

# Sustainability and Family Planning

Communications Field Notes



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For the past three years, Resource Media has worked to shine a spotlight on the environmental benefits of funding for voluntary family planning, with a special focus on the ties between the unmet need for family planning and climate change. We set out to galvanize a powerful new constituency for increased funding for voluntary family planning: conservationists. We believe that engaging green leaders in a dialogue about the ways in which women’s rights to family planning connects to their core issues will help build a broader base of support for policy change. And at the very least, such a dialogue will help dispel some of the tainted legacy around environmental interest in human population.

As with many others working to promote family planning, we’ve had some significant successes, but also encountered some major challenges. This report highlights the strategies we’ve found to be the most effective, as well as the sidetracks that didn’t pan out. Our hope is that the lessons we’ve learned will help others engaged in conversations around the many benefits that family planning funding provides for women, families, and the environment in which we live.

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## INTRODUCTION

How times have changed. Just three years ago linking contraception, climate change and human population was virtually taboo. In 2010, when the Hewlett Foundation released groundbreaking research by the National Center for Atmospheric Research and the Futures Group, the world was a different place. Some remained hopeful that elements of an international deal on climate change could be salvaged. Talk of human population had ebbed to an all-time low. Any mention of the human population dimensions of climate change mitigation was met with injunctions not to “upset the apple cart” of international climate negotiations.

Then the apple cart tipped, and hard. World population hit 7 billion people in late 2011. The UNFCCC COP process failed, once again, to deliver transformational results. The much-anticipated Earth Summit, Rio+20, ended with a whimper.

But in the meantime, a new conversation sprouted. Even as “official” climate and sustainability conversations ran aground, talk of women’s health, empowerment, and reproductive choice – and their ties to climate change and sustainability – got louder.

Today, this conversation has moved from the margins to the [Associated Press](#), [The Guardian](#), and [leading women’s blogs](#), where it is met not with contempt, but with interest. Bloggers and reporters all over the world are taking up these linkages with vigor, and the backdraft that once greeted any conversation about synergies between human health, population growth and the environment is notably [muted](#). The frame is shifting from one of blame to one of opportunity, and this is very good news.

The Family Planning Summit of July 2012, at which major funders announced [renewed commitments](#) to meet the contraception needs of 120 million women [worldwide](#), dramatically highlights this trend, and the growing momentum around family planning as a multi-benefit development strategy. Meanwhile, global leaders from both [North and South](#) are making their voices heard on reproductive health and rights (RHR).



## WOMEN AND THE PLANET: WHAT WORKS

Creating and promoting a messaging frame that allows for productive

### The “Population” Story or The “Women” Story?

*Every story, whether we realize it or not, has a protagonist, a mission and a resolution. When we lead with population or environmental benefits, the protagonist of this tale is human population, and the mission then inevitably becomes population reduction. This activates the deep and very problematic frame of “population control.”*

*When we lead with the story of a woman who wants to be able to determine the timing, spacing, and number of her children, but is unable to do so, a different frame altogether is activated in our audience, one that turns on women’s power and autonomy, and whose solution is to address individual rights and needs.*

*By addressing human needs, we make great gains for the world we all depend on. But we always place people at the center of the equation.*

discussion of linkages between family planning and environmental issues is no small task. That said, we have seen some real movement among environmental, family planning and development leaders toward the position that meeting the unmet need for family planning is a crucial, low-cost, common-sense tactic in helping women adapt to climate change, building more sustainable communities, and reducing climate change emissions. In assessing the efforts of the past three years, and the sea change in the conversation, we've distilled a few lessons:

### ***Grounding the Story in Women's Empowerment***

Even when reaching out to the fiercest conservation advocates, we recommend leading with women's needs, voices and lives - always. Women's empowerment is a universally shared value among the very diverse decision makers and advocates we've approached. Leading with environmental benefits carries a real risk of alienating audiences with an instrumentalist approach. But focusing on women's desires for better lives for themselves and their children, and the crucial role that access to family planning plays, provides a persuasive entry for all audiences. From there, bridging to environmental benefits is an easy reach, and one that makes intuitive sense. In many cases this linkage – through slower population growth and reduced impacts as a result – should be clearly explained as a secondary, incidental benefit that springs from the primary “win” of dramatically improved maternal and child health, and enhanced human rights.



### ***Powerful Storytellers***

The communications truism that the messenger is more important than the message holds truer than ever here. When women, particularly women from the global South, speak to the wants, needs and heartbreak of women worldwide who want to plan their families, the listener is moved to examine people/planet linkages through the lens of empowerment and synergy. When an older white conservationist speaks the very same truths, many key audiences wonder about his motivation. We found that deployment of women, and particularly global South women leaders, was the key catalyst to ensure positive reactions to a discussion of this nexus, and to short-circuit objections from both the right and left that center on coercion, blame and population control.

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**Global South Messengers**

*The importance of Global South messengers was resoundingly validated in a feasibility assessment conducted during the summer of 2012. Interviews with decision-makers preceded by a message from a videotaped global South messenger led to strongly positive reactions from audiences in several countries.*

*However, in France, where interviewees preferred not to view the English-language video, familiar objections around “blaming women” or “blaming the Global South” for climate impacts prevented a positive response.*

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## ***Learning While Recruiting***

As with any innovative and potentially inflammatory initiative, it was essential to lay the ground with individual approaches to opinion leaders, before doing anything else. We reached out with tailored



approaches to a variety of community leaders – from the conservation, development, family planning and foundation worlds – and conducted what amounted to tiny focus groups. We made sure to create safe spaces for dialogue by designing small meetings (ideally 2-5 leaders in any given organization) with plenty of time for an open discussion of the very hard questions that inevitably arose. The feedback we received was crucial to refining messaging approaches, inspiring a cadre of believers who had the chance to dive deeply into the data and politics,

and who came out convinced of the need to take the next step in advocacy. If we had come out swinging on the linkages with large or public events, outreach to the US Congress, or a social media push, it would have lit a firestorm of antagonism. Instead, we focused for over two and a half years on individual and small group grassroots outreach, creating safe spaces for frank conversation.

## ***Seizing the Media Moment***

Once the messaging ground had been laid and a cadre of champions developed, the time was right to venture out into the limelight. Reaching elite audiences and decision-makers through the media is never something to take lightly, particularly when individual outreach is an option and opposition backlash likely. Pegging media outreach to an existing news hook is the only option in this time of hyper-accelerated media cycles. In this case, the “Day of 7 Billion” in October 2011 presented the best opportunity though a challenging one. Our op-ed and blog pitching around this event aimed to interrupt the “sky is falling” tone of much population coverage with a positive message of women’s empowerment

### **What’s The Lead?**

*When we began talking with leaders about the climate/family planning nexus, we led with the huge environmental gains to be had by meeting women’s needs for family planning. An obvious choice when approaching environmentalists, right?*

*Wrong. Key leaders early on showed us why it made so much sense to lead with women’s stories.*

*By heeding their advice, we recruited a few champions who have made the subsequent mainstreaming of these topics possible. Two leading women campaigners in particular - Frances Beinecke of NRDC and Musimbi Kanyoro of the Global Fund for Women - seized on to these linkages. For them, making this connection was a no-brainer, and they adopted the issue for themselves, talking with many in their influential networks, writing blogs for important insider publications, and reaching out to funders and leaders we never might have guessed would be interested.*

*The takeaway? Invest early in one-on-one outreach.*

## 7 Billion and Counting

*We knew that the “Day of 7 Billion” would generate more population coverage than any similar event since the preceding decade’s “Day of 6 Billion.”*

*Reaching 7 billion people on the planet certainly was a milestone, and we expected a mountain of hand-wringing coverage that bemoaned our numbers and their impact on the environment, drove the unproductive “population as threat” narrative, and sidelined the elegant solution of women’s reproductive empowerment and choices.*

*We were right. It isn’t always fun to be right.*

*Predicting this coverage inspired us to try to push back, in some small way, with pieces that countered the momentum with stories of the win/win/win for women, children and the planet provided by access to modern contraception. And while we were pleased with the alliances we helped to forge between “unlikely bedfellows” messengers, we were struck by how small the impact of these pieces was on the larger conversation, even with a significant investment in social media amplification.*

*The 7 Billion conversation was just too big, and too powerful, and frankly, too regressive, to be disrupted by a few small sticks of dynamite.*

*The lesson here? Pushing back against a problematic and outdated frame requires a major investment.*

and sustainability (a mission at which we were not particularly successful, see sidebar below).

We also sought to use the “Day of 7 Billion” to pair unlikely messengers together, particularly leading environmentalists and women’s rights advocates, as proponents of voluntary family planning and women’s empowerment. Through these pairings, we were able to introduce leaders from both communities to each other, and to demonstrate that questions around human population *can* be addressed well and wisely by leaders from different worlds. Three pieces were published: by Bill McKibben and Kavita Ramdas (of 350.org and Stanford University), by Carl Pope and Carmen Barroso (of the Sierra Club and International Planned Parenthood), and by Pamela Onduso and Scott Moreland (of Pathfinder International and The Futures Group). These very alliances helped to deflect the old criticisms – surprisingly, there was no substantial right-wing backlash to any of the three pieces – and may have helped to set a new conversation in motion. As the connections between these leaders began to cement, side conversations began to emerge between them on these previously taboo linkages. And when the next big international environmental media moment began some eight months later, around Rio+20, these alliances proved their worth.



## WHAT DOESN'T WORK

### *Talking “Population”*

It's understandable, and easy, to frame human population as the problem in a world of heartbreaking inequalities and rapidly diminishing natural resources. But it doesn't work, and in fact is likely to ignite opposition even in audiences who may be receptive to rights-based approaches. The legacy of population control campaigns around the world lingers on, as well it should. And unfortunately, vestiges remain in Latin America, India and China even after the profound shift marked by the Cairo agreements in 1994 that placed women's rights at the center of the population conversation. Advocates across the political spectrum carry this knowledge, and most progressives know in their bones that consumption and income inequality are, in many ways, “bigger” problems than population. Recent [public opinion research](#) shows that even the most dedicated environmentalists are far more compelled by messages about women's rights and health than they are about the threat of growing numbers. Our advice? Lead with women's needs and women's stories. Of course, the benefits of slower population growth can't be ignored, and should be mentioned at opportune moments. Many leaders in developing countries are eager to discuss these issues, for example. But one can never be too woman-focused, and if you must err, err on the side that may seem obvious: real people with real needs matter most to all audiences.

### *Sidelining Global South Voices*

Advocates across the population, family planning and environmental communities know that women from the global South are by far the most persuasive messengers on the linkages between family planning and sustainability. Nevertheless,

because of legitimate structural constraints, we often do not lead with these voices. Partly this is a result the need to develop a more robust network of advocates spanning the global North and South. Partly it is the result of funding constraints that make messenger recruitment challenging. And partly it is the result of old patterns that make working with existing allies more convenient and logistically simple. Whatever the reason,



investing the time and energy to recruit, prepare and support global South messengers – especially women – is well worth the energy. These voices, by their very presence, defuse allegations that environment/family planning linkages may shift blame to poor women for environmental catastrophes. They can also powerfully address the feeling tone, narrative texture and lived experience of the many millions of women who want access to contraception but cannot obtain it.

### ***Ignoring The Elephant in the Room***

The United States has the highest levels of unmet need of any rich country, by a significant margin. It's also one of the world's largest climate polluters per capita, and in aggregate. Skillfully addressing these intertwined realities is an absolute must for many global South and European audiences. While the US family planning community may not be able to draw these connections for obvious political reasons, we nevertheless recommend a thorough consideration of how to do so for advocates working in this space. Particularly when US messengers are at center stage, the appearance of environmental imperialism may alienate important potential allies. The best way to defuse that possibility? Own up to the problematic US track record on both access to family planning and climate change, note the data the O'Neill/Futures

Group research that shows a very significant emissions reduction were US unmet need to be met, and create space for audiences to reflect on both.



### ***Focusing on the US Congress***

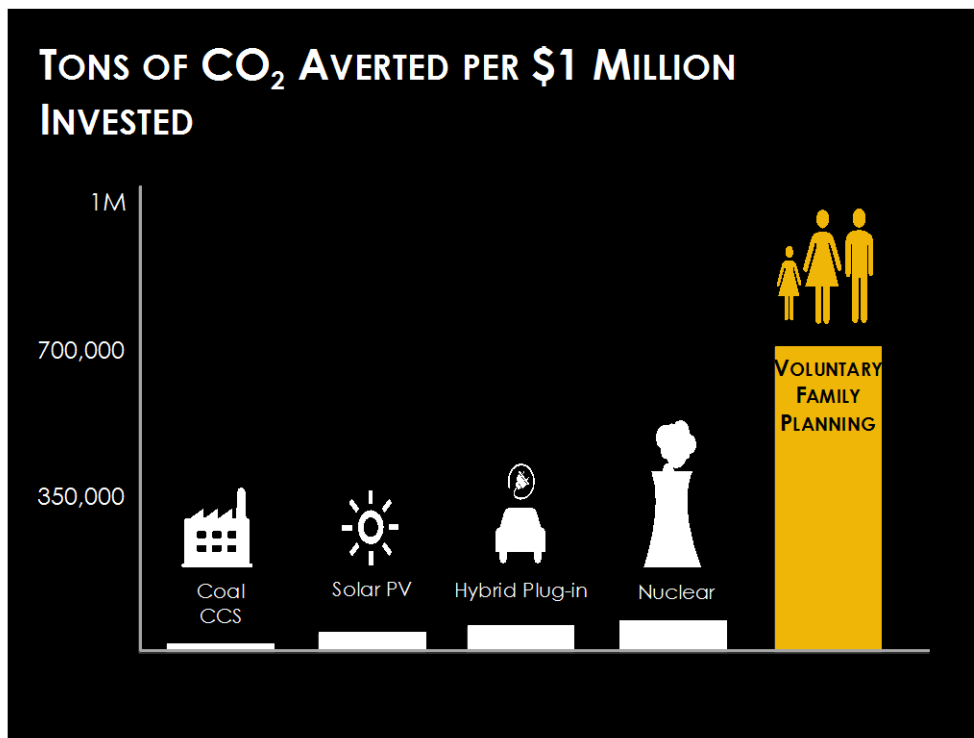
To understate the matter a bit, the US Congress is torn on access to birth control, and not particularly inclined toward sustainable development. As a result, we do

not recommend a primary focus on members to amplify these linkages. However, strong RHR [champions](#) remain among Democrats, and many moderates in both parties are interested in the linkages between population growth and international security, food security, and water scarcity - even if not climate change. Selective, strategic outreach to these leaders is an important longer-range task. For the small number of groups and individuals whose primary interests lie in population dynamics, a more demographically-oriented approach can be both strategic and effective.

### ***Right Graph, Wrong Audience***

In the highly charged field that surrounds climate solutions, family planning is the very new, and rather unpopular kid on the block. Climate campaigners and thinkers have been paddling upstream, hard, for decades to advance the world's understanding of what it will take to avert catastrophic climate change. So the fact that investing in meeting unmet need will be dozens of times cheaper than solar PV or hybrid cars, while it may be cheering to family planning advocates, is not as persuasive to many environmental leaders whose support is so very much needed for this cause. Many of them know, and rightly so, that we must invest in all climate solutions, and that setting up comparative data sets simply won't get us there. Some of the wonkiest climate experts we approached, when shown the striking "cost comparison" graph below, leapt to defend the more expensive interventions. The other side of the coin? This graph is powerful medicine for family planning advocates, and for those "carbon hunters" who are focused solely on tons averted per dollar. The lesson here is not to assume that all climate audiences see through this lens, and to strategically deploy this powerful visual.





## LOOKING FORWARD: NEAR-TERM OPPORTUNITIES

### *Confirm and Deepen the Data*

First, there is a pressing need for additional research on the climate/family planning linkages. Brian O’Neill and The Futures Group researchers established the gold standard with their work of 2010. But additional studies should certainly be commissioned that both confirm and deepen that data. In particular, we see a need for quantitative work that integrates both the mitigation and adaptation benefits of meeting unmet need, as well as for research that further explores the confounding variables of increasing wealth as a result of smaller families. There is significant momentum around providing climate adaptation assistance to developing countries. Peer-reviewed research that solidifies the adaptation benefits of family planning assistance could strengthen efforts to steer international funding in this direction.

### *Social Media Investment: Catalyzing Millennials*

Used wisely and strategically, social media provides the single most powerful toolkit to generate new grassroots and grassroots engagement on international advocacy issues, particularly for the critical constituency of “millennials” – those born after 1990. It goes without saying that substantial investment in social media capacity on existing campaigns is an important priority. Rio+20 is illustrative in this regard: a small investment in amplifying the existing work around family planning and sustainability linkages brought notable



rewards – a marked increase in collaboration among partner groups, a dramatic uptick in the #womenrio hashtag, and a continued presence on the social media aggregator Storify. The UN Foundation’s Rio+Social campaign also demonstrates an important lesson: with sufficient infrastructure, partners can create widespread grassroots and grassroots movement around an international event. It takes the right infrastructure, and genuine back and forth with the target audience, but the stories such efforts generate stand a good chance of going viral, as [Rio+Social’s collaborative 6 Minute Speech](#) did. In the near term there are many opportunities to create stronger partner networks, but in the longer term, mobilizing millennials requires throwing the doors wide open. Millennials are engaged and inspired by the holistic approach to people and the planet taken by those linking women and sustainability, and they are also the key to building a longer-term campaign and constituency for universal access to family planning. The trick will be to bring this effort to scale. But the ground has already been laid, and the opportunity is near at hand.

### ***Alliance Building***

Our work joining environmental and women’s rights campaigners has convinced us that featuring these “unlikely bedfellows” messengers is a key step in building the strength, breadth and depth of the movement for universal access to family planning – both domestically in the US and internationally. Continuing the work of outreach to environmental leaders on their own turf, in their own language, and with messengers they respect will be an important investment in coming years. Once these voices are activated, they can be deployed with decision-makers in the climate, energy and sustainability worlds who may not be as receptive to approaches from the family planning community.



On a larger scale, we see a substantial opportunity to knit together the diverse existing constituencies who are already working on family planning, but may not be talking to each other or working closely together. For example, international development and population organizations, women’s rights leaders and reproductive health campaigners could coordinate far more closely both with each other, and with the conservation NGOs already working on these issues. One important note on these collaborations: a fragment of the gender justice community remains adamantly opposed to the discussion of *any* linkage between the individual and environmental benefits of access to family planning. Understanding this constituency’s objections, while holding a realistic assessment of their influence in more mainstream feminist circles, is a key consideration in building resilient coalitions.

### ***Messenger Cultivation***

Recruiting, training and supporting diverse messengers is a labor- and resource-intensive undertaking, there's no doubt. But when it comes to advancing fraught issues, it's definitely worthwhile. There is so much momentum around family planning and reproductive health advocacy issues today that the time is ripe for more investment in leadership development around the world. Existing voices like Musimbi Kanyoro, Joy Phumaphi, Mary Robinson, Kavita Ramdas, Carmen Barroso, Frances Beinecke, Maggie Fox and many others could be supported in their work to cultivate the next cadre of powerful global South women, ready to speak, write, advocate and fundraise for universal access to family planning through a multiple benefits lens that includes environmental outcomes.

### ***Country Case Studies***

Those outside the family planning and reproductive health communities are almost always skeptical about the process of increasing contraceptive availability. But solid data from countries around the world shows that “if you build it, they will come.” In

other words, when clinics open, when commodities are available, when education is accessible, women (and men) increase their use modern birth control. The problem is, much of this data is in language and format accessible only to demographers. Powerful, visually compelling country case studies that walk a lay



audience through the process and effects of increased contraceptive uptake are sorely needed, and would serve almost all players working in the field.

In addition, disinvestment from family planning programs over the last twenty years has left much infrastructure available for renovation and reinvestment. We do not have to reinvent the wheel, or create programs from whole cloth. Those not familiar with the decline in family planning funding ([from 30% of total development aid in 1994 to 12% in 2011](#)) may not understand the easy reach for many programs. Country case studies can illuminate this possibility, and provide powerful evidence to those who may be cautious about the impact of new investment.

## CONCLUSION

The need for substantial new investment in voluntary family planning has never been greater. Yet in the current financially-constrained environment, nations are looking to maximize the impact of any investments they are able to make. Given the increasing attention to the growing impacts of climate change on women and families in the global South, and the potential for resource-fueled conflicts to impact our increasingly interconnected global economy, nations will be looking for investments that provide increased stability, security and sustainability. Family planning is, in our opinion, the obvious investment to make. And the greater the range of voices calling for this investment, for a variety of reasons, the more likely we are to see the gap between family planning need and family planning availability finally close.

In sum, we see a tremendous opening in the communications and policy landscapes as an integrated conversation about the well-being of people and the planet takes off. Strategic investment in the opportunities mentioned above, combined with a focus on building alliances between conservationists, feminists, and global South messengers from both worlds, and arming them with proven messaging, will bring increased engagement, funding and ultimately policy change.