remain open to the critical examination that this journal exists to pursue. That challenge carries a human cost when it fails: the ideological foreclosure of the population-environment-consumption nexus does not merely impoverish academic debate. It shapes resource allocation, forecloses policy options, and leaves unmet the needs of the billions of people – particularly women in high-fertility, low-income regions – whose welfare is most directly implicated in how these questions are answered.

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