**Intended Childbearing and Sustainable Development**

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Presentation at 2011 International Conference on Family Planning

Session 1.1.13: Reaching Out at Rio: Explaining Population Growth and Family Planning to Environmentalists [Slide 1]

Although population is a perpetually contentious topic, few would disagree that population growth below that of the United Nations Population Division’s widely cited medium projection would contribute to long-term global environmental sustainability, and hence make sustainable development less challenging for governments and societies. [Reference 1.] As a world map comparing population density and night production of light visible from space suggests, population and per capita energy consumption (closely related with per capita income) multiply each other to affect the global environment and natural-resource availability. [Slides 2 and 3.] Obviously, the world needs to work on reducing and bringing more global equity to per-capita consumption. While that moves ahead, it is clearly in all people’s interest that population follow one of the lower projected trajectories toward the next century—assuming this occurs through achievement of women’s and couples’ childbearing aspirations and through any other process (e.g. rising death rates, rising infecundity, or the imposition of childbearing intention external to childbearers). [Slide 4.]

Researchers with the Futures Group have estimated demographic impacts from, and the financing and policy implications of, meeting unmet need for family planning in the United States and most developing countries. [Slides 5-8, Reference 2.] This work generally suggests that the United Nations Population Division’s low projection of population growth to 2050 [Reference 4] would be roughly attainable by an accelerated effort to meet unmet need for family planning services, and that the costs for such service provision would be similar under both scenarios.

The concept of *unmet need*, however, is not well understood by the public and is difficult to communicate to laypersons. A more readily understandable term and associated framing for the problem of imperfect personal capacity to manage ones childbearing timing and fertility is *unintended pregnancy*. The Guttmacher Institute has developed estimates of the rates and proportions of unintended pregnancies worldwide and their impacts on rates and numbers of births that are unplanned. [Reference 3.] Based on the Guttmacher data, and allowing for unplanned births that result from mistimed rather than never-wanted pregnancies, it is possible to project total fertility and growth rates of world population under a hypothetical scenario in which all future births are outcomes of intended pregnancies.

At the Worldwatch Institute we have been testing the hypothesis under an unrealistically conservative assumption, with early and preliminary results published earlier this year in the journal *Solutions* [Slide 9, reference 5]. Under the assumption that any prevented mistimed pregnancy results in an immediate intended pregnancy (hence treating all mistimed as intended pregnancies and subtracting only never-wanted pregnancies), total world fertility would fall very slightly below replacement immediately. Under less conservative assumptions world population growth could reverse before 2050 [Slides 10-12.] Our work has barely begun, however, and we intend to explore the concept of “intended pregnancy” and the research challenges inherent in the hypothesis.

Most people can relate to the feelings of either elation or dread that a woman feels on learning that she has become pregnant. Successfully communicating that population policy aims to increase to the highest possible levels the proportion of pregnancies that are welcome rather than unintended, public support for such policies would be strengthened. If, in addition, it could be shown that a benefit effect of such policies, beyond directly improving individual

well-being, would be to slow and eventually reverse world population growth—with all environmental benefits this would help bring about—public support for rights-based population policies would likely grow in both the developing and industrialized worlds.

This research will take on a two-fold task in this complex arena. Qualitatively, it will lay out the issues involved in considering demographic impacts of raising the proportion of births that result from intended pregnancy (as well as to point out the reasons for doing so). And it will address some of the challenges of attempting to assess the proportion and magnitude of such births in the human population. We will endeavor to make a first-order assessment suggesting how future population would change from the “expected” future if we could somehow instantaneously empower all women worldwide to have personal control over the timing of pregnancy. Based primarily on the Guttmacher Institute data on intended pregnancies and resulting “unplanned births,” we intend to calculate what the global total fertility rate would be if such births did not occur and hence did not contribute to total fertility or future population growth.

The Guttmacher Institute estimates that 22 percent of all births worldwide are the outcomes of unintended pregnancies. There is considerable some variation by region and country. If we used these figures to calculate birthrates and life tables without such births, our task would be relatively easy—and total fertility rates would be well below replacement for the world as a whole. (Current replacement fertility worldwide is 2.34, based on dividing total fertility by net reproduction, using data from the United Nations Population Division’s 2010 revision of its World Population Prospects. [Reference 4.]) But the task is much more complicated. Guttmacher Institute data also suggest that most unintended pregnancies are mistimed rather than unwanted altogether, so I must make assumptions about the demographic impact of preventing mistimed

pregnancies. Will not such prevention result in an increase of later intended pregnancies? Probably, but in some cases, later circumstances would be no better than current ones for an intended pregnancy. In others, the woman’s age-related fecundity may not allow for the later intended pregnancy. In short, the amount and timing of births from intended pregnancies that result from earlier prevented mistiming of pregnancy cannot be predicted based on available data.

To address this problem we will endeavor to present a range of estimates and projections of birthrates and future population growth, bounded by two assumptions. On the most conservative side, we will simply exclude all mistimed pregnancies from our calculations of births from unintended pregnancies, based on the best estimates of global rates of mistimed pregnancies. In effect, this is biologically unrealistic in the extreme, since it essentially assumes that prevention of a mistimed pregnancy is immediately followed by an intended one—in the same year. For that reason, this boundary offers an unassailably conservative basis for one end of our range of calculations.

As the use of such assumptions indicates, the available data appear to lack the comprehensive geographical and temporal accuracy that would support a robust estimate of the demographic impacts of women’s control of pregnancy timing. Why go through the exercise, then? First, to find all available data and see how and for what they can be used. Second to make as robust and defensible as possible a first-order estimate of the impact. The idea that prevention of unintended pregnancy could actually turn population dynamics into an environmentally positive force is among the most hopeful available in the consideration of the sustainability crisis. Its potential to mobilize public support for reproductive health and especially family planning services, based on the intention and aspirations of individual women themselves, has not been tested. We need to begin the difficult process of assessing whether the idea is realistic or a fantasy, yet almost no work on this important question has gone forward. If the data are insufficient to answer our questions today, we need to find ways to develop better data, rather than dismiss the inquiry as too speculative due to the lack of data.

**References:**

[Reference 1.] United Nations, Seminar on the Relevance of Population Aspects for the Achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, United Nations, New York, 2005, p. XII-1.

[Reference 2.] Scott Moreland, Ellen Smith and Suneeta Sharma, World Population Prospects and Unmet Need for Family Planning, Futures Group, Washington, DC, April 20, 2010, available at <http://pubs.futuresgroup.com/3572WPPResearchBrief.pdf>, accessed November 7, 2011.

[Reference 3.] Susheela Singh et al., Abortion Worldwide: A Decade of Uneven Progress, Guttmacher Institute, New York, 2009, available at <http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/Abortion-Worldwide.pdf>, accessed November 7, 2011.

[Reference 4.] United Nations Population Division, World Population Prospects: The 2010 Revision Population Database, available on-line at <http://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/>, accessed November 7, 2011.

[Reference 5.] Robert Engelman, “An End to Population Growth: Why Family Planning Is Key to a Sustainable Future, *Solutions* Volume 2, Issue 3, April 2011, pp. 32-41, available on line at <http://www.thesolutionsjournal.com/node/919>, accessed November 7, 2011.