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## **Launch of *World Watch* Magazine's Population Issue**

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Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

***Edited Transcript—Thomas Prugh***

Well, thanks, Geoff. And thanks to the Wilson Center for hosting and for those kind words about the magazine issue. And thank you all for coming to this today. I have to mention also that in one sense this event is brought to you by the foundations whose generous support helped make the population forum issue of *World Watch* magazine possible. Those would be the United Nations Population Fund, the Wallace Global Fund, the Compton Foundation, and the Winslow Foundation.

One of the pleasures of being the editor of *World Watch* magazine is that I get a bird's eye view of a wide variety of subjects. By the same token, one of the downsides of being the editor is that I learn just enough about most of these to be dangerous. And in this case what I don't know about population would fill volumes. Luckily many of those volumes have been contributed to by the people we assembled for this issue and here today.

So, coming to this subject as an amateur, as I was doing my research I found a lot of fascinating material. Take this headline, for instance. This was in the *Christian Science Monitor* not long ago: "Spain Labors to Bring Home Baby and the Bacon," it went. And the story was about the mayor of a village in southwestern Spain who gave a live pig to every couple who delivered a newborn. One of the winners of one of these pigs said, "I'd rather have free daycare than a free pig, but every little bit helps."

In a similar vein, you may have heard that last year, Russian president Vladimir Putin declared September 13<sup>th</sup> a national holiday for conceiving children. And couples who delivered a baby nine months later, which not coincidentally would have been on Russia Day, got refrigerators for that accomplishment. And also a story in Reuters -- and believe me, I'm not exhausting all these kinds of stories by mentioning these three. There's plenty of them out there. This Reuters story appeared in March. In an effort to boost Singapore's low birth rate, a high school there has launched a government-sponsored course, teaching students about flirting and relationships. And the subjects include love song analysis, speed dating, and online chatting.



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You know, and all this time I thought we had too many people. You know, that's what I in my naiveté assumed was the problem facing the planet. But it's obvious that although we hear endlessly about globalization, there are many places that take a pretty local view of population matters, for one reason or another. I'm not convinced that this isn't an example of how human beings can do things that appear to be individually smart but collectively stupid. We'll see how that plays out. Because it does seem clear that if the arguments in the Population Forum issue that we've assembled are correct, that the planet as a whole faces some grave problems as a result of rising populations.

And very briefly I'd like to recap what our writers for this issue said, starting out with Robert Engelman, our own vice president for programs at World Watch. He contributed a piece called "Unnatural Increase," which was adapted from his new book, which I've read and can recommend to you. It's called *More: Population, Nature, and What Women Want*. Bob notes that for most of human history, population control efforts were focused on persuading women and sometimes coercing them to bear more children. He then offers a who's who of prominent activists who worked in the other direction, starting with Francis Place in the 1820s and extending through Annie Besant, Aletta Jacobs, and Margaret Sanger.

He also discusses how in the post-World War II years, governments began moving toward policies that actually built on those pioneers' work, sometimes -- and I found this amazing -- simply by lifting prohibitions against contraception. Many governments had had policies in place actively prohibiting the use of contraception. But the history shows that as women and their partners increasingly gained access to effective contraception and thereby more effective control of their own fertility, that the numbers of children they had trended downward.

And today more than three-fifths of reproductive age women or their partners use contraception. And globally, women average just over two-and-a-half children a piece. Bob goes on to argue, however, that after 200 years of this struggle, we seem to have reached the point at which population growth is no longer considered pressing. And support and funding for family planning is actually flat or in decline.

I think the lesson about women's control over their own fertility is reinforced in an article contributed by Professor Lori Hunter of the University of Colorado at Boulder. It was called "Population, Health, and Environment Through a Gendered Lens." Professor Hunter



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describes a program in the Philippines that successfully brings together microcredit, reproductive health measures, and conservation services. And the broader lesson of that case study, it seems to me, is that tailored policies that empower women economically and in terms of fertility control can lead to greater social and environmental well being.

This lesson also comes through in an article from Bernard Orimbo, who until just recently was with the Kenya Field Office of the German Foundation for World Population. Bernard's program taught villagers living near the Great Congo Basin Forest how to farm butterflies, which gave them a sustainable source of income that didn't destroy the forest, unlike the logging and some of the other extractive ways people have been making a living there. The story focused on a man named Wafula, who is earning enough from butterfly farming to keep his daughters in school rather than having to marry them off, which was the normal option and practice in his community.

But when people living in circumstances like Wafula's have fewer options than he did, they often wind up in sprawling, crowded cities like Nairobi. And from an environmental point of view this is a mixed blessing, as described by an article by Leiwin Jiang, Malea Hoepf Young, and Karen Hardee. Karen of course will be speaking in a little bit. They contributed an article called "Population, Urbanization, and the Environment." And they note in that article that between now and 2050, the global urban population is expected to double to about 6.4 billion, nearly as many people as there are on the planet right now.

And those impacts are likely to be considerable. Big cities retain heat. And the bigger they are the more heat they retain. They change water flows and quality as well as biogeochemical cycles. They threaten biodiversity by habitat destruction and fragmentation. On the other side of the ledger, cities can also house and nurture more people with lower per capita resource consumption. And as in so many things, I suspect that how that plays out -- the devil in that is in the details.

A team from the Population Media Center -- for the article it was Scott Connolly, Katie Elmore, and Bill Ryerson -- of course Jim Motavalli is here today carrying that flag -- contributed a piece on a Roper Poll that PMC commissioned this summer -- it's very fresh data -- on U.S. attitudes on population. And I found this just really interesting and disturbing at the same time. A couple of the results that might interest you, barely half of all the respondents taken together agreed that there was a strong connection between population growth and climate change, for example. Now, interestingly, younger Americans seem to



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understand that better than older ones did. But only one in three of those young people agrees that having fewer children of their own would help to protect the environment. I won't even begin to speculate as to what kind of cognitive dissonance is required to hold those two views at the same time. But that's only one of a number of eye openers in this data. So I recommend that article particularly to you.

And finally Elizabeth Leahy of PAI and Sean Peoples of the Wilson Center catalogue some of the security issues associated with rising populations. And again a couple of highlights: Over 95 percent of the next three billion or so people who will arrive on the planet will be born in less developed countries. And these are often places where the economies cannot readily absorb new workers. So many of those people will have to migrate to find jobs. And, in fact, only a couple of years ago, in 2005, already nearly 200 million people were living somewhere other than their country of origin. So this is already a fact of life that's likely to expand in the coming years.

The remittances sent home by guest workers to developing countries totally 145 billion dollars in 2004. That's pretty significant, it seems to me, in terms of capital flows. And this can be seen as a good way of redistributing wealth. But obviously guest worker populations often give rise to considerable social tensions as well. And finally studies also suggest that countries with more than two-thirds of their populations under age 30 are almost 90 percent likely to have autocracies, autocratic regimes; and that high proportions of young people in countries appear to tilt those countries to civil instability.

Those are just a few of the broad lessons apparent from these articles. But a population is, as you all know, a huge topic. And there's lots of stuff we just simply couldn't get to. And I'm sure you've noticed one significant gap. We didn't have anything in this issue on population and climate change. And I can only apologize for that and say that we did have an article lined up on that very topic and it fell through almost literally at the last minute. And we simply weren't able to make other arrangements.

So there were some questions that we didn't get to address, and I would like to mention a few of those. And maybe the panelists and you all can pick these up and discuss them. One is, how good are those UN projections? And what are the assumptions they depend on? Are they reasonably reliable? Have they been reliable in the past? Are they squishy or not? Second one that comes to my mind is -- and I'm fixated on this because I just think it's so bizarre that -- the attempts in some countries to raise fertility rates. Elizabeth Leahy and



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Sean Peoples argue in their article that such efforts have not worked very well in the past. And if that's true, then the question it seems to me ought to be, what policies should governments pursue to cope with the declining ratio of young workers to dependents, which seems like the inevitable fate of every country on the planet at some point?

A third question would be, in view of the potentially desperate global consequences of letting population growth and imbalance race away uncontrolled, what should the developed world's response be to that? And finally -- and this is in the category of "What the hell, why don't we just ask this and see what happens?" -- are human institutions capable of coming to grips with these problems? I have my own doubts, but I'd like to hear what you all have to say about it. These are tough questions. But we have almost an hour and a half to settle them.



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