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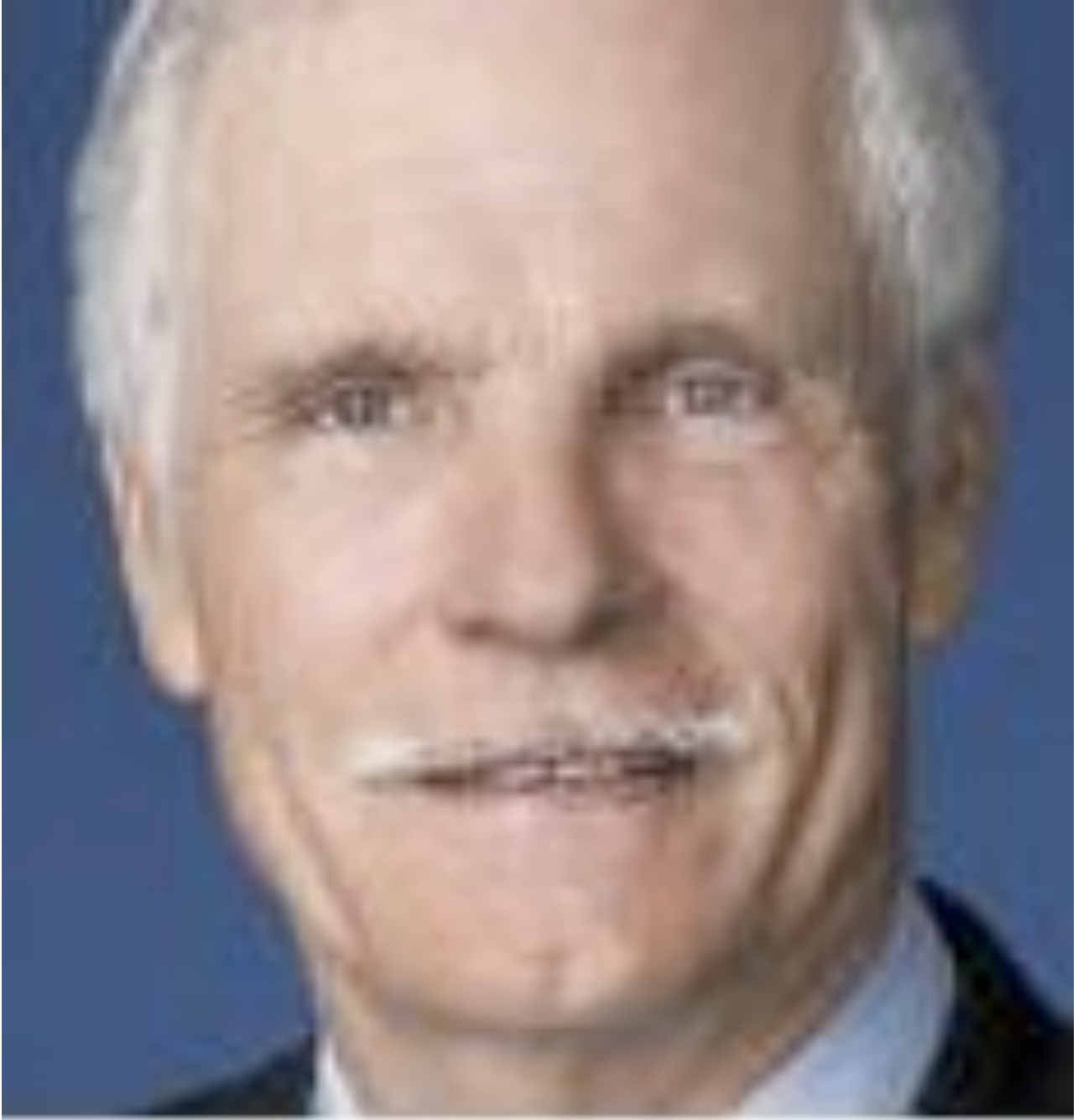
Global 7 Billion: Half a Solution from Ted Turner

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Published Nov 04, 2011, 09:24am EDT, Updated Nov 22, 2011, 12:30pm EST

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Ted Turner. Source: CNN.com

In 1950 world population was 2.5 billion. This week it passed 7 billion, an ominous occasion marked by various events across the globe, including a special [CNN editorial](#) penned by none other than former boss Ted Turner.

Turner has a right to opine on population growth and global poverty implication, seeing as he donated \$1bn to set up the United Nations Foundation, but I wasn't quite expecting the 1970s thinking that popped out.

Says Turner: "Researchers at the Guttmacher Institute found there are 215 million women worldwide who want the ability to time and space their pregnancies, but do not have access to effective methods of contraception...

"Universal access to voluntary family planning is a cross-cutting and cost-effective solution to achieving all of the [Millennium Development Goals](#)...

"There is no better value for the money than international family planning, which provides a higher return on investment than almost any other type of development assistance."

Turner then rails against Congress' recent foreign aid [budget cuts](#) in funding for international family planning and the U.N. Population Fund.

It is hard, and perhaps churlish, to disagree. Who in their right mind would counter the obvious social and economic benefits of family planning? Other than the Catholic Church, that is. Therein a tiny clue to the bigger nature of the problem and how thinking has moved on.

Since the 1970s when population growth first hit the radar as part of the Club of Rome's "Limits to Growth" Studies, the provision of family planning has been part of the global population solutions mix. Perhaps not adequately -- there can always be more -- but supply side solutions to contraception provision and family planning clinics have consistently been funded.

The demand side

The problem is also in demand. Even where a safe and cheap contraceptive is available, there is little guarantee it gets used. This boils down to the social norms and mental models in developing world communities. Which is not to say that developing world families are not smart enough to perceive their own best interest. They are. In the absence of adequate affordable social services, health care, aged care, and disability insurance, the smartest thing a couple can do is have many children.

There's never a golden bullet to a systemic problem such as this, but the closest thing that does exists is not contraception provision, it is girls' education.

Educating girls enables them to see and enact opportunities outside of childraising, and once they have other options they become much more likely to reach for the birth control after 2.5 children, just like their Western counterparts (often in direct contravention of patriarchal and

religious doctrine -- which education empowers them to resist.)

Educating girls does not privilege girls unduly. It's corrective of a skewed situation where traditional societies educate boys before girls. Figures that demonstrate this are provided by the [Population Reference Bureau](#).

Whispered heresy

While girls' education was a whispered heresy in the 1980-90s, partly because of patriarchal assumptions in both developed and emerging markets, it is now a clearly defined development platform. See for example the World Bank [report](#): "Getting to Equal: How Educating Every Girl Can Help Break the Cycle of Poverty." There are organizations such as Forum for African Women Educationalists ([FAWE](#)) and NGOs such as [Educate Africa Girls](#). Even the [GE Foundation](#) sees girls education as a specific initiative.

There's a chicken-and-egg here because contraception allows girls to stay in school longer. And of course the UN Foundation is hardly blind the girls education. It is very much part of their mix: see this [release](#).

It's just a question of where the emphasis is placed when an influential philanthropist such as Turner communicates over global population hitting the seven million mark. Once upon a time the problem looked like a supply side problem. It doesn't anymore. It's about inculcating demand. That means it's about girls' education and that what the call-to-arms should be for.