

# Drawdown: a review of the Review

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*By Jane O'Sullivan*

Hats off to Paul Hawken, the environmentalist behind [Project Drawdown](#). Three years ago, he published a best-selling book, '[Drawdown: the most comprehensive plan ever proposed to reverse global warming](#)'. The concept was brilliantly simple. It stripped away the complexity of how to respond to climate change, by cataloguing the hundred most impactful actions that could be taken, using existing technologies, to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Listed at numbers 6 and 7 were 'Educating Girls' and 'Family Planning', each attributed 59.6 Gt CO<sub>2</sub>-eq. Less obvious was that, when taken together, these two constituted the greatest single contribution of all, at 119 Gt. And they do go together, since they represent the emissions saved by reducing global population growth from the UN's 'medium fertility' projection to its 'low fertility' projection. To his credit, Paul Hawken drew attention to this fact in talks on the project, particularly in his appearance on Damon Gameau's uplifting climate-solutions movie '[2040](#)'.

Note that the UN's low-fertility projection is an outcome-based projection (achieving half a child per woman fewer births globally), not based on the policies or actions required to achieve that outcome. *Drawdown* simply split the resulting emissions equally between 'education for girls' and 'family planning access', on an entirely arbitrary basis. By focusing most of the commentary on empowering girls, they might deflect the push-back against family planning programs, which many readers still wrongly associate with neo-colonial, victim-blaming, rights-abusing 'population control'.

Recently, Project Drawdown has released a new book, '[The Drawdown Review 2020: Climate Solutions for a New Decade](#)'.

Population interventions are again included, but this time under the single entry 'Health & Education', attributed 85.4 Gt CO<sub>2</sub>-eq emissions reductions.



Family planning counseling. Photo: Sala Lewis

### **Is political correctness causing population efforts to be misdirected?**

The new presentation gives the impression that population growth is best minimised by indirect, rather than direct, interventions. We know this to be untrue: all instances of rapid fertility decline since 1955 have been associated with direct promotion of small families within national voluntary family planning programs. And yes, that includes China, where most fertility decline occurred under a voluntary program in the decade before the one-child policy was introduced. In contrast, the link between girls' education and fertility tends to be weak, once co-determinants (such as parents' socioeconomic status and support for gender equity) are taken into account.

Disappointingly, even less information is given about the calculation of this population contribution than in the original book '*Drawdown*'. There is no explanation for why the emissions reduction is lower than in round 1. The text in this section is mainly an attempt to ward off criticisms for including such an item at all. For example, it stresses that '*It's critical to note the vast disparities in emissions from high-income countries compared to low ...*' and asserts that '*The topic of population also raises the troubling, often racist, classist, and coercive history of population control.*' Like many current treatments of the topic, it ignores the profoundly humanitarian history of the voluntary family planning movement, instead elevating rare instances of ethnic targeting and coercion far beyond their importance. To assure that what they are advocating has the approval of the global community, they stress, '*the United Nations notes that the international community has committed to ensuring that all people have access to family planning, should they wish to use it, and the ability to decide how many children to have and when.*'

The *Drawdown Review* states, '*People's choices about how many children to have should be theirs and theirs alone. And those children should inherit a livable planet.*' But it does not explore the tension between these two rights. Somehow, the use of the word 'planet'

lifts the responsibility for each child to the entire human race, absolving parents of this responsibility. Yet the liveability of their community's own local environment, under their own customary management, is directly diminished by increasing the size of each generation. Somehow, the rest of humanity bear the guilt if local destruction makes a misery of life for those children.

The UN human rights charter, affirmed in the Cairo Programme of Action on Population and Development, states that parents should be able to choose their family size 'freely *and responsibly*'. The words 'and responsibly' are almost entirely forgotten in recent years. At least, the words '*the ability to decide how many*' might be interpreted to include education on the personal responsibilities of parents, not only toward their own children, but to the others (human and non-human) against whom their children must compete for ever-diminishing means of subsistence.

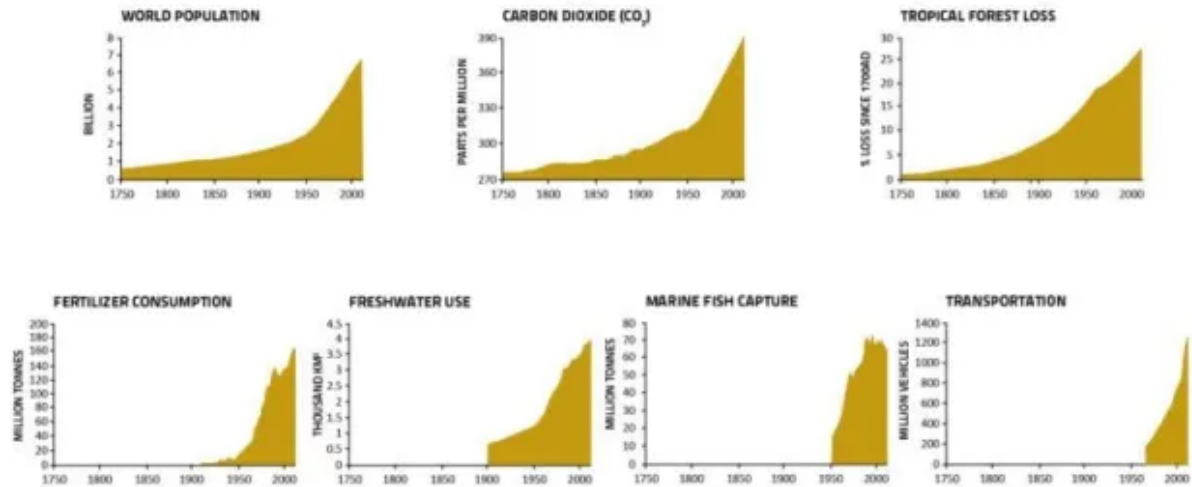
### **The cross-cutting benefits of population rendered invisible**

The new Drawdown report stresses their attempts to integrate solutions in the scenarios presented: '*The individual "bottom-up" solution models can be run in isolation, but we also integrate the models within and across multiple sectors. This allows us to consider how the ensemble of solutions might work together, ... and addresses interaction between solutions where possible.*'

It is very difficult to incorporate all likely interactions, without introducing dangerously uncertain assumptions, and it is understandable that Project Drawdown does not do this comprehensively. That the results are presented as an inventory of separate and additive items means that the benefits of interactions are attributed to one or other action, with little transparency.

Population affects the scale of most of the emissions sources on their list, and hence the impact of most of the remediation actions. But there is no evidence that these interactions were studied, let alone reported on. The *Drawdown Review* presents two scenarios, representing strong climate action and truly heroic climate action, with greater implementation of each solution in the second scenario. Emissions are compared with a baseline, no-climate-action scenario. But 'Health and Education' is one item that is not varied. The same low population projection is assumed in both scenarios, against the higher population assumed in the baseline scenario. This presentation maximises the emissions avoidance from other solutions, while minimising the role of population growth reduction. For example, the deforestation avoided as a direct result of less population growth in tropical forest countries (the World Resources Institute estimated this as an area the size of Germany in Africa alone) is attributed to 'Forest Protection'. The lower demand for food under 'Reduced food waste' incorporates the lower demand for food resulting from a lower population than the baseline. Obscuring in this manner the multiple climate benefits that fewer people could provide is par for the course, but a missed opportunity.

# Human Footprint



Source: United Nations, 2017

Summary of the human footprint on Earth. Source: Population Matters

It is also worth noting that *Drawdown* estimates only emissions reductions to the year 2050. Most of its 'solutions' are one-off transitions from current practices (such as electricity generation moving from coal to renewables, diets changing from meat-rich to meat-free). If fully implemented by 2050, they offer no subsequent reductions. In contrast, a shift in fertility between now and 2050 generates a much greater impact on population size beyond 2050 than before that year. The urgency of fertility reduction is precisely so that any of the gains that might be achieved on *Drawdown*'s other items are not undone by increased human demands beyond the modelling horizon. The longer our time-frame, the more important are this decade's birth reductions. This importance is unstated in *Drawdown*.

It is good that *Drawdown* includes some treatment of population and family planning, when so few do. But we are yet to see honest and accurate attention given to the role of proactively reducing birth rates in minimising climate change.