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Launch of *World Watch* Magazine's Population Issue

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Edited Transcript—Robert Engelman

I want to thank Geoff and Sean and all the folks here at the Environmental Change and Security Program. I've been really blessed over the years, both with Worldwatch and before that for a number of years with Population Action International. I've worked very closely with Geoff and his colleagues.

So it's been a -- it feels a little bit like home to me. And I guess the downside to that is I feel like most of you have probably heard me before. So on that basis, I don't have any slides. I do have a book cover. A lot of the answers to the questions that were just asked are in that. There's some copies here, and I've got a few myself, happy to give you an author's discount and an inscription. Promotion never sleeps.

But I wanted to thank not only Geoff and his colleagues here at the Wilson Center's ECSP Program, but also Tom Prugh and Worldwatch for allowing me this privilege of being in this magazine and actually for working for the organization. One of the reasons I joined Worldwatch a little more than a year, year and a half ago, was that this is an environmental think tank, environmental research organization, that from its very origins, its founding by Lester Brown in 1974, saw population as an integral part of the quest for environmental sustainability and struggled with that and with how to bring those two together over the years. And in joining Worldwatch, I was assured that if I could get all of my other assignments done -- and there are a few of those -- that I could continue to take these issues on, and in fact kind of reengage or re-enliven some of Worldwatch's work on this effort. And, in fact, the magazine is part of that. Obviously Tom, helped by Lisa Mastny, Lyle Rosbotham -- we have a few people who put this incredible magazine together pretty much all by themselves -- it always amazes me -- did the lion's share of all this work, as well as of course the authors.

But it was part of an overall initiative that I've been very active in encouraging, moving forward, and working on at Worldwatch to take this issue on in a larger way than many environmental research organizations have. And with the support of the foundations that



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Tom has mentioned, we're going to be moving forward. We'll have more pieces about population I hope, not only in the magazine -- I don't know how soon we'll do another special edition -- but we're open to features in the magazine as well as in our annual publication, *State of the World*, which this year will be about climate change, and Web features and papers.

In particular, we'll be focusing, thanks to new support from the Wallace Global Fund, on linkages between population dynamics and economic issues, economic trends, and economic problems in the world, which I think will be extremely interesting to take on. I'm looking forward to. And I invite anyone interested in working on this or other issues related to population to join with us and to get in touch with Tom or myself. The line forms to the right, right after this program.

One of the things that's particularly good about *Worldsatch* is -- it isn't just my idea it's something that's been seen consistently at *Worldwatch* -- that it's very similar really to the theme of my own book, *More*, that providing women what they themselves want, namely access to family planning and other reproductive health services, the power to make and to put life decisions into effect and maybe, in reference to Tom's comments about low fertility and government's efforts to try to buy families off into having more children, maybe they also want a little bit of help with work around the house and raising the child. These are really the key to sustainable population dynamics. And these are the issues that we should particularly focus on from a policy perspective when we look at them.

We might also be looking at issues relating to our own country's population. We might be looking at issues relating to migration. We might be looking at issues relating to age structure. That's one of the exciting things about the work ahead of us, that really anything involving population and environmental and indeed social sustainability are in the mix. And if anyone wants to ask me my own data-free, initial working hypothesis on what population has to do with the sub-prime mortgage crisis and the collapse of the bailout, we can maybe take that up in the discussion.

But today I mostly want to stress one point that I tried to bring out in the article, which is an excerpt from my book, *More*, that's in the magazine and that's also brought out pretty consistently in the rest of the book. And that is that this interest in women's well being and in women's capacity to choose the timing of child bearing and the somewhat different interest in human numbers and the impact of human numbers on the world, have long been --



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I actually argue perhaps have always been -- very closely intertwined, and that contrary to some opinion, to the contrary, this is natural, this is understandable, and in general it's a very good thing.

Now there are a lot of general perceptions and indeed there's a recent book whose author appeared with me in this building just six months ago, who make the argument that the interest in population numbers and the impact of population growth on the environment, on the world as a whole, was a distorting element in international development for a number of years and was really sort of a demographic imposition on something quite separate, which had to do with people's freedom to make decisions about their own child bearing, and particularly in women's health. There's not nothing to this argument. There is something to this argument. But I think it's actually a distortion of what really happened over the last 50 years -- 100 -- even more than that, and that this particular connection really goes back to the very earliest awareness of human population.

And it's easy to document. And I had a lot of fun doing this in my own book, going back at least to the time of Malthus and the 18th century. So that from almost the very early days, not just Robert Malthus but Jeremy Bentham, Francis Place, whose early work promoted contraception in the context of population growth, but also a number of very interesting pioneering women, beginning with Mary Wollstonecraft, Annie Besant, Aletta Jacobs, Mary Stopes in the United Kingdom, and Margaret Sanger. Tom mentioned some of these people. And most of these, with the obvious exception of Malthus, effortlessly saw connections between women's own well being and the overall well being of the species in terms of human numbers. And I think that would be good if we looked at that as well and continued to work at that and not be dissuaded from that in spite of the claims that are made, that this linkage invariably ends up in abuses of human rights. Obviously, I disagree that it does invariably. And I mention this because one way or another, most of us seem to find it difficult to link population, demographic change, with the realities of women's lives and the critical need of most active couples to have access to the means to stay healthy while they're sexually active and to determine at every point along their sexual activity whether they want to become pregnant and have a healthy child at this time, and especially whether they need or want some method of contraception.

I mention this particularly because in writing the book and before I wrote the book and since writing the book, I'm always amazed not just how rarely population dynamics comes up in the public discourse, but how even when it does, it's often with little or absolutely no



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attention to the positive ways that population dynamics can be influenced, especially by trying to do the right things particularly in women's lives -- women's and men's lives. I'm glad Tod Preston from PAI has joined us because Tod has a blog on Population Action International's Web site -- he posted just yesterday after listening to Tom Friedman here yesterday morning -- in which he actually lays out a number of recent and very encouraging mentions by prominent writers or public figures about population, in which in a welcome way, as Tom points out, there's an acknowledgement of the importance of population and how it affects the issues that we're all grappling with on the global scene.

And I agreed with Tod that this was really, really quite interesting. But I couldn't help in reading through this that it illustrated a point that strikes me a lot, that people like Tom Friedman, former President Bill Clinton, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, and CIA Director Michael Hayden, have not generally in my experience -- I haven't read everything they've said on this topic -- but they have not generally been able to link their comments about population or their concerns about population with women's lives and what's needed in women's lives. And I have this hunch that it has something to do with the fact that the sense is that is sort of a women's topic, that it's not something that men feel very comfortable talking about.

And it reminded me just briefly -- I hope this is somewhat relevant -- of Governor Palin's acceptance speech at the Republican convention. If you recall, right after Senator McCain chose Governor Palin, there was this hurried rush by his aides to rewrite her acceptance speech -- that in itself was a little revealing -- because it had been written with a, we were told, a "male tone." And it reminded me that these are incredibly gendered issues, and that when we discuss these, they are gendered issues and we can't escape the role of gender in them. And in fact that was part of my own effort to kind of break through this mold and having the audacity to subtitle a book on population "Nature and Women's Lives: What Women Want." But I think it's important that we learn how to do that and become comfortable crossing genders in effect on these topics, because these topics are so important.

It's also the case that many who work on women's health and on sexual and reproductive rights and health aren't all that comfortable linking the work that they do to population per se. And I believe that they should. I believe that they should get more comfortable with this topic and this linkage. And actually, amazingly enough, I'm sometimes asked for advice about this by some of the people who are feeling a little uncomfortable. And the point that I often make about it is that if you, women who work particularly in the SRHR field, the



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sexual and reproductive health and rights field, don't talk about population from your perspective and from what you know about these issues, others will.

And they may not know as much as you do about it. And you may be left out of a conversation that you really want to be part of, because these issues, as Tod's blog points out -- and I recommend it to you -- are coming back in a big way with climate change, with food prices, with energy prices, with the price of housing, and the way these all interact in a climate of incredible economic insecurity that we're in right now.

And they're important not only because women's health and women's rights matter on their own, on their own merit -- and they do -- but because healthy and empowered women exercising their right and their rights, exert the best possible influence on population outcomes. After writing this book I believe that more strongly than ever, even though some people have questioned me as I talk about this book, "Are you really saying that if every women around the world could choose for herself at every moment in her reproductive career whether or when to become pregnant that world population would actually stabilize, and that the governments who are now concerned about hyper-low fertility could drop their concerns?" And my answer that that is yes, I really do believe that. Everything I've done in writing this book and in the dozens of conversations I had with women in some of the poorest countries in the world convinced me that that's true.

It's not going to happen right away. We have a lot of population momentum. There's going to still be diversity in fertility rates. There's no question. But overall, I'm convinced that we will get to global replacement fertility and below when we achieve that ability. It will certainly help if we can also educate women and men, quite frankly. Sexuality education, not everyone in this country is sure that that's a good thing. But let me tell you that's a good thing. That would help as well, as well as just helping our overall sexual and reproductive health. And certainly providing more economic opportunities for women are part of it. But the particular key is letting women choose for themselves when to become pregnant. That is something I harp on a lot.

So, finally, if I have just two more minutes -- Geoff's gone, so I have two more minutes -- I'd just like to make a small prediction along these lines and point to a country that I think is really interesting in this regard right now, and that's the Philippines. I hope you've all been reading about the Philippines. It's an interesting microcosm of the economic problems around food prices, particularly energy prices, the impact of population on a biodiversity and



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environment-rich country and on its economic situation, in an environment where the government is ambivalent about how to approach reproductive health and women's choice.

And here's the prediction I would like to make, because I didn't make too many predictions in the book, actually. I feel the population people from Malthus to Ehrlich on have gotten into some trouble when they make predictions, so I was very cautious about it. I'm going to step out for the purposes of this discussion -- you heard it here first -- and make a prediction, that if the Philippines government passes the law that they're now considering, which would essentially require the federal government to embrace and to support the distribution of modern contraception as part of its reproductive health programs countrywide, if they pass that law, which is very controversial and opposed by the Roman Catholic Church in the Philippines, and if the government actually invests in that law and really makes it work, that I believe within five years, five years, the fertility of the Philippines will drop by a full child.

That's not a fraction of a child. We laugh about that in demography. Toes to scalp, a full child -- and the Philippines will reach roughly replacement fertility. And the reason I believe that is because I'm convinced by my own conversations with Filipino women and because what all I've read since -- and it's been a little while since I've been to the Philippines -- that this is a country where there's a high unmet need for contraception, where women are extremely strategic about what they want for their children, the kind of lives that they want for their families, and that if the government would just get out of the way, they would have a sustainable population.

So on that provocative note, I will let it go. And I look forward to our discussion. Thank you.



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