

FPESA Extended Abstract for UAPS 2015 Conference

Family Planning and Environmental Sustainability Assessment, a Project of the Worldwatch Institute

Presentation title: **African Researchers on Linkages between Family Planning and Environmental Sustainability**

Robert Engelman

Senior Fellow

Worldwatch Institute

Washington, DC, USA

rengelman@worldwatch.org

July 20, 2015

For several decades the idea that wider use of family planning would contribute to a more sustainable natural environment, more supportive to human well-being, has been one possible advocacy tool for those promoting improved access to family planning. In recent years, however, the argument has been less often used and is sometimes seen as controversial, perhaps in part because it is perceived as of little interest and possibly even offensive to women, to Africans and to people in developing countries elsewhere. Africa is often perceived as a continent where exploration of such linkages is least likely to occur, given histories and cultural traditions of high fertility in many countries and some resistance to family planning programs, at least until recently, by such leaders as President Museveni of Uganda. It may therefore appear to some observers that African researchers are less likely than others to contribute to exploration of linkages between family planning and environmental sustainability. Prevailing perceptions about this may in fact discourage younger African researchers and those just beginning their careers from exploring such connections.

Perhaps equally important, the scientific evidence base for these linkages has never been firmly established, least of all in peer-reviewed research. Suppose a survey, meta-analysis and participatory assessment of the peer-reviewed literature could establish that a robust scientific case does exist for family planning's contribution to environmental sustainability. And suppose further that researchers who are women and/or from Africa or developing countries on other continents are among those exploring and perhaps supporting this hypothesis. Researchers might be more likely to engage in exploring these linkages. Those working in or supporting family planning advocacy community might be more likely to use, and more effective in using, the argument that environmental sustainability and sustainable development would benefit from wider availability and use of family planning.

The hypothesis of the Family Planning and Environmental Sustainability Project is twofold: 1) Peer-reviewed scientific research published in the past 10 years supports the thesis that greater use of family planning contributes to environmental sustainability through two main pathways, the empowerment of women and the slowing of population growth. 2) This scientific literature is not restricted to that published in developed countries by developed-country researchers, but rather has been produced in the last decade by researchers of both sexes and from developing as well as developed countries. Women and developing-country researchers in particular are a powerful resource for the advocacy argument that family planning contributes to environmental sustainability.

Researchers at the Worldwatch Institute are surveying scientific literature published in peer-reviewed journals in the last 10 years (i.e., 2005 and later) that may be relevant to our hypothesis. Research papers making direct connections between the practice of family planning by couples and individuals and dispersed environmental benefits are rare to the point of nonexistence. FPESA project staff developed a conceptual framework illustrating possible pathways through which the use of family

planning may contribute to environmental sustainability, with the two principal pathways being empowerment of women and slowing population growth. To identify and select articles for assessment, we are applying key terms (e.g., family planning, population, sustainable development, reproductive health, gender equity) using Google Scholar, Scopus and Web of Knowledge, supplemented by interviews with experts in reproductive health, population and environmental sciences. Using this methodology we have narrowed our search to some 920 articles we are considering for assessment for their relevance to our conceptual framework. We have assembled a network of about two dozen researchers from around the world—nine of them Africans—who are helping us in a participatory assessment of the strongest and most compelling of these. (Numbers are not final as there is some turnover in this group.) We intend to summarize these assessments in a report including a textual summary of our findings and an annotated bibliography of the most relevant articles on potential contribution of family planning to environmental sustainability. This report may be available for distribution, at least electronically, in time for the 2015 UAPS conference in Johannesburg.

While no final conclusions are possible at this time, our preliminary findings are that peer-reviewed research that can document family planning's benefits, directly or indirectly, to environmental sustainability is relatively sparse, despite hundreds of articles published in the last decade that refer to or imply aspects of the linkage. Much of what exists is more subjective and sometimes rhetorical than data-rich and empirical. Numerous articles, for example, open with the assumption that population growth contributes to environmental degradation but then fail to examine this assumption and develop instead ideas on how to address the "resulting" degradation—without considering or making any proposals for action that could influence demographic trends or their impact on the environment. Almost no research explores our hypothesis directly; that is, how precisely family planning might or might not contribute to environmental sustainability.

By contrast, there is a much richer field of peer-reviewed papers exploring some of the pathways and subset linkages within our conceptual framework—e.g., that slower population growth might delay the onset of water scarcity in some places, or that women's proportion in national parliaments helps predict the ratification of international environmental agreements. Our hypothesis requires support by chains of reasoning rather than individual papers that demonstrate it holistically and comprehensively.

We find a considerable subset of relevant research that is authored by women and researchers from developing countries—including African ones. This suggests a wider community of interest in this linkage than has been recognized to date. Finally, nowhere in the research we have seen so far are there findings that undermine the consensus value that family planning and all action on population should be based on human rights, well-being and individual choice.

This work will supplement knowledge on a topic that currently rests on an evidence base that is more inferential than rooted in science. We will summarize and disseminate scientific findings in various fields and topics by a geographically diverse set of female and male authors. The findings—citable to specific papers published in scientific journals, some with publication locations in Africa—will shed light on an array of links germane to the hypothesis that family planning contributes to environmental sustainability. We aim, for example, to organize our selected assessed papers by environmental topic, e.g., climate change, water availability, biological diversity, forest resources, etc. We are particularly looking to identify papers that explore connection between family planning and the empowerment of women. (Most of the literature looks at the relationship in the other direction; i.e., whether empowered women are more likely to use contraception.) This connection would support another: that empowered

women are more likely to contribute to environmental sustainability than women with little autonomy and agency.

Overall, we hope to place family planning on a more scientific footing in relation to women's status, population dynamics, and the influence of both on environmental sustainability and sustainable development. We hope that African population researchers, as others and along with family planning advocates, will find our work especially valuable for 1) going further themselves in pursuing these research issues and 2) applying our findings to family planning advocacy. The work will support research advances and family planning advocacy, in Africa—where fertility is highest in the world—and elsewhere. Finally, we hope to build and diversify the community of experts on the family planning and the environment and foster better communication between African researchers and their colleagues worldwide. Ultimately, improved understanding of the benefits of improved reproductive health and individual choices on childbearing to environmental sustainability will mean that the people of Africa will gain from this research.