



# World Chronicle

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"State of the World Population 2003"  
UNFPA

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## **"Adolescents' Health and Rights"**

As the world's biggest generation of adolescents in history – more than one billion of them – enters adulthood, their future may depend largely on what they know, and do, about sex and reproductive health. How much will it cost to finance adequate education and health for such a large segment of humanity? What approach does the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) advocate for sex education? And to what extent has HIV/AIDS broken the taboos that surround frank talk about sexual relations? The guest on this edition of World Chronicle is Stan Bernstein, the principal researcher and editor of UNFPA's "State of the World Population" report.

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**ANNOUNCER:** From the United Nations in New York, an unedited interview programme on global issues. This is **World Chronicle**. And here is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** I am Michael Littlejohns and this is **World Chronicle**. The world's biggest generation of adolescents in history – more than one billion of them – are about to enter adulthood. According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) their future, and that of their countries, may depend largely on what they know, and do, about sex and reproductive health. Our guest today is Stan Bernstein, the principal researcher and editor of UNFPA's "State of the World Population" report. Joining us in the studio are Sephora Rosario of *Asahi Shimbun* and Louis Hamann of the *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation/CBC*.

Mr. Bernstein, welcome to **World Chronicle**.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Mr. Bernstein, this report, which is quite an impressive document and evidently you put a tremendous amount of work into it, but unless I misread it it's rather a discouraging document. It's story, in part at any rate is of promises unmet and problems mounting and one of the reasons that the problems are mounting, or at least that the promises are not being met in overcoming them, is that there's just not enough money. Money is sloshing around for other things but not enough for this. Is that a correct reading or have I got it all wrong?

**BERNSTEIN:** Well, I think the report is quite honest on the size of the challenges and the nature of the difficulties but it also points to the progress that's been made and is being made. I would tend to characterize it as a call to action rather than a treatise of discouragement. The report clearly indicates that greater priority has to be given to investing in adolescents' needs. We're talking about their education needs, their employment needs, their health needs, including sexual and reproductive health, in order to make sure that we can make any progress whatsoever on the major development goals that the international community has adopted. If we're going to reduce poverty, if we're going to increase gender equality, if we're going to improve standards of health and opportunity, we have to invest in young people and we have to start doing it now.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** How much money do you consider would be required per year to at least fulfil some of the goals that were enunciated in the Millennium Declaration of the heads of state when they were here?

**BERNSTEIN:** There are a lot of people working on cost estimations for different parts of the Millennium Development Goals. Educational estimates are in the area of 30 billion dollars a year, for example. HIV/AIDS estimates out of UNAIDS are in the area of eight billion dollars. At Cairo, the International Conference on Population and Development in 1994, we estimated that for an entire package of population and reproductive health to meet the needs of all ages of the population by the year 2000 we'd need 17 billion dollars a year, and by 2005 that would come to 18-1/2 billion dollars a year. These are sort of the magnitude of the kinds of amounts that are required. We do know that the returns on those relatively more modest investments in sexual and reproductive health will pay themselves off many times over, and not just immediately but for generations to come.

**ROSARIO:** In the report it mentions over half of the new AIDS population are adolescents and every 14 seconds one youth is infected with AIDS. In the report what are the cost estimates for actually fighting and preventing AIDS versus the cost of treating already patients with AIDS?

**BERNSTEIN:** The estimates for preventive activities -- in order to address AIDS you need a broad-based set of activities, you need prevention, you need treatment and care, you need support to the communities. UNAIDS is the best source for that kind of information. In terms of the preventive needs we estimate that it will be about 1.7 billion dollars a year for some major components; in school, mass media, out-of-school, increased condom availability. That's a very important component of the wide range of efforts that are needed for HIV/AIDS. The returns on prevention are much higher than the returns on cure, on treatment. One estimate has it that the cost-benefit ratio for prevention in relation to treatment is somewhere in the area of 28 to 1. You need both. You need higher investment in both because treatment is, in its own way, a kind of secondary prevention. The lower the level of infection in a population, the lower the level of the virus in people's blood, the lower possibilities for its transmission. But clearly, what is really preferred is people not getting infected at all. In order to do that the report outlines our commitment to the A-B-C approach; a combination of abstinence programmes, to try to delay the onset of sexual relations, being faithful, reducing the number of partners or being faithful to a single partner and consistently correct use of condoms. These, in combination, are sort of the three legs of the stool that working together have and can have further success in reducing HIV/AIDS prevalence. We've seen this work in Uganda, we've seen it work in Thailand, we've seen it work in Zambia. Large-scale efforts,

educating populations, communicating with them, mobilizing local groups, can put these kinds of packages in place and reduce the course of the pandemic.

**HAMANN:** You talk about several countries where efforts have actually paid off but in many countries still sex and sex education remains a taboo subject and so how do you convince governments that they have to tackle this problem and how do you get the kids to actually, you know, get comfortable speaking about this stuff?

**BERNSTEIN:** That's one of the problems with this area in general. Even though, for example, complications of pregnancy and delivery are a major cause of death to 15- to 19-year-olds – cause early marriage and early sex are in fact are a part of life in many places – governments initially have been slow to address these concerns because it is a touchy and sensitive area. In that way the HIV/AIDS pandemic has, horrible and tragic as it is, directed governments' attention to recognize that they do have to pay attention to this, they do have to design programmes, they have to work with parents and religious leaders in communities if they're going to turn around this pandemic. And the only way to turn around the pandemic is to inform people honestly and openly about issues concerning sex, reproduction, relationships, empowering young people to protect themselves and form healthy and responsible relationships.

**HAMANN:** A lot of people would have an argument saying, "Well, sex education leads to greater sexual activity". Number one, do you buy into that argument and number two, doesn't that become a problem in itself as well? Because greater sexual activity obviously – if you're talking about poor countries people don't always know, don't always have the power to protect themselves, the AIDS epidemic even goes higher and...

**BERNSTEIN:** The report outlines the evidence that comes out of the World Health Organization around national studies and efforts that have been done in a variety of countries that clearly indicate that sexuality education leads to delayed onset of sexual activity, reduction in the number of partners and safer behaviour. The fears are there, the concern is there, but because of that you need to have a heightened dialogue. You need to address local parents groups, religious leaders, local governmental people to get attention focused on these concerns. If the dialogue increases the topic will be less sensitive and people will see for themselves the gains that they get from the programmes.

**ROSARIO:** Adolescents between 10 and 19 years old, their needs are very different, what sex education is appropriate for each individual age and what is the average age where teenagers are having sexual encounters for the first time?

**BERNSTEIN:** Clearly, messages that are delivered and communications and programmes that are done have to be age specific and sensitive to the local cultural context. There's no universal prescription around the globe as to what age what kinds of information should be there, but people designing the programmes and giving support and technical assistance for these programmes in their local area can take those considerations into account. They can make sure that they are sensitive to the concerns that people have and they can work with the local communities in educating them about the kinds of materials that are being used and get their voices and inputs as to what they should be. The age of onset of relations has been declining in many places in the world while at the same time the age of marriage has been increasing. This means there is a special burden to make sure that these young people have access to proper information and to services that can enable them to protect themselves, including instruction and training in the skills to negotiate not having sex if they don't want to have sex. With regard to levels of coercion, the report points out that this is indeed a serious problem and in some settings as much as a third of initial sexual experience is in fact coerced. We need then to make sure that at younger ages both boys and girls are given instructions on proper respect for each other, are given the opportunity to role play, are exposed to consistent messages from their religious leaders, from their communities, from mass media, to empower them to make decisions that are wise and safe.

**HAMANN:** We're talking about sex and sex education for youth how do the needs, and maybe not the needs so much but the challenges that they face compare when you're talking about poor countries and more developed or wealthier countries? Are there any sorts of parallels there or are they completely different? Because we don't often talk – I mean we often talk about the problem of AIDS, sex education, reproductive health in poor countries but very seldomly do we hear about the needs, the challenges that youth face in richer countries.

**BERNSTEIN:** Well, certainly adolescence, which is itself a cultural construct and is developing in different places in the world at different speeds and different phases, but adolescence is a time of transition everywhere both in developed countries and developing countries and developed countries differ dramatically in how willing they are to face these issues directly and immediately. I know for example, and the report points out, that in Europe where sexuality education has been part of curricula, where there are more open discussions of these kinds of concerns in families, in communities, in media, adolescent pregnancy rates are lower than they are in countries where these sort of discussions are touchier or less advanced. The United States and Britain for example have among the highest teen pregnancy

rates in the developed world, markedly higher than what obtains in the more open and more engaged societies of the continent. It's the case that it's not just poor countries but the poor segments of societies in every country where these concerns are heightened. You can see it all across the board. You look at age of marriage for example; age of marriage, as I mentioned, has been increasing but in poorer populations not much change. In fact, the situation can be quite serious. The wealthier segments, even in developing countries' societies, a small proportion of girls are married before they're 18 years old.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** This is **World Chronicle**. Our guest is Stan Bernstein of the United Nations Population Fund – UNFPA. He is the Principal Researcher and Editor of the “State of the World Population” survey focusing on adolescents. Here is a brief overview of the report:

**NARRATOR:** ...In its Annual “State of World Population” Report, United Nations Population Fund – UNFPA -- examines the challenges and opportunities facing the world's 1.2 billion adolescents, the largest youth generation in history. The report notes that helping adolescents avoid early marriage, unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infection – notably HIV/AIDS -- will improve their futures and that of their families, communities and nations. UNFPA calls for greater investment in adolescent health care and education, as well as the promotion of girls and women's human rights ...

Adolescents need accurate information to make informed responsible choices and to protect their health. In Uganda, a frank approach to teaching young people about HIV/AIDS has helped roll back the epidemic in that country, significantly lowering the infection rate among teenagers.

**DR. WILFRED OCHRAN** (Uganda Population Secretariat): When AIDS came in – and AIDS touched every family, or everybody – people had to wake up to the realization that we need to talk about these issues. So AIDS provided an opportunity, unfortunately though, but provided an opportunity for sex education...

**NARRATOR:** With the assistance of the United Nations Population Fund, young people like Eric Senyonga are being trained to encourage adolescents to seek out reproductive health services.

**ERIC SENYONGA:** If you have sex without precautions you can get STDs or AIDS, and if you escape all that maybe you get the girl pregnant. Then your life is difficult because you and the girl don't finish school. When you take precautions you have opportunities for a better future.

**STAN BERNSTEIN:** The time between reaching sexual maturity and the time of the age of marriage is increasing and if we are to prevent unwanted pregnancies, exposure to sexually transmitted infections, we need to make sure that young people are well informed and capable. Adolescence is also the time when young people are learning how they are going to interact with members of the opposite sex. Seeing that they learned both to protect themselves, have healthy lives, and respect and cooperate with each other is absolutely essential.

**NARRATOR:** Change is taking place all over the world. In Vietnam over 40% of the country's 80 million people are under 20 years old and the government has made sex education a priority.

**MME. XUYEN** (Vietnam Education Centre): The younger generation must have information to protect themselves. They must be taught to avoid unwanted pregnancies and abortions which can affect their health.

**NARRATOR:** To reduce adolescents' vulnerability the government has started reproductive health discussion groups at high schools and colleges. Attendance is voluntary. At the Hanoi Agricultural College, virtually every student attends, a sign of their need and curiosity.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Mr. Bernstein, earlier in the programme the question of taboos came up, how do you guys in UNFPA overcome the culture, religious and other inhibitions that diminish opportunities for sexual and reproductive education?

**BERNSTEIN:** Well, I think what you have to do is you have to engage people where they are. You have to have discussions with them and remind them of really what the issues are. The health burden for unsafe sexual behaviour is enormous. The risk from young girls getting pregnant, whether it be from maternal mortality or whether it be a fistula, a horrible condition where damage happens when...

**LITTLEJOHNS:** This is a hole in the birth canal and as a result the mother becomes incontinent?

**BERNSTEIN:** That's correct. This is a condition that is reparable by relatively inexpensive surgery but there's a lot of stigma attached and these young women are frequently shunned and banned from communities. UNFPA is active in a campaign to improve the ability of countries to address this, to actually see that the operations take place and to make sure that it's part of a general discussion on the dangers of young pregnancy. When the dangers are clear, when what is at stake, when the opportunities for young people who

manage to delay their first births out of their adolescent years are made clear in increased education, completion rates for girls, in better understandings, more health information, better decision-making and negotiations on matters of sex and reproduction, when the benefits of these are clear, the discussion increases. There's further concern.

**ROSARIO:** Also, how do you involve youth leadership more in the community that changes the community's mentality more toward the area of human rights and the protection of children?

**BERNSTEIN:** This is absolutely essential and the report points to the need for youth participation. Young people know what they want and need and they know the kinds of messages that will get through to their peers. We have a youth advocate who said the other day, "You know, when you're buying shoes for your children you better know the right size". And having young people involved in the design of programmes is absolutely essential. It increases their success. They listen better, they get the messages, and this is done in a wide variety of ways. Whether it be media campaigns, call-in programmes, involvement of local youth associations, these approaches are being tried out in a wide variety of countries around the world and they get results and they get results fairly quickly at relatively low investment.

**HAMANN:** Mr. Bernstein, you talk about the importance of engaging and reaching people where they are, you talk about the importance of dialogue, yet when you look at the numbers regarding youth – I mean 240 million youth across the world live in abject poverty, 100 to 250 million of them are street children – how do you engage a dialogue with kids that probably have on their minds not education – sex education far less? They just want to get a square meal at the end of the day so how do you reach them? How can you engage them?

**BERNSTEIN:** What you need to do is you need to design programmes that provide them with an integrated approach to their needs and concerns. You need to put together livelihood training and opportunities with information campaigns, you need to address them as people, give them places where they can get a variety of their concerns directly addressed. There's much made in the report about youth-friendly services. You need youth-friendly places; you need gathering places where concerned people can work with young people. Find out what their priorities are and help them design programmes to meet those. As far as the most severely impoverished people are concerned, and one quarter of adolescents are in this extreme poverty condition, they will succeed or fail on the basis of what our over-all development efforts succeed in doing, but their exposure to immediate risks have to be reduced dramatically.



**LITTLEJOHNS:** Mr. Bernstein, we haven't discussed the question, or at least the question has not come up yet, of abortion which is a hot button item in the United States and a few other places, and I think it's one of the reasons why the United States decided not to contribute funds to UNFPA. Has that situation changed by the way?

**BERNSTEIN:** No. We're not currently funded.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** So, what about abortion? What's UNFPA's policy on abortion?

**BERNSTEIN:** Our policy is perfectly clear. We do not support abortion as a method of family planning in any way whatsoever. We don't support abortion. What we try to do is provide information and contraceptive services so that people don't take recourse to abortion. The way to make sure there aren't abortions is to make sure there aren't unwanted pregnancies and this is done by giving people access to effective and safe means of family planning.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** And the suspicion that UNFPA was contributing to involuntary abortions in China, which had a rather draconian policy of "one child per family", this is not true?

**BERNSTEIN:** This has been investigated and rejected. It's not even the basis for the current United States position with regard to the funding of UNFPA. The State Department sent a mission and saw UNFPA as a positive force in China's programme.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** So what is the basis for the...

**BERNSTEIN:** The basis was that because of some laws that the Chinese have, the social compensation laws that penalize people who have high numbers of children, that we were somehow complicit. UNFPA is opposed to those laws, has been working with the Chinese government on that matter.

**ROSARIO:** How much of programmes have failed to operate because of the lack of U.S. funding and do you think most Americans want UNFPA to continue its work?

**BERNSTEIN:** Well, surveys show that the United States' public supports voluntary family planning efforts quite strongly. They recognize also the importance of issues like making sure that adolescents can make informed decisions. We hope that the U.S. funding can be restarted. We look forward to the day when that happens. The American public supports it, the world supports it. One hundred and twenty-five countries are making donations to UNFPA for us to do our programmes. The cut off of funding has, of course, hurt. We've tried to minimize the damage. We know that cutting edge programmes, ones that are long established, are probably the ones that are hurt most immediately. So we hope that this

changes and that the rest of the world also increases their contributions so that the work can go forward successfully.

**HAMANN:** Quickly, Mr. Bernstein, I'd like to ask you about the policy implications of having this largest generation in history of adolescents moving into adulthood. UNFPA often talks about the fact that, you know, over the years how the elderly population is going to increase dramatically and that's going to mean governments having to devote more resources to their services, or services that pander to them. What are the policy implications of having these 1.2 billion adolescents moving into adulthood?

**BERNSTEIN:** The 1.2 billion adolescents, that's a number that's not going to come down between now and 2050, and we all know what adolescents are like. They are the first ones inventing everything in their lives. Their needs are going to have to be met whatever their proportion of the total population is and they will be a smaller proportion of the over-all population. What we are going to need is to make sure, with a large and growing populations of older people and very large populations of young people, that there is more inter-generational contact, that there are more programmes that involve people across the age range to ensure that they have health through their life cycle.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Mr. Bernstein that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle**.

Our guest has been the Principal Researcher and Editor of UNFPA's "State of the World Population Report", Stan Bernstein. He was interviewed by Sephora Rosario of *Asahi Shimbun* and Louis Hamann of the *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation/CBC*.

I am Michael Littlejohns, thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

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