

World's science academies call for coordinated action on population and consumption

By Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf)

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The world's 105 science academies – including the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) – highlighted the global challenges of population growth and consumption and urged world leaders to take decisive action.

ASSAf President, Professor Robin Crewe, said that the Academy of Science of South Africa is pleased to be a signatory to the statement calling for coordinated action on population and consumption. The challenges of population growth and consumption affect both developing and developed countries and place a severe strain on the planet's natural resources and global responsibilities and should be addressed urgently in a collective and coordinated manner.

“The Rio summit offers a unique opportunity for policymakers to use the sound, evidence-based advice of science academies around the world to address these challenges.”

Through IAP, the global network of science academies, academies from all over the world, including countries as diverse as Brazil, Ghana, the United States and South Africa, have come together to call for action on population and consumption.

The academies' statement highlights that current patterns of consumption, especially in high-income countries, are eroding the planet's natural resources and the interests of future generations, and should consequently and urgently be reduced. It also highlights that, if the right conditions are in place, reduced consumption can stimulate and facilitate economic development, improve health and living standards, and increase political and social stability and security.

The statement emphasises the relevance of population and consumption to the future of both developed and developing countries and reminds policymakers to need to consider the following:

- Population and consumption determine the rates at which natural resources are exploited and the ability of the Earth to meet our food, water and energy needs in the future.
- Current patterns of consumption in some parts of the world are no longer sustainable.
- Rapid population growth can be an obstacle to improving living standards in poor countries, to eliminating poverty and to reducing gender inequality.
- Changes in population age structure resulting from declining birth and death rates can have important environmental, social and economic impacts, including increased demands on healthcare and pensions systems.
- Population growth contributes to migration and urbanisation, which if unexpected and unplanned can be economically and politically disruptive, thereby preventing potential opportunities for economic and social development from being realised.
- The combination of unsustainable consumption and the number of people on the planet can directly affect our capacity to support natural resources and the environment.

The statement also highlights some key actions that need to be taken, including:

- consideration of population and consumption in all policies, including those related to poverty reduction and economic development, global inequality, biodiversity and the environment;
- reduction of levels of damaging types of consumption and the development of more sustainable alternatives, with action critically needed in high-income countries;
- encouragement of development strategies that help reduce population growth, in particular those that promote education to women and girls;
- provision of access to comprehensive reproductive health and family planning programmes for all. This issue requires substantial additional resources from governments and international donors;
- a global shift to a new, green economy through the reduction of levels of damaging types of consumption and the development of more sustainable alternatives;
- development of policies that improve the quality of life of older people and create new opportunities for their continued contribution to society;
- development of urban planning policies that take into account future consumption and demographic trends.

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