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PHILIPPINES: Population and fishing problems 'tied together'

In poor coastal areas of Southeast Asia and the South Pacific, a strong link has been drawn between over-fishing and over-population. With population pressures driving the over-exploitation of fishing grounds, the two problems have to be dealt with together.

Presenter - Graeme Dobell.

Speaker - Heather D'Agnes, a population and environmental adviser with the American aid agency, USAID

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Heather D'Agnes: We have incredible environmental problems in the marine region – we've got overfishing, we've got destruction of coral reefs. Now that's a problem in and of itself, however when you look also at the ties to population, when you look at incredible population growth and very high fertility levels in the Philippines, when you look at that and you start to figure well that population growth is actually bigger in the coastal areas. Well why is that? It's because those areas don't have access to basic services like family planning. Then you start to think, what are all those people doing? Well, they're all fishing, and they're all very dependent on the marine resources right off the coast of where they live. So then you start to think, well, maybe those people are the same people who are out there overfishing and they're also the same people who are out there using destructive fishing methods, like cyanide or like dynamite, to actually get more fish.

Graeme Dobell: What would your responses be then, in poor fishing areas of Indonesia, south-east Asia into Melanesia. What sort of policy responses would you look for?

Heather D'Agnes: Well what I am really advocating for is the need to look at both environmental policies so let's turn to strengthen the management of the marine areas in those countries, you know, many of them don't have any management, so first let's put into place, let's protect some of those marine areas let's also try and conserve, stop all this overfishing

Graeme Dobell: Controversial of course in the Philippines to talk about family planning in any context – how well can you make a family planning argument in terms of environmental issues and get that accepted by the Catholic Church in the Philippines?

Heather D'Agnes: Well what's very interesting is when you go into a local community in the Philippines and I'm talking about a village, which is a barangay in the Philippines, when you go in there and you start to talk to people about what problems they have in their lives, you know what are the issues they're struggling with, they always talk about overfishing, then they talk about how there's too many fishermen. Then you ask them, well why are there so many fishermen. Well, there's a lot of people. So when you start to have these conversations you realise that people really see the linkages between too many people, too many fishermen, not enough fish in the sea. And when you bring it around, well why are there too many people you start discussing the issues around high population growth and what's underlying that, people start to really see the issues and they start to understand the need for smaller, healthier families. So what I'm saying is, people want it, at the very local level. Now these people, they're very devout Catholics, they go to church

every week, but the reality of their lives is that they're living very difficult lives. So when you talk to them about the benefits of family planning, not just 'there won't be a lot of people' but the other benefits are you will have smaller, healthier families, you can send your children to school, you can have enough extra money to, you know, build a nicer house. Those things really resonate with them and they realise that it's not just, you know, about following the Catholic Church but it's about their lives and their own choices. So at the very local level you don't find a lot of opposition, both from people who are practicing Catholics and even from very local Catholic churches themselves. It's really at the national level, where a population policy is politically infeasible, or it's something that the Catholic church really pushes against.

Graeme Dobell: How much do you see that the sort of analysis that you're doing about South-east Asia and the Philippines is also applicable to some of the island states of the South Pacific?

Heather D'Agnes: I think it's completely applicable, because what we're talking about are small island states which have a real definite limit to growth. They live on islands, which you can't expand much past the coast of an island, and they also have very very few resources. An island itself tends to have limited land and water resources and of course the marine resources, so I think the linkages I'm talking about and the way to program to those linkages should deliver services to the community in an integrated fashion between both environmental management and family planning, this is very very transferable.

Graeme Dobell: And you can send out somebody to do family planning and environment at the same time? How?

Heather D'Agnes: You sure can. In fact, in the Philippines our experience has been that you can train community members who may have an elementary education, you can train them to be peer educators and what that means is that they go and talk to their peers, their neighbours, their friends, the people that they fish with, for example, and you can train them to deliver information about the benefits of family planning. The same time they're there in the fishing boat delivering information about why smaller families are better, or may help out their condition in life, they're also talking about the importance of not fishing in a certain area, let's say a marine protected area, so you see they're talking about their lives, it's not like they're out there lecturing