

*Population and Reproductive Health
Oral History Project*

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Northampton, MA

Mercedes Concepcion

Interviewed by
Rebecca Sharpless

August 17–18, 2004
Sacramento, California

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Narrator

Mercedes Concepcion, Ph.D. (b. 1928) is known as the “mother of Asian demography.” Her work has been influential in the development of family planning in Asia and other parts of the world. Dr. Concepcion serves on the board of commissioners of the Philippine Population Commission, and is professor emerita, University of the Philippines. She has been a consultant to the World Health Organization, UNFPA, UN Statistical Division, and is the author of numerous publications.

Interviewer

Rebecca Sharpless directed the Institute for Oral History at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, from 1993 to 2006. She is the author of *Fertile Ground, Narrow Choices: Women on Texas Cotton Farms, 1900–1940* (University of North Carolina Press, 1999). She is also co-editor, with Thomas L. Charlton and Lois E. Myers, of *Handbook of Oral History* (AltaMira Press, 2006). In 2006 she joined the department of history at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, Texas.

Restrictions

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Format

Five 60-minute audiocassettes.

Transcript

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Sharpless

Okay, today is August 17, 2004. My name is Rebecca Sharpless, and this is the first oral history interview with Dr. Mercedes Concepcion. The interview is taking place in the home of her niece in Sacramento, California. It's a part of the Population Pioneers Project being sponsored by the Hewlett Foundation. Dr. Concepcion, thank you so much for making time for me while you're here in the United States.

Concepcion

Oh, it's no problem.

Sharpless

And so, here we are together this morning, and we'll be talking about your wonderful career as a demographer. But I wanted to start out—just tell me a little bit about yourself and your family growing up.

Concepcion

Well, I am the youngest of five siblings. I did chemistry as an undergraduate at the University of the Philippines simply because—well, when I finished high school, I wanted to be a journalist. And my father, who was a physician, said, "There's no future, no money, in newspaper work, and you don't need to go to school for that. Just go and take general education and see where you shine." So, by a fluke my best grade was in chemistry. So I went into chemistry, finished it, but never worked as a chemist. Actually, I worked

about three months in a lab doing biochemical work, and then he told me that since he was doing some clinical studies on diets—he was a diabetes expert, and he needed somebody to do the statistics—so he said, “Oh, you go and sit in on a course on biostatistics, which [two of] my former students are teaching at the School of Public Health.” So I sat in that course for one semester. Then he said, “Well, I will go look for a scholarship for you to train in this subject.” And so he went and spoke to the UNDP [United Nations Development Program] resident representative in Manila to inquire about the possibility of a scholarship for me. And the res. rep. said, “Well, maybe she can qualify for a Colombo Plan, which would be for Australia or New Zealand.” And it took a long time because they had never heard of biostatistics.

Sharpless Who had not?

Concepcion The Colombo Plan. (laughter) It wasn't unusual. So then in 1952—I finished college in 1951—

Sharpless You finished your bachelor's degree?

Concepcion Yes, at the University [of the Philippines]. And then in January of 1952, he died.

Sharpless Your father?

Concepcion Yes, my father died before he could learn that I had gotten the scholarship, the Colombo Plan Scholarship. And so, when he had died, I asked my mother, “Do I still go on?” And she said, “Well, that's what your father wanted, so why don't you go?” So I went and spent two years in Australia, at the School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine [of the University of Sydney].

And I did not do a formal course because there was no formal course, so I was just attached to a certain professor, Oliver Lancaster, who was a physician, a researcher, and mathematician. So he guided my work, and most of it was hands-on work. And then he also had friends in the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization [CSIRO] there. He made me go and observe what they were doing. I spent two years in Australia, and then I came home.

The help that I was going to do for my father was no longer relevant. However, the Statistical Training Centre of the University of the Philippines had just opened with United Nations assistance. It was a United Nations training center for statistics. I went and applied, and I was the first Filipino staff member, because the others were all visiting advisors from various countries. The principal advisor was a certain Dr. Meredith Givens. I think he used to be with the U.S. Bureau of the Budget or something. I stayed there until 1964 when the Population Institute was formally established by the University of the Philippines Board of Regents with Ford Foundation assistance.

Sharpless

Okay, I want to talk a lot about that, but let me back you up a little bit. When you went to the University of Sydney, what kinds of things were you doing hands-on work about?

Concepcion

Well, I was helping Dr. Lancaster with his research, and so it was mostly things dealing with biological, mortality studies, which helped me prepare for my demographic training. It was mainly mortality studies. And then he attached me to a Miss Helen Turner who was with CSIRO, who was doing

more work that had to do with biological variables associated with fertility and other things. So again, without knowing it, it was a preparation for my demography. And he made me sit in on various mathematics courses so that I could strengthen my background in mathematics.

Sharpless

And what is it that you liked about statistics?

Concepcion

Actually, it was more the application of it rather than the mathematics of it. In biostatistics I didn't go into the more mathematical portion because I knew that what was really required was its application for clinical and biomedical research. I wanted to see what were the tests that needed to be done. So that's what I did, and then when I came back I told the acting head of the statistical center that I did not want to teach, because it was a graduate course leading to an M.S. in statistics and most of the students were older than me. So I said, "I'm not going to teach these people who are older than me. They might not listen to me." That remained so for a year and a half, until one of the faculty members was sent abroad on a UN assignment. She was teaching sampling operations, mostly fieldwork. Since there was no one to take her place, the director said, "Why don't you just take her place for a while, you know, until she comes back?" So I was here doing field work with the students, who didn't know what to do with me because they were all men. They didn't know how to treat me when we went out to do interviews. And so they were very careful. They fed me (laughter) and they were very polite.

But then I never got out of teaching. I was even teaching summer school until—then, oh, in 1955 was when I joined, and I came back at the

end of '54 because the school year in Australia is February to November. So I returned in December and in January I joined the University of the Philippines. And this Dr. Givens one day came to me and handed me a form, and he said, "Fill that." And I said, "What's this?" He said, "Oh, it's for a scholarship." I said, "Where?" He said, "Oh, to attend a meeting." And it was actually an International Social Science Council scholarship, junior fellowship, they called it. I didn't realize at the time that he was the one who was going to be [deciding who would be awarded] the fellowship. It was for the first Seminar on Population Problems in Asia and the Far East, which was held in Bandung, Indonesia, in 1955.

So I dutifully filled out the form. I didn't even know what demography was. I had to look it up and then do a five hundred-word statement on what is the importance of the population problem, not even knowing anything about the population problem. So twenty of us were selected, region-wide—two from the Philippines. I was the only female among the twenty. There were official delegations from each of the countries in the region. Before that seminar, a close friend of Dick Givens came to Manila at his invitation, to address the Philippine Statistical Association. It turned out to be Professor Philip Hauser of the University of Chicago. I met him then, and I met him later on in Bandung. It was there that the demographic community was present, officers of the Population Council, the UN, all of the important names in the field.

Sharpless

I'm sorry, tell me again who was sponsoring this conference in Bandung.

Concepcion

It was the UN. Actually, it was Dr. Marshall Balfour of the Rockefeller

Foundation, together with Dr. Irene Taeuber, who organized the whole thing. But I think they were using UN funding, because it was a UN seminar.

Sharpless

Okay, but it was a major conference.

Concepcion

Yes, and of course, when I say Bandung, most people think it was the Bandung political seminar, because it had been held the same year. But this was the first ever held to deal with population problems in Asia and the Far East. And being the only woman among the junior fellows, I was partly there as an observer, but partly also with the delegation, which consisted of the University of the Philippines [executive] vice president, who was acting director of the Statistical Training Centre at the time, and the assistant director of the Bureau of the Census and Statistics, and the two of us, the former student of my father, the one whose biostatistics course I audited, Dr. Victor Valenzuela. So I met all of these people whose names later on became familiar when I took up demography.

I was frequently made officer-in-charge of the center, because the director who was then appointed was an economist, and a member of the Central Bank [Monetary Board]. He was very busy attending international conferences. [Consequently], he was frequently abroad. So at one time, a letter came from Dudley Kirk, [director of the demographic division] of the Population Council, [mentioning] the fellowships in demography open for all persons in the region. So I sent a letter acknowledging the information and I signed it with my name. But I didn't say that, you know, I met you in Indonesia, because I didn't want to presume on that. And then he was very kind and said, "Oh, we know one another. Are you interested yourself?"

Sharpless He made that connection.

Concepcion Yes, he made the connection. And then I said yes. So he said, “Well, we’ll give you a scholarship for advanced work in demography.” I didn’t even have a basic course in demography, and I was to do advanced work. He said, “Where do you wish to study?” I said, “Well, I want to go to Princeton.” And they said, No, you can’t go to Princeton because they were not admitting women at that time, not for degrees anyway. So they said University of Michigan, because Professor [Amos Hawley, who] was in human ecology, was at the time [visiting professor at] the University of the Philippines Public Administration Institute. I said, “No, I don’t want to go there because I don’t know anybody there.” I said, “I think I’ll go to Chicago because at least I know somebody, Dr. Hauser,” who was chair of the sociology department.

I was admitted, and the very first thing he tells me [was], “No, you can’t just do an advanced course, I recommend that you do a Ph.D., because in your country, it’s important to have a graduate degree. If you go back there with no degree after ten months of study, what will you show for it? Nothing.” So he cabled the executive vice president of the university, whom he got to know in Bandung very well, and he said, “Dr. Virata, I am recommending Ms. Concepcion to do a Ph.D., so please just extend her leave of absence beyond the ten months.” Then I got a reply that said, approved, extended with pay. “Oh good,” I said.

So I spent two years and four months in Chicago, and then I get a cable saying, “You have to return because one of the advisors from

Australia teaching demographic statistics is leaving and we want you to come while she's still here so you know what to teach." But then she left before I even came back. So I taught demographic statistics without finishing my dissertation. I did all the academic credits for the degree, but not my dissertation. So Hauser said, "Oh, there's nothing in the statutes that says that you have to finish your dissertation in order to do your defense, so we will do your defense now and you can go back without having to worry about returning here for a defense."

I went home in [late 1960], and it took me three years to finish. I kept, you know, just sending one chapter at a time. Dr. Hauser came several times to the Philippines because he had various projects with the UN Economic Commission in Bangkok. So on one trip in 1963 he said, "Young lady, you'll have to finish. You will sit down, and in two weeks I want you to return that dissertation, and you will graduate in June of this year." So that's what happened. He forced me really to buckle down to work and complete the chapters that were still missing and forward them to Chicago.

Sharpless

Well, let me ask you one more question about the Bandung Conference. What were the issues in population at that point?

Concepcion

Well, this was the increasing, the very rapid [population] growth of the Asian region. For many, it was a very new thing because nobody had ever thought of that. And then, well, what were the causes of high fertility and the down-trend of mortality. Actually, that was the first time that attention was going to countries like Japan, which had managed to decrease its fertility while the rest of the region had still very elevated rates, and that mortality had come

down as a result of the medical discoveries, especially post–World War II. So it was an eye-opener for many of them, and it brought together a very multidisciplinary group, because we had economists from Indonesia, very prominent economists who were doing some work already on this, and then we had—was China there? No, I don't think China was there, because China was still—it was '55, so too early. (laughs) But practically every country in the region, including the Pacific islands, [was] represented. It was quite a big meeting. I think it was a ten-day meeting, the very first one, and I think that was the eye-opener for all of the countries, because it was Asia and the Far East, so ECAFE [Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East]—it was ECAFE before it became ESCAP [Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific]—was very prominent as one of the organizing groups. At that time no one, no one had even started demography, I think, from among the region's social scientists, so I think that sparked interest in this field.

Sharpless

How good was the data on the Philippines in 1955?

Concepcion

Oh, we had our census in 1948. The United Nations Population Division sent a staff member to do a labor force analysis and in the context of that study showed that actually the rate of growth that was being manifested during the intercensal period was too low. So one of the first ones that came after the institute was established was Frank Lorimer, who did the work on establishing the rate of growth, and analyzing the population data. And by that time we already had the 1960 census, so he was able to compare the '48 [and] '60 censuses. He stayed in the Philippines for two years as the first

visiting faculty member of the Population Institute.

Sharpless Uh-huh. Okay, so you went to the University of Chicago—

Concepcion I went to the University of Chicago, did my comprehensives, and my dissertation defense, and came back in July of 1960.

Sharpless Okay, tell me about your dissertation topic.

Concepcion My dissertation topic was on the fertility of married women in the Philippines, because we had had a 1958 survey of households as part of the quarterly labor force survey [which began] when I was with the statistical center, and I used [the] 1958 [survey round]. And I wanted the data which were then on cards, using the old-fashioned—

Sharpless IBM punch cards?

Concepcion Yes. And then to my horror, when I was still in Chicago, one of the staff members at the Statistical Center wrote me, “Oh, oh, they’re selling the [punch] cards! I have seen them converted into toy airplanes in the park!” So, I—I wrote to the Bureau of Census and Statistics and, yes, it was true. Fortunately, the 10 percent sample had not been touched. So I retrieved whatever could be done, and—

Sharpless So what were your findings?

Concepcion Oh, that Philippine fertility was very high and associated with SES [Social and Economic Status] and so forth. I compared it with a recently printed book on the demography of Lebanon by Joseph Chamie, who is now the director of the UN Population Division, so that gave me a comparative outlook.

Sharpless Uh-huh. And about what was the fertility rate in the Philippines then?

Concepcion At that time, it was six and a half that Dr. Lorimer confirmed.

Sharpless Okay. So, it was a challenge working—

Concepcion Yeah.

Sharpless —in between Chicago and the Philippines.

Concepcion Yes, yes. Well, most of it—of course, at that time we didn't have recourse to e-mail or anything, so you had to use this slow mail, the "snail mail." And I had to come home, and then it took me—of course, I came home (telephone rings) I was still with that center and—

Tape 1, side 1, ends; side 2 begins.

Sharpless All right. Anything else about your doctoral dissertation and your conclusions?

Concepcion Well, the first part was actually an historical review of population data from the eighteenth century onward, whatever records existed at the time. So I had to use historical records, and some of them are very good, because actually the baptismal records were, not photographed, they were microfilmed by the Church of the Latter Day Saints. They're kept in the Family Historical Center run by the Mormons. For some of the parishes there, they have been excellent sources of historical demography. So I worked with a [Filipino] Jesuit historian at the time who was then the primary source of the history of the Jesuits in the Philippines. And so my dissertation was the first analytical study of fertility, although that was not the trigger for the population policy and program. My dissertation remains in the shelves of libraries.

But the trigger for the program was the series of newspaper reports

written by Juan Mercado, a journalist, who is an unusual journalist because he reads and interprets research data, and knows exactly how to translate them into very interesting articles, and quite accurate, because this is an area where the journalists are—you even teach them how to calculate rates or what the difference is between a birth rate and a growth rate, and they can't get it! (laughter)

So—speaking about journalists, we had a development journalism course that was set up by the Philippine Press Institute using this journalist Mercado and former *Financial Times* writer Alan Chalkley. And there was another one—[Tarzie Nittachi]—from Sri Lanka and an Indian, Amitabha Chowdry. The four of them set up this course for journalists at every level, including management. And so I was the one who was telling them all about the population, and then they would write a series of articles about them. Now we have to start all over again. You see, we are getting a group of journalists together. Tomorrow the course will start in the northern Philippines. I was supposed to be the person lecturing, but since I'm here I recommended a colleague of mine to take my place. We have been developing a PowerPoint presentation by e-mail to see just what should be done, because I will be using the same presentation for the middle islands, the Visayan Islands, next October.

Sharpless

Uh-huh. Well, tell me about the articles that Juan Mercado wrote.

Concepcion

Oh, he focused on the rate of growth, and he said that this is very alarming, we should be doing something. And that came out in 1968. So, this sparked interest and, at that time, Rafael Salas was the executive secretary of the

Philippine president, what we call the [“]little president[“]. He was invited to attend one of the General Assembly meetings of the United Nations and when he [returned], he said, “We are missing the boat. All of these countries are getting funding to do something about their population problem, and here we are so complacent and doing nothing and here we have had”—by that time, we had had already two national meetings on population organized by the Population Institute. One was in 1965 when the university president inaugurated the first national conference on population. As I told you earlier, the institute was established by the University Board of Regents in November of ’64.

Sharpless

Okay, now, but you haven’t explained to me how that happened. Can you explain to me how that happened?

Concepcion

Yes. The Ford Foundation constituted a group made up of Philip Hauser of the University of Chicago, Dudley Kirk of the Population Council, New York, and Oscar Harkavy of the Ford Foundation. The group went to Asia to look at the possibility of establishing demographic or population institutes [in various countries] in the region. They started with Japan and then Korea. And of course, Dr. Hauser was touching base with his students, so he thought since there was already an Institute of Population Problems at the ministry of health and welfare in Japan, there was no need to set up another one. I can’t remember whether they did Korea, but in the Philippines, they touched base with us, so the executive vice president of the university who knew them from Bandung days gave them a very good reception. The university approved the group’s recommendation to set up a population

research and training institute with funding from the Ford Foundation. Then the next country that they visited was Thailand because there was another [former University of Chicago] student there, Visid Prachuabmoh, whose daughter Vipana is now the director of the College of Population Studies at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok.

And we worked on the papers, patterning it after the Statistical Training Center, which was then absorbed into the university after UN assistance was terminated. This was what the group also demanded from the university: after the Ford Foundation assistance would be terminated, the university would absorb the institute as a regular unit of the university as part of the graduate school. It still does not offer undergraduate training. So, for the first four years, we had complete support from the Ford Foundation. Then the Ford Foundation said, We will support you for another four years provided you set up a matching grant. I looked for money to set up a matching grant. So after eight years, we had the matching grant to sustain at least the fellowships and, partly, faculty development. We were able to send people to the U.S., to France and to Australia to study and get their Ph.D.s. So, the first core faculty were all trained abroad. Brown, Pennsylvania, INED [Institut National d' Etudes Demographiques] in France, and ANU [Australian National University].

Sharpless

Okay. And how were you chosen as the first—you were the first director, correct?

Concepcion

Yes, I was the first director, because there was no one there (laughs) — someone who was working with the Statistical Center followed me. She also

went to Chicago to do her Ph.D. So the two of us were the two faculty members that carried on while the rest were abroad—we were training students. We turned out our first graduate, who is an American, Peter Smith, who is now Peter Xenos of [the East-West Center in Honolulu], Hawaii. And I was wondering why he had come all the way from the United States to take up demography in the Philippines. It turned out that his girlfriend was a Filipina and she had come home, so he followed her after he finished his bachelor's degree in Milwaukee—he did his undergraduate work in Milwaukee—and then he became our first graduate. And then we had two, three students a year who would enroll for the master's degree. So that's how we began.

Sharpless

Okay. So you started training students, primarily.

Concepcion

With two faculty members. Elvira Mendoza (Mrs. Pascual). Then I lost her because her husband, who was a philosopher—no, it was her father-in-law who was the philosopher; the husband was in business administration—he was doing business administration at Chicago, preferred to stay on in the U.S. He came back and he was working at the university, but he was very uneasy so he went back to renew his permanent residence in Guam. And then she followed, and became a staff member of Mayor Richard Daley's office. I've lost touch with her. But the fact is, she still is in Chicago working.

Sharpless

Okay. I'm sorry—but when I interrupted you, you were talking about setting up a commission.

Concepcion

Uh, yes. When Rafael Salas returned—I knew him because when he was still at the university in 1965, during the time General Carlos P. Romulo was the

university president, Salas was one of his assistant vice presidents. So this was in the mid-sixties, and we had our first national conference on population in 1965. We published a book on [the proceedings]. And at that time I got everybody to produce a paper or serve as discussants just by phoning them. It was very [easy]. And then we got Dr. Hauser to come. We had the UNDP Resident Representative Warren Cornwell to be one of the speakers. We had President Romulo, of course. And then we had invited Dr. [Chidambaran] Chandrasekaran from India, whom I had met in Bandung, to come also and address the conference.

Two years later, we had another conference, '67, and between '67 and '68, this series of population articles appeared in the morning dailies. Then by 1968, when Salas went to the UN General Assembly and came back, he called me and said, "I want to form a committee to study the population problem with the idea of recommending a policy to the president." So I knew we needed a [large group], so we invited everyone, the [Roman Catholic] [and Protestant churches], the government agencies, NGOs [non-governmental organizations] [and academics]. They worked in small groups to produce the recommendation. Actually, it was a study of the population situation, and the recommendation was for the [Philippine] president to come up with a policy. The policy was very simple: just say that we need to undertake a program of family planning so that each Filipino could partake of the fruits of national progress.

And so the president approved [the recommendation] in late '69. And we had another study commission to flesh out what [this program] would

be. [Therefore], the same group met, and then the secretaries of various [governmental] departments were named as members of the ad hoc Population Commission, together with representatives of the Catholic Church and other churches. During the first meetings, the Church was interested. Later on, when they saw where it was going, they said, No, we would rather not because, they said, we don't want to seem to be promoting family planning. So, I told them, "You know, it's better for you to be in than to be out, because if you're in you can influence the way the program will go, but if you're out, no one will listen to you from the commission, because they will say, Well, you opted out." But they still insisted—

Sharpless

On getting out?

Concepcion

On getting out. From that time on, they never collaborated. Then in 1970, Congress debated a population policy, and that was signed into law in 1971, August of 1971, by President [Ferdinand] Marcos. In 1972 martial law was declared, and there was a presidential decree [PD79] amending the policy. The decree just amended the composition of the Population Commission and the program. In 1970, actually, the formal Population Commission was established and an executive director was appointed in the person of Dr. Conrado Lorenzo, [Jr.]. From that time on, family planning work began. And all [efforts], of course, [were] to end abortion as a method of contraception, and of course, it's also [illegal]. There was money for the population program [from] USAID [U.S. Agency for International Development]—and [the] UN Fund for Population Activities [UNFPA] [provided funds].

From that time on till today, the commission has undergone various changes with every Philippine president. Although Marcos was very enthusiastic, he had to be reminded again and again to come out with statements endorsing the program. In 1981, we had the IUSSP, the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population, hold its [general] conference with the Philippines as host. And we couldn't get President Marcos to deliver the address at the opening, but UNFPA Executive Director Rafael Salas was there. But on the second day, Marcos was able to come, so we had to sort of change the program around just to suit his convenience. But he did deliver a major address on population. That's when you, you know, sort of have to prompt him to address the population issue now and again.

So for the first four years of the program under his administration—he was elected in 1965 and served until 1986—there was really a very big drop in the total fertility rate because of the public enthusiasm. Then the rate of decline slowed until 1986. In 1986, Corazon Aquino came into—oh, I just have to tell you that every time the bishops would complain to the [president] about the population program, Marcos would say, “Well, if you're opposed to the program, I will approve the divorce bill,” which was always pending in Congress. He held that as a threat. So the [bishops] would back down until again they would go to the president to complain, and he would come back with the divorce threat. It's always this adversarial [relationship], which disappeared when Aquino came into power because she was very religious. She kowtowed to the bishops. And, of course, the

bishops came into force, and they were very much against the program because it offered what they called artificial contraception, and all that. So, we were all being condemned for that. The program was in the doldrums during '86 to '92. Then came Ramos. Revival again, '92 to '98, six years. And then [from] '98 to 2004 was supposed to be [the] Estrada [administration]. He was also in favor and, in fact, the secretary of health was very supportive of the program. And he—[the health secretary]—was [ready] to sign the voucher for the importation of contraceptives, for the first time using Philippine government money. Then came the people's power against Estrada, so the secretary of health was unable to sign the voucher for fifty million pesos out of government funding for the purpose of importing contraceptives. That was a disaster.

And then, of course, we have the incumbent, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, who is also like Corazon Aquino and would have nothing to do with reproductive health, would have nothing to do with reproductive rights, copying everything that the Bush administration is mouthing in all international conferences, and domestic also. So we can't expect anything from her, so we're back to square one. So, was it last year? yeah, 2003, the National Academy of Science and Technology [NAST], which is like the National Academy of Science in Washington, decided to get into the act. They [organized] a roundtable on population, and I just told them why population matters. And one of the congressmen who has a Ph.D. in political science from the University of Hawaii and is very interested in population—he's married to a Thai who is a faculty member at

Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok—he said, “My wife was telling me, ‘Why on earth are you still debating population at this time? That’s no longer an issue!’”

“And here we are,” I said. “Since thirty years ago,” I said, “I was talking about population already and why it was important to deal with it, and now I consider myself a failure because I am back to square one, doing the same thing again to a different audience, but still saying, ‘Why is it that we are talking about population?’” Well, in the meantime, the businessmen, the studentry and all those who had been very lukewarm before are now talking about population. I understand from the international channel here on TV that various newly elected Philippine congressmen are now espousing bills on population, on family size, on reproductive health. In fact, we at the National Academy of Science and Technology have come up with a bill on family size without talking about population control, population management, because these are all—um, what do you call this?—dirty words now, so we want to address the poverty issue through smaller family size and by establishing family and community centers in the local government, because we have given up on national government. It has to be local government now because they are autonomous under the local government code. They can do what they want.

Sharpless

Interesting.

Concepcion

So, we are hoping that they can do something.

Tape 1 ends; tape 2, side 1, begins.

Sharpless

All right. This is the second tape with Mercedes Concepcion on August the

seventeenth, and I wanted to circle back and ask you a couple of questions. You mentioned the Church. Tell me about the role of the Catholic Church in the Philippines in the 1960s.

Concepcion At that time, the Church was still quite favorable, because I remember that every time we had a seminar on population, we would always have a Church representative. A priest would be asked to explain the religious [aspect in relation to] family planning methods. Also, what would—

Sharpless And were they talking about the rhythm method, maybe? I mean, were they talking—

Concepcion They were talking about other methods, as well—

Sharpless Okay—

Concepcion —of course, but pushing rhythm at the time, which was not yet a dirty word. (laughs) So, even the one who has become most—well, he is old now, so he is not so vigorous anymore—but he became a most spirited and controversial person later on. But he used to be on the same stage as me, and very favorable, you know, so no problem, no problem. And then, a group set up what they call the Responsible Parenthood Council, which was an NGO. They were trying to figure out ways of engaging the public in the rhythm method and ways of popularizing it and so forth. We were working with them, and it was their president who was a member also of the [population] commission, of the early commission.

Sharpless Mm-hm. And was there ever a time when the Church actually did not oppose condoms and the pill and things like that?

Concepcion Uh, no.

- Sharpless** No, okay, so it was always—
- Concepcion** Not ever. (laughs) But it was always that condoms—you know, one of the Jesuits would make fun, and he said that he was always traveling with condoms in his briefcase, and when they would open it at the airports they would wonder why there was this priest in a soutane carrying condoms. And he would say, “Well, I use this as”—oh, what do you call this?—“caps for the battery of my car,” he said, “because it makes [it run] very [well]”—you know, what is this—(laughter) or else he would say, “I give it to the children as balloons to play with.” But he always carried these condoms. Then later on, when they get to a certain age, these priests become very conservative and then they take up religion—(laughter) they take up religion and become very opposed to the idea of family planning. So we told them when they started to make noises about leaving the commission—I said, “You know, it’s better for you to stay”—if you can’t fight ’em, you join ’em, see?
- Sharpless:** Now, how much impact did the *Humanae Vitae* encyclical have?
- Concepcion:** Not very much, actually, because very few people read it and, of course, if it were read out in public, nobody listens to the sermon, anyway. Many of the men, they go out during the sermon and smoke a cigarette, so nobody listens to the sermon. As a matter of fact, survey after survey that we have done has shown, really, no religious impact on the practice of family planning.
- Sharpless** Then how is it that the Church has so much power?
- Concepcion** It is on the policy level. At the policy level we cannot—for ten years now, a population bill has been filed in Congress, which reaches third reading and that’s all. Then our Congress closes and then we have another Congress, so

what the hierarchy does is to get to the wives of these congressmen, and threaten them with hell and damnation, so that the wives, of course, will relay this to their husbands. Thus, we cannot get anything passed in Congress when it comes to population because of this strategy. There are certain areas where the parish priest is very strong. He will tell the women that using artificial contraceptives is a sin. But it is the women who aren't educated, who couldn't care less because they don't go to church in the first place. But even if they do, when the husband either gets drunk and then forces his wife to have sex or they think that they need more children so that they can be a help in adding to family income, without thinking of, you know, clothing and food and education, in particular. So you have a lot of street children now who we are trying to rescue from the streets. But there are so many of them and many of them, you know, are sniffing rugby.

Sharpless Okay. So the Church has a—(both talking)

Concepcion Yeah—

Sharpless Yeah, not on the daily (both talking)

Concepcion But at least now they are saying they are for responsible parenthood. They have now said yes to natural family planning. In the past, the Church emphasized that the end of marriage was procreation. But now they are saying, Well, for economic and social reasons, we can practice natural family planning.

Sharpless Now, I noticed that on your vita that you were on a papal commission in the 1960s. What was that about?

Concepcion Oh, that was the first papal study commission on the family and natality, the

one that led to the *Humanae Vitae*. At the end, we thought the majority opinion, which was for contraception, had won.

Sharpless I think most people thought that.

Concepcion And then a group of five or six prevailed, and the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* was released thereafter.

Sharpless Well, tell me about that commission.

Concepcion I was not on the original commission. The original was a very small group of religious, then it expanded, because it was '65 when the Pope set it up. I think that he set it up first with just theologians, and then it expanded a little to include, of course, the medical group. And then somebody suggested, Well, perhaps it might be good to have social scientists. Of course, these were all Catholic. So then they said, Maybe it would be good to have also developing countries represented. So, there were two of us who were nominated from the Philippines, one was a Jesuit, American Jesuit, working on population, [Fr.] Frank Madigan, and myself. And I was selected because I was a woman, and a Catholic and from a developing country.

But this was towards the latter years of the commission—but very interesting because we were multi-country—there were Indians among us; there were, of course, Europeans; the secretary of the commission was a priest, a Dominican, very, very learned, Father Henri de Riedmatten. And he was—you know, Dominicans are not (laughs) into our style of family planning, either, but he was very impartial and objective, and he thought we were also. But then the commission included those who were very strongly opposed, and there were about five or six. But we had Gerald Ford, a Jesuit

who was for. There was another Jesuit, [Stanislaus des Lestapis], who was against. So you had—even among the same order there was disagreement—but among the lay theologians, they were all for it. There was somebody who had written a book on contraception, a lay theologian, American. There was one who was Dutch—of course, the Dutch are very liberal. The Germans were also quite liberal—but the Jesuit who was from Belgium, he was opposed to that. He had written already various essays in contradiction to the stand of the liberal group. So we thought when we dispersed, that was the end of the commission—

Sharpless Where was it?

Concepcion In Rome. There were about sixty of us members at the end.

Sharpless And so you hammered out a document?

Concepcion No, the document, the *Humanae Vitae*, was not drafted by us, but we had the majority opinion. And we thought this majority opinion would win the day, because about five only, as against fifty-five, or something like that. It was very clear.

Concepcion Then in 1968, the *Humanae Vitae* comes out.

Sharpless How did you hear about it at first?

Concepcion Just, when it was—

Sharpless And what was your reaction?

Concepcion Of course, we said, Oh! After all that work. But you cannot help feeling disappointed.

Sharpless How did you find out what had happened?

Concepcion Ah, well, there were odd rumors, and there were some books written about

it, and those who were close to Father de Riedmatten have already passed away, I think. There was another one, a layperson, a doctor, who was also very influential there, and he came from Georgetown—no, he was not from Georgetown, the other one was from Georgetown, the sociologist. But this was the group I was meeting with, because the laity—we were together. And then we had the chair couple of the Christian Family Movement there, Pat and Patty Crowley, from Chicago—they were also very favorable. There were actually three couples, one French-Canadian, one from Chicago, and another one from the Mauritius. And what was very funny was because we were staying in a convent of nuns, the couples had to separate. So the men went over to the convent for the men and we stayed with the nuns. Then, finally, for another meeting, they arranged apartments for them. So (laughs) we said, All of this is practicing birth control.

Sharpless (laughs) Right. But for the average person on the street in the Philippines, this wasn't that big a deal.

Concepcion No, you ask somebody, Have they heard of it? Yes, they have heard of it. Have they read it? Very few have read it, actually.

Sharpless Okay.

Concepcion So I think the impact was really small—even the pastoral letters of the hierarchy that are supposed to be read out in our parish, they never get read out, or else I don't go to the mass where this is read out. But nobody listens, you know, to somebody who drones while reading. (laughs) It's only, as I said, the ones who are very close to the Church who observe the periodic abstinence.

- Sharpless** Now, when the Commission on Population was set up, how many commodities were available in the Philippines?
- Concepcion** Uh, I really cannot say. I was not dealing with that part, at all, but I would say that there was ample supply.
- Sharpless** Okay. So if someone—
- Concepcion** The trouble was only in the distribution—
- Sharpless** Okay.
- Concepcion** They would get to the regions and from the warehouses they had problems with distributing them down to the provincial and municipal level, and that was what we kept commenting on, you know. We said the shelf life, particularly of condoms and pills, would be short and with the kind of weather that we have, which is six months rain and six months heat, these are not favorable to a prolonged shelf life. So we said, We ought to see to it that they get down to where the clinics are.

So that's why the idea of a *barangay* [supply point], which is the barrio or village level distribution point, was set up. So we had women as *barangay* supply officers. They were supplying only two commodities, the condom and the pill. But these were resupplies, because the acceptor has to get her original supply from the clinic and then the rest from the supply officer at the *barangay*. Study after study showed that those supply officers who were mobile and who went from house to house motivating the women were the ones who had a successful family planning program. Those who stayed put and just waited for the client to come had low acceptance rates.

So that was the situation until '86. And then, of course, Cory Aquino,

in her hatred—actually it was hatred of Marcos—did away with everything that Marcos started, including the population program, regardless of whether it was good or bad. She ignored the need to build up energy sources, so we suffered the consequences of ten-hour energy losses, you know, brownouts. She did away with the program—well, that was not only because it was started by Marcos, but it was also against the Catholic Church teaching, and so forth. So she eschewed everything that Marcos did. And as a consequence, we are still feeling the effects of that up to the moment.

Sharpless What was the role in the 1970s when the commission began? What was the role of USAID?

Concepcion They were very active—well, they were pushy, actually. And depending on the director, the mission director, some of them were like bulls in china shops. They had the best of intentions, but they didn't know how to go about it. (laughs) I can remember some of them were very, you know—they were just—(claps hands)

Sharpless (laughs) Just like fists hitting a wall.

Concepcion Yeah, um-hm. And Steve was there.

Sharpless Steve Sinding.

Concepcion Yeah, he was one of the good ones. I can't remember now who was the mission director at the time, but there were some who were diplomatic and would get their way very nicely. Others—well, it depended, as I said, on the personality of the person. There was Lenni Kangas, with whom Steve Sinding worked. The one who preceded him was the one who was really

very aggravating. He would scold everybody for not doing their all for family planning—Filipinos and Americans alike. (laughs) And then, of course, everybody's back is up, and when you get lectured they won't do anything to cooperate. All right, really funny, mm-hm. So this has been the situation. They have been there. They have been giving. As I have said, imagine how many years—twenty-five years of giving supplies and commodities without any effort on the part of government to import contraceptives, except for some counterpart funds—but otherwise, nothing in the way of deciding, once and for all, to import contraceptives using government money. There have been studies now to show that people are willing to pay. They are no longer going to be offered for free, so that the only free contraceptives would be for the poor and so forth. But with this move of the present administration to have only what they call the “fertility awareness campaign,” to make them know about the reproductive cycle and promoting the use of the Billings [Ovulation Method], or whatever method.

So I told them, “Do you realize,” I said, “how much effort is needed to promote this?” I said, “And these are only tools to ascertain the fertile and infertile periods, so it's not that.” So I said, “This is like Alcoholics Anonymous. I remember in the 1970s Father Madigan, who started down in Mindanao in the plantation where Del Monte was, where the pineapples were grown, to set up a rhythm group of ten couples. He had a chair couple. He was teaching them the rhythm method. The nuns in the nearby plantation were also promoting rhythm among the laborers. Well, Father Madigan had to give it up because the wife of the chair couple became

pregnant.” (laughter) So he didn’t continue anymore with this rhythm promotion. “But,” I said, “you know, you have to be there to support the couples continuously. It’s not [like] they’re there all the time supporting the groups, that’s why they failed. Seven days a week, it cannot be done just during office hours.” But nobody listens.

Sharpless Okay. What about the martial law? What impact did that have on the work?

Concepcion No problem, insofar as the program was concerned. As I said, all we had to do was to, if enthusiasm was waning, go to the [presidential] palace and get Marcos to say something in a speech or in [his] state of the nation [address] about population so as to prod people into doing something again. It’s like that in—

Sharpless How much—

Concepcion There was no restriction about it during the Marcos regime.

Sharpless How much education did it take to get Marcos on board?

Concepcion I think it was mainly done through Salas, but then Salas left in ’69—

Sharpless Uh-huh.

Concepcion —in disgust when he was trying to run for senator. Then he found that his own cousin had sabotaged him during the campaign, so he left in disgust. So we lost a very ardent supporter, and we had to get those we call “the Salas boys,” who were planted in Malacanang in the palace, to do the prodding because the one who was then executive secretary after him was also a convinced population supporter, so we could get him to sort of say, Could you please remind the president to (laughs) include this in an address or come out and address this important meeting or that meeting?

- Sharpless** Um-hm. Tell me about the fertility survey that you did in '77 through '79.
- Concepcion** No, we had started the fertility surveys in 196[8].
- Sharpless** Okay.
- Concepcion** Quinquennial [five-year] surveys. So '68, '73, '78—
- Sharpless** Okay.
- Concepcion** And then the NDS [National Demographic Survey] that was the national part of the World Fertility Survey [WFS], the '78 one. And then '83—when did NDHS [National Demographic and Health Survey] come into being?—these last two, so '98 and 2003 were NDHSs.
- Sharpless** Okay.
- Concepcion** So, the health department was brought more into play in the formulation of the questionnaire and so forth. And it passed out of our hands—I mean, Population Institute hands—in '93.
- Sharpless** Okay.
- Concepcion** It was taken over by the National Statistics Office.
- Sharpless** So what was first one you worked on?
- Concepcion** Sixty-eight.
- Sharpless** Sixty-eight. Okay. And—
- Concepcion** Then '73, '78, [which] was part of the World Fertility Survey, was a joint National Statistics Office [NSO]—they were not yet National Statistics Office, they were National Census and Statistics Office [NCSO] and UPPI [University of the Philippines Population Institute] venture. So I was co-project director together with the NCSO director. And then in '83, it was still a joint effort, until, as I said, '93, when they took it [over] completely.

- Sharpless** Um-hm. Now, what—
- Concepcion** Because the funding was going to them already—
- Sharpless** Okay. Now, what was—
- Concepcion** —as part of the government's—
- Sharpless** What were your responsibilities as co-director?
- Concepcion** Well, first of all, the planning, then the training of the field force from supervisors down [to] interviewers. So we would set up regional centers for the training, and then supervision. Questionnaire formulation, of course, would have to hew to the WFS guidelines. We had a person from the World Fertility Survey who was there as coordinator. He was a Surinamese, but very, very fluent in many languages. So he and I would always battle it out because he would say something, and then I would say, “No, that cannot be, because this issue that”—and so people in the room, they thought we were fighting (laughs) because both of us would raise our voices, and then we would settle on something. So, the writing of the project report—the census director was more a ministerial type because he had too many other responsibilities so he just chaired the meeting, but most of the work was done by us at the Institute.
- Sharpless** Well, if you're doing it every five years, it sounds like you'd be working on it constantly.
- Concepcion** Oh, because after that would be the reports, the first report, then we had the analytical report that followed. So we did that until '83, and we had publications for what you call the second report, which would be more analytical papers. But we couldn't keep it up anymore after that—too much

work. And, when the census people took over the demographic surveys, they were not also trained to do analytical reports, so we would co-write the report. That was what happened in 1978. We had the census people draft the chapters, but I had to rewrite everything that they wrote. But they, of course, came out as co-authors in the publication.

Sharpless Let me flip the tape.

Tape 2, side 1, ends; side 2 begins.

Concepcion So this was what happened when I retired in '93. I was working on the '88 report, but that never saw publication because the people who had written the chapters had no more time to rework their drafts. And they had to run more tables, and so they lost interest because it was already five years afterwards. (laughs) They were already working on something else.

Sharpless So what trends did you see in these over the years, in these fertility studies?

Concepcion The total fertility rate, as I said—there were spurts, in the decline, depending on who was the president at the time.

Sharpless Okay, it was 6.6 when you finished your dissertation.

Concepcion Six point five in the sixties. It is now 3.5, so—

Sharpless That's substantial.

Concepcion But that's how many years? Thirty years. So that is thirty-five years [until] the 2003 [survey].

Sharpless Now, okay, so just to make sure that it's not that things went along pretty nicely during the Marcos years and then Aquino came in and—

Concepcion Little, little decline. There was a decline, but not—and you will notice it also from the family planning methods that were being reported as used by them.

So, sometimes the use of modern methods would be stagnant. And it was the traditional that would be rising.

Sharpless

Okay.

Concepcion

Now, the last two surveys show that the modern methods have increased, but the increase has not been spectacular. But the traditional is still very strong. And then AID commissioned what they call the family planning survey, which is an annual rider to the household survey of the census [office] and, as it is only the past years, so I told them, “Do not use that to compare with the NDS or the NDHS, because it’s a totally different survey.” I said, “You just compare FPSs [Family Planning Surveys] over time and the quinquennial surveys separately so you don’t have to show”— But we still are very far from the 70, 75 CPRs [contraceptive prevalence rates] of our neighbors. Even Vietnam has higher—

Sharpless

Contraceptive prevalence?

Concepcion

I think their contraceptive prevalence rates are very high. Even Indonesia is way ahead of us.

Sharpless

Now, when did you do your first contraceptive prevalence surveys?

Concepcion

[In the late ’70s. But it is also] part of the NDS.

Sharpless

Okay.

Concepcion

So, we talk about what do they practice, how long have they been practicing, so we can also compute—oh, what do they call this?—the shifts and the continuation of the method, so from the beginning we have the CPRs, so we can compare the trend in CPRs.

Sharpless

Now, I’ve always wondered about what it’s like to go knock on the door and

ask the housewife what kind of contraception she uses. How do you train people to do that?

Concepcion

Well, actually, our women are not reticent when it comes to what they practice. But when you are matter of fact in your interview, there is no malice. Many of our women are also very earthy, so you can talk about this in same-sex surroundings. It's different when there are men around, but—

Sharpless

It's crucial that the questioners be female.

Concepcion

Um-hm. Most of our surveys—in fact, all the surveys are for women. In the last two NDHSs, they had male questions, but they [deal] mainly with health questions, AIDS and TB and whatnot. And of course they would ask whether they or whether their wives were practicing family planning or whether they were using the condom, because it's the only male method. Oh, and of course vasectomy. But other than that—but that looks to me from the recent trends that surgical sterilization is gaining ground. But it's still the pill that is prominent—and of course the traditional method. And the traditional method is withdrawal.

I remember when I first was in the field in 1963, I kept wondering. I said, “Well, natural method—lots of people here are using rhythm,” until I delved and probed, and I found out what they call natural in the vernacular, using the Spanish, was withdrawal. So I said, “Oh, my God!” (laughter) I thought all the time it was [the] rhythm method, so I was going to say, “Ah, very nice, you can”—[but] you know, it turned out to be (laughs and claps hands) *coitus interruptus*. “Ah, very bad!” I said.

Sharpless

Yes, not effective at all.

- Concepcion** No, no, and very bad, psychologically, also—
- Sharpless** Yes, yes.
- Concepcion** So, we said no. So you have to be very careful in your interpretation of what the respondent is saying.
- Sharpless** Yeah. Now, where did most of the commodities come from?
- Concepcion** Oh, USAID. Lately, UNFPA has pitched in, because the condom importation has stopped. They already gave word that this year, no more condom importation.
- Sharpless** USAID did?
- Concepcion** Um-hm. And next year it will be pill importation. But they changed their mind, and they have extended that to 2006, I think. But when supplies were required, UNFPA came into the picture and imported.
- Sharpless** And tell me what happened with the bill to put commodities into the Philippine budget?
- Concepcion** Yeah, that one. Nothing, because another secretary of health came into the picture who was an Arroyo-selected person with approval of the cardinal. And he is very glib. When he is talking to you, he is for family planning. When he is in front of somebody else, he goes, “sh-hm-hm-hm” (mimics talking secretively) with the result. “Oh,” he said, “we are promoting all kinds of methods, you know, but it’s up to the LGU, the local government unit, to do it. you know, since the natural family planning methods have not been given as much prominence, we’re just trying to level the playing field.”
- Yes, all this, you know—(pause in recording)
- Sharpless** Now, you were telling me that the current health minister wants to defer

everything to the local government units.

Concepcion Oh, yes, that is the position of the administration. The local government can do anything it wishes to do, but not national. National is for the fertility awareness campaign only.

Sharpless Right.

Concepcion So, all health personnel who belong to the central—because in the devolution of administrative powers contained in the 1992 local government code, all powers are devolved to the local government. So all the central government agencies have devolved, except education, and who else? I think it's just environment. For the rest, supposedly, those who have local offices, the rural health doctor is supposed to be paid now by the municipal or city mayor. And, to the horror of the mayor, he found that the rural health doctor is getting [a] higher salary than the mayor, so he refuses to appoint the doctor in the rural health center. So the health system has really declined, degenerated in this devolution because of the lack of money. So what we are trying to do now is to get the local government, especially provincial government, to set aside or to support the municipal mayors in their efforts to import contraceptives. That will be the avenue by which importation can be done.

Sharpless To get back up to the provincial level? (both talking)

Concepcion Because the governors are still the authority in the provinces, see, so all of these municipal and city mayors are still answerable to the governors. So he can—and these are bigger, because if you go by municipality, there are 1,400 municipalities, and there are seventy-eight provinces. So if the provinces get

together, there will be more bulk buying—it will be easier to bulk-buy than if you take 1,400 and—I mean there might [not] be 1,400 of them willing, so there may be not even half of them willing to do that. So you have to start with the provincial level, because there are now seventeen regions, and the administration keeps adding regions——then provinces, then municipalities and cities, and then the village, or *barangay*, level. So we are going now to the *barangay* level and setting up community organizations there to do the work.

Sharpless Now—

Concepcion Start all over again.

Sharpless Yeah. The Philippines, of course, is an island nation with diverse—

Concepcion Very diverse.

Sharpless —population.

Concepcion Diverse population, diverse language, diverse culture—

Sharpless So talk to me about the challenges of that.

Concepcion Well, first of all, if you just look at the provinces, all the regions, we'll say the biggest problem now is our Muslim provinces, because under the Muslim—they can have four wives, they can have unlimited numbers of children, they are mostly poor, uneducated. So these are challenges. And what the external assistance is focusing on are these provinces now. The Spanish government has [projects] there. They are supporting family planning also, in this Muslim majority. We have a region which is called the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao [ARMM]. And the census results are very poor. They show the response in terms of each age and sex group to be erroneous, with the pattern exhibited like a see-saw instead of a smooth pyramid, broad at

the base and tapering at the apex, the oldest age group.

Sharpless Okay, then, let me make sure—they see-saw, instead of being linear?

Concepcion Yeah, instead of being a pyramid.

Sharpless Okay.

Concepcion Yeah, so—well, it could be, not a pyramid, but maybe a balloon shape. But, at least it shouldn't vary from one age group, five-year age group, to the next to be short, long, short, you know.

Sharpless Right.

Concepcion Then when it comes to education, whatever we look at in terms of data, when it comes [to] the ARMM, it's a big problem. So I just said, "Separate them out, because look, it's distorting the national picture." But we can't separate them out, because they're part of the country. So that's a big challenge. Now, in terms of the Christian, non-Christian [populations]—but when it comes to just the regions, you have the migration pattern reflecting the movements to regions of economic opportunity. Even before the Second World War the landless in central Luzon, the big island north, were encouraged to homestead in the south—in Mindanao. So you have all the effects of this movement down there.

Sharpless Okay.

Concepcion But of course they went into the areas where the indigenous population, which is not all Muslim, and the migrants have, according to the indigenous population, taken over their ancestral lands, see. So that's one big fight. Then you have also people from the middle islands, the Visayan Islands, also migrating downward, because Mindanao is the land of opportunity—it is

still—it was open.

And so, this migration movement has created what we would call pockets of people who came from the north and from the middle islands representing two different language groups, the Ilokano-speaking and the Visayan-speaking. Now with the national language being taught, at least people can now understand you when you talk in the national language, even down there—

Sharpless

It's Tagalog?

Concepcion

Tagalog-based, Tagalog-based, but it is called Filipino. Before, you had to switch to English to get understood if you did not know the local language. There are twelve major dialects. So any effort we have to survey, you have to have the interview questionnaire in at least eight different languages. So, you do it in English and then have it translated into the local language, back-translate it to English to see whether it is consistent, and then use the local version. Your interviewers have to be local, otherwise they have to speak the language. So you have the language problem.

And then, because of the fact that these are islands, it's very difficult to unify people, because this has been the historical trend. During the Spanish occupation, when the Filipinos didn't like the Spaniards, all they had to do was flee to another island and get out from having to pay tax. So this inter-provincial movement continues. So these island groupings have also been responsible for the fact that people do not think in national terms. You think of your family first, your kin group next, and your province. So, it's the same here—you have all of these [im]migrants. The Filipino community

is not one.

Sharpless Um-hm, um-hm. And of course you had a long period of United States occupation as well—

Concepcion Uh-huh, yes.

Sharpless —and then the Japanese.

Concepcion Well, that was only four years, so—but it just has its implications for mortality, but not so much. In fact, the four hundred years under Spain were overcome by the fifty years of U.S. occupation because of education. See, during Spanish occupation, only selected people were allowed to be educated to a higher level. You only went up to what was the level of the elementary; sixth, seventh grades, that's all. Beyond that, you have to really belong to a select group. But when the Americans came, there was public education. It was open to everybody. The public schools were open to anybody who qualified. Everybody got put into the public schools to learn how to read and write, unlike in the Spanish times. Those fifty years had greater impact than the preceding four hundred years, except for the religion. So, of course the Americans brought Protestantism, but it still is not a major religion. And then we also have the local Protestant sects, which have more impact than the imported Protestant.

Sharpless Uh-huh.

Concepcion So these are big challenges. Segmentation of the population has to be done so your program has to cater to different segments. So, now, when we say, Only the poor will be offered free contraceptives—but who are the poor? How do you get to segmentize them?

Sharpless

Very difficult. To what extent does this diverse population make work expensive?

Concepcion

Oh, yes, very expensive, because, as you see, translation is one already, and then, I mean, you have local interviewers, true, but the supervision has to be done locally, not even regionally. So you have to go over there and that is expensive. I'm involved now in an exit-poll review, and I found out that a sample of ten thousand households nationally is costing ten million pesos. And out of that sample, one can get something like seven thousand completed interviews, so that's seven thousand interviews for ten million pesos. So when we told the pollsters that, Okay, nationally you can report the results, because your margin of error is plus or minus 2.8 percent, but when you go down to the regional and provincial level, and depending on how many strata you have, you double your margin of error, thus affecting the reliability of data. So in order to be able to report regionally only, not provincially, for sixteen regions, you need a sample of fifty thousand. The pollsters said, What, fifty million pesos? Who's going to pay us fifty million to conduct a survey? And that is what the census charges for a survey. When the Population Institute wanted to do a migration survey, they had only some fifteen million pesos. And the census people said, Even right there, we cannot do that because our household sample now is fifty thousand, but for a migration survey you need more samples to be able to get the regional movements very well reported. So they were charging—how much were they charging?—some thirty million, I think. So we said, Give up the idea of the migration survey.

Sharpless Too expensive.

Concepcion Too expensive.

Sharpless Where did the majority of the funding come from, besides USAID, for this one?

Concepcion For these surveys—well, previously we were getting from UNFPA, of course, AID for the NDHSs, and locally. The national budget would have an appropriation for the ten-year survey program, which is supposed to be passed on and reviewed by national government. But with the fiscal crisis, the first ones that the legislators will veto are the surveys, even if they need them. So, we need to say, for example, for a national census over three hundred million—they're planning a bi-census in 2005, and so far they have only, what, less than two hundred million budgeted for it. And the preparatory part has to be done this year. We are already in the second half of the year, and they have to do the listing of households, et cetera. And the National Statistics Office doesn't have the money for it.

Sharpless Well, why don't we stop for today and we'll pick it up in the morning.

End Interview 1

*Interview 2***Sharpless**

Today is August 18, 2004. My name is Rebecca Sharpless. This is the second oral history interview with Dr. Mercedes Concepcion. The interview is taking place at the home of her niece in Sacramento, California. It's part of the Population Pioneers Oral History Project being sponsored by the Hewlett Foundation. All right, Dr. Concepcion, I thought we had a great time yesterday. We talked a lot about your career in the Philippines, working at the University of Philippines in the Population Institute, and so today we're going to talk about—I'm sure we'll circle back to your work in the Philippines, but today we're going to talk about your multitude of work with various international organizations. And so we agreed we would start today with the United Nations.

Concepcion

Right, and that includes the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East, which is now the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, and I will refer to them in terms of their acronyms, which is ECAFE and ESCAP. In 1963, there was the first Asian Conference held in New Delhi, India. I was among those who were selected to be part of the [preparatory] committee for that conference, which was actually the second conference, because if you'll recall, I mentioned the Bandung seminar—that was the Bandung seminar on Population Problems of Asia and the Far East in 1955. So eight years later was the first of the conferences organized under the commission, the ECAFE. And at that time, Professor Wilfred Borrie, an Australian, was the chair of the preparatory committee. We met several times in Bombay, because there was at that time a demographic institute in

Bombay under United Nations auspices. In fact, the UN had set up across the regions a number of demographic training and research institutions—one in Latin America, in Chile, with a subcenter in San José, Costa Rica. Then there was this one in India, and later on they set up one in Europe. And, what else was there? Oh, there's the African one, in fact there were two, [one] for the French-speaking and the [other for] English-speaking Africa.

So in 1963 we had the Asian Population Conference in New Delhi. Prime Minister [Jawaharlal] Nehru was our special guest. In fact, I cherish a picture of the reception where I was shaking hands with him. And so that began the series of the decennial conferences on population. The next one happened to be in 1972 in Japan. And then '82 was in Colombo, Sri Lanka, the '92 was in Bali, Indonesia, and then the most recent one was 2002 in Bangkok, Thailand.

Sharpless

And what's the purpose of these conferences?

Concepcion

These are Asian population conferences and they reviewed the situation in Asia with regard to all these demographic elements. So we always start with the demography of Asia and the Far East, and then when it changed its name to Asia and the Pacific, it included all the Pacific Islands, so—actually, the stretch is from West Asia to the Pacific Islands, so it goes really beyond what we formally call East Asia and South Asia, because the membership of ESCAP includes some of the—now, particularly, of the Central Asian Republics, after the breakup of the USSR. But before that it included Iran. The composition—there are about thirty-five countries, but now I think

there are more, because of all these Central Asian Republics.

Sharpless So, you start out—does every country give a demographic report?

Concepcion Yes, we give the demographic situation, and all. And usually there is a theme for that. For example, in Colombo it was population and development. And then there is a set of commissioned papers to be written by people within the region. Of course, there is always a secretariat contribution in terms of the overviews. There are also plenary sessions where speakers are selected to prepare some keynote speeches and so forth. So, I would say, from 1982 onwards, the topics went from just pure demography to more population and development issues. So sometimes we concentrate on the environment. At this last one, it was a very contentious one because it was on reproductive health. The associate members are the United States, France, and the United Kingdom.

Sharpless Now, why is that? I noticed there was something on the Internet about the United States having a seat at this, and I thought—

Concepcion They're associate members.

Sharpless Why?

Concepcion Because of the fact that they, I think, were present at the beginning of the Economic Commission, so their status as associate members enables them to participate as delegations. The U.S. delegation included a person from the State Department stationed in Bangkok who was either Chinese or Japanese in origin, but an American citizen—very used to filibustering. I tell you, it was a most difficult meeting.

That is the reason why all the countries decided that they would not

have a tenth anniversary of the Cairo Conference. The World Population Conference, which started in 1974, has been going on every ten years. In 1994 the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo was the last one. There should have been one this year. But the delegates decided not to have one, because of the position of the United States.

Sharpless

Because of what happened?

Concepcion

It held up everything. We could not do anything, we were so behind in the agenda. Usually, these meetings have evolved into preparatory sessions where senior officials first deliberate on the issues. Then, once they have deliberated, they make the recommendations, and then the ministers come in for two days and sort of look it over, and then approve the recommendation. So the ministers are there mainly to give their blessing. So this started, as I said, in '82, in Sri Lanka. And by the time the ministers had come, the senior officials had not finished their work.

Sharpless

Because of the United States?

Concepcion

There were night sessions, ad hoc meetings, breakfast, lunch. Some delegations volunteered to speak to this man who was the spokesperson of the U.S. delegation, but he still held to his position, so okay. The U.S. wanted to delete that part of the 1994 Program of Action dealing with reproductive health, reproductive rights, adolescent rights and reproductive health. The U.S. delegation felt that providing information on adolescent reproductive health issues was contaminating the youth, et cetera, et cetera. So—

Sharpless But all that language is coming right out of the Cairo Program of Action—

Conception Exactly. So the U.S. was backtracking, was reversing its 1994 position. And yet it was the U.S. who insisted in Cairo about the inclusion of Paragraph 25, or whatever paragraph that is. So we were telling them, No, we have agreed that as a convention, an international covenant, and no, we will not back down on that. Well, finally, they sent a low-level person for the ministers' meeting. He was not even a bureau director, he was only an assistant director. He behaved as if he was, you know, a conqueror, because this Joseph—I met him in the hall on the first day of the ministerial meeting, and he said, “Oh, I would like to introduce the leader of our delegation.” And so I said, “How do you do?” And I said, “Our minister of health has come.” “Oh,” he said, “perhaps he would like to meet me for coffee in one of the coffee bars in the building.” After all, he is not even ministerial rank, he is only an assistant director. So he should have known that if he wanted to meet, he would have said, “May I meet him and can you introduce me—I will go with you,”—no, no, no, no—very typical stance. So I said, “Well, I will convey the message.” So I told our secretary of health, I said, “That man,” I said, “who’s heading the delegation, I met him, and he says, can you meet him for coffee at the bar?” And he said, “Oh”—so he didn’t give any attention to that. And so we sat down, and later on, I think, they met at the reception, but he made no mention of the earlier invitation.

I have been part of the preparatory committees for the Asian Population Conferences up to 1992 in Bali. In Bali I was also one of the plenary session speakers. My paper dealt with the way countries in the

region complied with the 1974 Plan of Action recommendations, because we had the World Population Conference agreement there, which was reaffirmed in Mexico in '84. We wanted to see just how the countries had met the targets in these two plans, or programs of action.

Sharpless

In Bucharest and Mexico City?

Concepcion

From Bucharest to Mexico, yeah. So I looked at all the targets and all the countries who were the delinquents and who were the ones who weren't. This was just an overview—that was my paper. In 2002, there was little money for the conference, so what the secretariat did, they had the preparatory committee, only limited it to very few, and then they just commissioned a number of people to prepare papers. The new papers were actually on Behavioral Change Communication [BCC] instead of IEC [information, education, communication]. There was a population and development issue paper, which was a very good one, by Gavin Jones of the Australian National University. I think there were about ten papers prepared, and each one of them was presented at the plenary, and discussed by the senior officials. I was not in the hall to listen to any except the first one, which was that of Gavin Jones, because we were busy trying to work out the negotiations with the U.S. delegation. So I hardly knew what was going on in the hall. (claps hands) I would only go into the hall to look for somebody (laughs) and pull him out of there to join us, because it was a terrible, terrible meeting. So, that is the situation insofar as the ESCAP is concerned.

Sharpless

Um-hm. And how valuable are those ESCAP meetings?

Concepcion

I think they have—well, as you know, Asia is the largest region, the one with

the largest populations. It is also the one where the successes have occurred in terms of declines in fertility and in mortality. And so I think that every session or conference—and the smaller countries are, I think, inspired or given a sense of competitiveness, because, you know, this country has done this much, and perhaps one can do the same, and how did they do it? I think that the sense also of belonging to a region is cemented at those meetings. It comes once in ten years, and so you come, you meet people, you talk with them, and then, of course, it also is a learning process for many. It cements friendships and so forth.

And since—when was that, I think about three, yeah, conferences back—the parliamentarians have also joined in, so they usually have an Asian parliamentarians' conference preceding the conference. They talk about some of the issues, and then they talk about what needs to be done by these legislators, et cetera. And then some of the legislators stay behind and attend the conference, so in fact that was what happened. Two of our legislators stayed behind and for them it was an eye-opener, because they said, Oh my goodness, this reminds us of Congress, where the filibustering goes on. One of them, this young congressman—he's the one I was talking about who is married to a Thai—he kept shaking his head. He went out into the lounge and he saw an elderly woman seated outside, very grandmotherly looking. So he took pity on her, sat down, and said, Hello, I am Congressman so-and-so from the Philippines. Oh! She began berating him for his stand and saying, "I am going to tell on you to the executive secretary of the Philippine president." For the first time in his life he was

speechless. I said, “That’s what you get for going and talking to strangers in the hall.” And he said, “You know, I thought that she looked so grandmotherly, I took pity on her and I sat beside her, little thinking that she was one of those”—on the fringe, you know, of the U.S. delegation, and apparently a member of some NGO, because she kept handing out leaflets. (Sharpless laughs) I was so amused, because he doesn’t lack for words in any situation, but in this one he really was speechless! (laughter) He was so taken aback by this deranged woman saying, “Why are you taking that position? You should be ashamed of yourself, you are a Catholic country”—(laughter)

Sharpless

How active has China been in ESCAP?

Concepcion

Oh, very. Before they even began participating, they had always had a representative, and this representative is the one who speaks English fluently, and he is from the ministry of foreign affairs. I can’t recall whether they were represented in ’63, but certainly in ’82 they already were there, and in ’72 I think they were also there in Japan. They sent a full delegation to Bali and Bangkok, and their head of delegation was a woman. Oh my goodness, she was one of the fightingest members of the delegation [when it] came to fighting with the United States delegation on the issue of reproductive health. She was very active in our small group meetings, trying to come to grips with how are we going to deal with this and come out with a consensus.

We were reviewing the conference plan of action which would affirm the ICPD Program of Action. The U.S. delegation wanted to delete

portions of that which [were] nothing but quotes from these contentious paragraphs from the ICPD Program of Action. And so we said, No, no, we stick to our guns. If they don't like them, they can vote against it. And of course, the issue here was that the practice in ESCAP is approval by consensus. So we said, if the United States does not vote together with us, we cannot have the conference plan of action recommended for approval by the ministers. So finally a solution was, the U.S. would put these two paragraphs or sections of the plan to a vote. That's what the U.S. delegation proposed: they would put the plan to a vote. And if they lost, then they will vote for the entire document and just enter a reservation as a footnote. The U.S. wanted the whole, I think, two-page reservation attached as a footnote. And we said, No, no, no, no, all that is required is to put the statement in the footnote, "Please see the annex for the full text of the reservation." This is the way it has always been. Oh, but the U.S. wanted to do it their way—this was another piece—another bone of contention. And finally, since they lost, it was just one against, two abstentions—the cowards! (laughs)—and the rest voted for the inclusion of the paragraphs unchanged.

Sharpless Including France and Great Britain?

Concepcion Oh, yes. In fact, Australia, New Zealand—everybody was very vocal about it. And so, at first, they said the Philippines might not, because of our minister, whom I said was very glib and whatnot. But he said, "Well, there's nothing wrong with this issue." And so I said, "You better vote for it." So he voted for it, and so all the Philippine NGOs said, Oh, thank goodness that you were able to convince him. I said, "We had a member of the Philippine

delegation from the department of foreign affairs. Since she was the one who was telling him all about all of the international treaties and whatnot, and that we had voted for these in '94 and so forth, 'Okay,' he said, 'Fine, I will vote for them.'" (laughs) So that was the part in the regional commission. Now my part in the population commission of the United Nations—

Sharpless Yeah, okay. I don't know if this would be a good time—I was going to ask you about the impact of Bucharest and Mexico City and Cairo. Would this be a good time to talk about that or should we hold that?

Concepcion Oh—yeah, yeah. We'll—I'll just talk about that when I talk about this, because this was under the auspices of the UN Population Commission.

Sharpless Okay.

Concepcion The population commission—as I said, I was recommended to be the Philippine representative to the UN Population Commission, which in 1967 was only meeting every other year, in alternate locations, one year in New York, another year in Geneva. In 1967, when I first attended, the U.S. delegation included Professor Ansley Coale of Princeton. He said, "I want to vote for the Ghanaian as the rapporteur." DeGraft-Johnson was his name, Kweku DeGraft-Johnson, a statistician.

Sharpless From Ghana?

Concepcion Yeah. So when Coale saw him, he said, "Oh, it's the wrong DeGraft-Johnson. I wanted the sociologist." DeGraft-Johnson had a sociologist brother. Professor Coale said, "Oh, you better be a co-rapporteur, because, this person being in statistics, we don't know what he will write." Thus, there

were two rapporteurs at that session, Kweku and me (laughs) just because of this mistake of Ansley Coale.

Sharpless So you were rapporteur at your first meeting?

Concepcion Yeah—I was rapporteur at [my] first meeting. So '67, the two of us, and in '69, the UN Secretariat decided I was going to be the chair. So I chaired the 1969 commission, and we began the preparations for the 1974 World Population Conference in Bucharest—

Sharpless For Bucharest, okay.

Concepcion So we were the preparatory committee. And the preparatory committee, apart from the director of the UN Population Division, included, of course, the U.S. delegate in the person of Conrad Taeuber, the husband of Irene Taeuber. I can't remember whether Professor Wilfred Borrie was a member. In any case, we planned this, and then the [UN] Population Division prepared the plan of action. And that went through a series of consultations—regional, as well. There were so many amendments, so they dealt with all of these amendments at the regional level, thinking that by the time the conference started, no more amendments would have [to be] dealt with. Oh my goodness! One country, a Latin American country—and they already had their regional meeting—came with 169 amendments.

So, our delegation was headed by the secretary of social welfare and development, who later became the UN special assistant for the Year of the Child. The executive director of the PopCom [Philippine Population Commission], I, and one from the department of foreign affairs, who happened to be the ambassador—gosh, I don't know, to one European

country at the time—were the other members. In any case, I got pulled out of the plenary session to form part of an ad hoc group [to] deal with all of the amendments to the plan of action. We were meeting day and night.

And Phil Claxton of the U.S. Department of State was a part of that group—there was a Soviet person who was meeting with us—and he [Arkady Isupor] was very good, because when it came to formulating this—because various countries were against the targets, the numerical targets, and other provisions—he would reformulate them in such a way that they would be acceptable. Phil’s contribution included also the bottles of Scotch (laughter) that the group [drank] during the evening sessions—it was a very—how many were we?—we were more than twenty, I know. There was the Swede who was a member of the Swedish development assistance—

Sharpless

SIDA [Swedish International Development and Cooperation Agency]?

Concepcion

SIDA. And who was the UK representative? Oh, my colleague from the UK, who was her country’s representative to the UN Population Commission. We were very amicable and we worked with good will. We did everything that could be done to make the plan of action acceptable. Finally, we came up with an acceptable document. In the meantime, I (laughs) remember—when we sit in the plenaries, it’s alphabetically arranged by country, see, so Peru was—

Tape 1, side 1, ends; side 2 begins.

Sharpless

And Peru was on your left, and then Philippines.

Concepcion

There was a matter being put to the vote. And so, I raised my hand in approval. And the Peruvians stared at me and said, “But you voted in the

General Assembly against that.” I said, “I don’t care.” I said, “But this is what we think we should do.” And then there was one time when there was some issue and many of the delegates had left the room for coffee or something.

Sharpless And this is at Bucharest?

Concepcion Yes, yes, at the plenary. And so, I was pacing up and down the sides talking to delegates to approve the provision in the plan of action. And my colleague was on the other side trying to do the same, so I raised my hand and I said, “I would like to call for a vote on this issue, a roll-call vote.” Because I knew that part of the opposition was out in the hall, so roll call—oh, the opposition delegates were so annoyed, because they were not there for the vote. (laughs) I said, “It’s your fault for not being here for the vote.” So we won that issue. So this was one of the sidelines of that meeting. And then followed Mexico in 1984.

Sharpless Um-hm. Now let me ask you one thing about Bucharest. A lot of—

Concepcion That was the first world conference which was actually where the IUSSP was still an organizer. After 1974, it became completely under UN auspices.

Sharpless Okay. Now, a lot of Americans point to the speech by John D. Rockefeller—

Concepcion Which was not at the plenary—this was at the NGO forum. Yeah, well, he changed his stand because he called for population and development and—which was okay because it was good to remind us that, you know, you cannot do anything without taking into account the development aspect, can’t do it—just changing the demographic situation without taking into

account how it will affect development and vice versa. This two-way relationship was what he was pointing to, and I think that it was good.

And—

Sharpless It made a lot of Americans angry. Why would that be?

Concepcion Oh, because they were more concerned with just the demographic, and they thought, you know, that this was a turnaround, and that Rockefeller had reversed his position, et cetera. But actually, this was the beginning of the concern regarding the interrelationship, not only with development, but with also environment, which later came into the picture. And I think it was a useful tactic, like they are saying of this paradigm shift in Cairo to reproductive health. I thought that was just a shift that was instigated by UNFPA so that they could come up with a niche of their own where they would not step on the turf of the other specialized agencies, because UNFPA really did not have any turf of its own. This was Nafis Sadik's idea. Now, with Nafis out as executive director, reproductive health has declined in importance at UNFPA. As I said, it depends on just how much push there is in the program by the head of the UNFPA, the multilateral assistance. So, Mexico just affirmed—reaffirmed—the 1974 Plan of Action. I think, for me, Bucharest was a much better conference. It looked to me as more like a repeat of Bucharest. What was next? 1994? The ICPD in Cairo.

Sharpless And of course in Mexico City, the big thing here in the United States was that they announced that we wouldn't, you know, give money to any country that supported abortion.

Concepcion Yeah, um-hm.

- Sharpless** The so-called Gag Rule.
- Concepcion** Um-hm. Yes. Well, and of course, it was against China. There were all these denials from China that they did not support abortion. And it is true that—well, if you look at some NGOs, and even Rei Ravenholt, who was with USAID promoting, for example, the menstrual regulation—what is it? it is an abortive device—so I said, “You speak from one side of the mouth and deny it from the other.” The multilateral assistance is very specific about not supporting abortion but, for example, the Packard Foundation is for abortion. We know that, so we’ve been very careful about not having any proposal that will include abortion. But we know that Packard Foundation is for abortion. So, it just depends on the funding agency. The UNFPA representative in China, he is very careful about seeing to it that no funds are used for abortion. But, of course, you cannot, once it is in the hands of the country, you cannot prevent them from doing what they want to do, because it is their program. So it may not appear in the document, the country program that has been agreed upon. But they can by policy decide, you know, where this money will go. So that’s why USAID is very angry at that. Think how many years [they] have not been releasing the money, the contribution to the UNFPA, the thirty-eight million dollars or something that the U.S. has pledged.
- Sharpless** Right, right. But from the Philippine standpoint and from your point on the UN commission, Mexico City was not that earth-shattering?
- Concepcion** No, no, unh-uh. No, it didn’t affect our program at all. It was just a reaffirmation of what we had agreed to in Bucharest. And as I mentioned

earlier, it depends on who is the Philippine president and where the Population Commission would be located. And that is why the policy is always shifting, depending on who is the president, and the program suffers as a consequence because of this. So you have these ups and downs, up and down, all throughout the years.

Sharpless Is there any situation in the Philippines in which abortion is legal?

Concepcion It is illegal, but there is a lot of abortion taking place.

Sharpless Right. But there is—you know, a lot of countries have policies that say it's legal only for rape, incest, or to save the life of the mother. Is that true? What's the policy—

Concepcion Yes. There is this clause, I think, about saving the life of the mother. But then, most of these births do not occur in hospitals, or are not medically attended. They are attended by traditional birth attendants, so who on earth will know whether that fetus was aborted. And those who undergo the abortion process usually do it in such septic conditions that they are bleeding and they then go to the hospital as a last resort, when it is already too late. Either they die, or they botch the abortion and they cannot have any more children as a result. So this has been studied, and of course, they say, Oh, it's exaggerated, the numbers that we come up with are exaggerated because they're only estimates.

Well, how can you get a true figure, because we do not have complete reporting. How can you follow up all of these clandestine cases? And even if those were in the hospital, the one study that has dealt with hospital cases, at least those you can document. But you don't know whether the abortion

was induced or spontaneous. So, when we come up with a figure of, let's say, four hundred thousand, they say, Oh, too high—the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy says that. And that's what happens, the hierarchy said, when you resort to contraception. We said, Yeah.

Sharpless

Now how is that?

Concepcion

All of these contraceptive devices, the hierarchy claim lead to abortion, or encourage the practice of abortion. This is always the refrain. But we said, "Contraception is preventing rather than contributing to abortion." "Oh, no," the hierarchy insists, "all these countries that have high rates of abortion have also high rates of contraceptive use."

Sharpless

How can you reason with that?

Concepcion

Exactly. So I don't fight anymore on that basis, because no use—the opposition won't listen in any case. There is the Opus Dei and the pro-lifers, who are against any population program and artificial contraception. For example, in the city of Manila, the mayor is a pro-lifer, so you cannot introduce any artificial contraception in any of the public health clinics in Manila, because he is against it. The governor of one province also prohibited artificial contraception. Fortunately he was appointed secretary of local government, and then resigned as a cabinet member before the election, because he could see that he would be replaced. So he has not been assigned to any positions since then—thank god. But he is one of those who also did not want his province to even have any family planning program. And the other one was—well, he was [a] very well known Opus Dei member. Fortunately by law, you can only be governor for two terms. After

that, you cannot run for re-election until after a certain period. So he ran for congressman and won, so he is now in Congress. (laughs) I'm sure he will be the one who will be fighting against all of these bills on population that have been introduced.

Sharpless Now, did the provinces have this much power under Marcos, or is this just starting—(both talking)

Concepcion No, Marcos was pre-local government code—so they were all centrally run—

Sharpless They had a centralized—

Concepcion (both talking) Yeah.

Sharpless Centralized until Aquino, okay.

Concepcion Um-hm, um-hm, because central government was the source of funds. Now they have their own allocations, the IRA, Internal Revenue Allocation, for provinces, municipalities and cities.

Sharpless So tell me about Bucharest—I'm sorry, about Cairo.

Concepcion Cairo was a madhouse because there were just so many people, so many people—you had thousands of NGOs, and I thought they were having their separate meeting in a different venue, and the officials were in it. Again, the same thing, you had the working groups to iron out all of the contentious issues, especially from the program of action. And, of course, reproductive health was contentious. We had as part of our delegation a member who later was appointed ambassador to the Holy See—a woman. And so, of course, she was always with the Holy See delegation.

Sharpless Um-hm, even though she was supposed to be Filipino?

Concepcion Huh?

Sharpless Even though she was supposed to be with the Filipino delegation?

Concepcion (both talking) Right, right, and she would not join us in many of the activities, because she was always sending cables to the Cardinal to report every day on what was going on. In '94 there wasn't e-mail yet. The Philippine delegation was a big delegation—there were twenty-eight of us. There were four official delegates, the rest were designated advisors. I was an advisor to the delegation, having [retired from the university] in 1993. Our delegation included the secretary of health, a woman, and the director of the Population Institute. And these two delegates were the ones who sat in the group discussing Paragraph 25, on reproductive health—the two paragraphs that were the most contentious. I joined the migration group dealing with the rights of the migrants and so forth, because we had [many overseas workers]—and so I sat in there—and then this same thing again: meeting, meeting, meeting, trying to come to terms with and have consensus on provisions of the Program of Action—then the voting.

In Bucharest it was China and the Holy See who had reservations on the plan. Now, it was Holy See—and who else?—who joined together in an unlikely partnership, because China voted with the majority on the Program of Action. So this again showed that the Holy See—although this woman member of our delegation did not say very much, she was reporting everything, everything back home. And I remember one time, it was a Sunday, we met her in the elevator of the hotel. I was not staying in the same hotel as the [Philippine delegation], because I was being paid for by

IUSSP. We told her, Oh, we're going to the Philippine Embassy, because there will be Mass there. So we asked whether she would like to come along. "Oh, no," she said, "I'm going to send cables."

Some days before I asked these priests who were with the delegation of the Holy See whether they were celebrating Mass somewhere. They said they were going to the French convent to celebrate Mass there. Instead of inviting us to go—knowing we were Catholics—they were very standoffish. So when we told her [we were] going to the embassy she said she still had to go down and go to the telecommunications office, so was not sure whether she could join us. So after we had the Mass at the embassy, we went and did some sightseeing. We went looking for the cave where supposedly Mary and Joseph had hidden themselves during their flight to Egypt. And who do we run into but this lady with the priests—they were also doing their own sightseeing.

Sharpless

From the Holy See?

Concepcion

Yeah, the Holy See delegation. And these were American priests—they were not Italian, they were American priests. So we said, Aha! So that's how the land lay. No, after that we would not have anything more to do with her. She was so selfish as to, you know, so we said, Oh, hi. I said, "Do you have transport?" She said, "Oh, yes, I have a car." So we didn't say anything any more, because we were in the van provided by the embassy.

The NGOs were very, very busy with trying to, you know, lobby, lobby—but, you know, it's very difficult when you're in a different section. And it was very difficult to move from one venue to another—although

there were shuttles back and forth. The two venues [government delegations and NGOs] were not side by side. One could walk, but no, the heat made it intolerable. So it really was a deterrent for one to try and go to the other venue where NGOs were meeting. I think they were very disappointed, because the meeting wasn't going as they thought. They assumed they would be able to participate in the main conference, but it was not open to them. They could attend certain sessions open to the general public. If one were not a member of a delegation, one could not enter the building, because we all had IDs. There were only certain sessions which NGOs could attend as observers, and that was not even the session hall itself. It was a room where there was a TV showing how the sessions were going. So that was one disappointment for the NGOs, that they were unable to join the conference proper. Same thing happened in Beijing at the Women's Conference. The NGOs were not able to join the main delegations because the size of the hall and limited attendance.

Sharpless Did you go to Beijing?

Concepcion No. That's women—(laughter) remember?

Sharpless Oh, that's right, you said off-tape that you're not on the list for women's studies things, yes.

Concepcion Population, yes, but women, no.

Sharpless Well, tell me more about what you think about the reproductive health clause in the Cairo Program of Action.

Concepcion You know, given that the Program of Action had been approved in '94, there was a campaign to introduce this to countries. I was going around in

one of my [UNFPA] evaluation missions. I went to Egypt and met with the minister of health, a man who referred me to the director of the family health program, a female doctor, who claimed that they had integrated reproductive health into their program. However, the vertical aspect of the health program had not changed. So you had family planning—you had the maternal/child health practice compartmentalized.

Sharpless Okay, so family planning [has] its own little niche, and maternal/child health [MCH] is another little niche, and—

Concepcion Um-hm. And so I asked, I said, “How can you then integrate these different elements of RH if the program’s still segmented—compartmentalized?” And she said, “Well, I am the one who sees to it that RH is integrated.” She said, “My directors or chiefs of each of these sections, we get together and discuss the integration.”

But the problem was that the people that she placed—like, for example, she placed somebody in the IEC who didn’t know anything about IEC. And the person who knew something about IEC was in another section which had nothing to do with IEC. So, it was this kind—and then I said, “How come family planning has not been integrated into the RH?” And she said, “Because family planning practice is still quite low, relatively. We want to promote it. That’s why we are giving it much more emphasis.” So—that’s the vertical. And I said, “Well, how do you then get the client who comes in for MCH to do family planning and all that?”—because, you know, the entry point here has to be any woman who comes into the health center will be given reproductive health services, whatever kind. And so the

elements there may vary from MCH to FP [family planning] to AIDS, whatever. So this was one aspect. And you could see that while they paid lip service to RH, the integration was still not being done effectively.

The Philippines came up with ten elements of RH, family planning being one, men's reproductive health was another one, HIV/AIDS and STDs [sexually transmitted diseases] and MCH—We had the family planning, we had the MCH—it was part of the Safe Motherhood Project, so there was a person on top there, then you had the family planning head underneath. So it still is compartmentalized. Even if you have ten elements of RH, you have take into account all of these to come up with an integrated program. In practice it wasn't done. And I think that is the failure of RH. They are paying lip service to it, but in practice I think it is actually FP only. USAID does not believe in RH, but only FP. So we designate it as RH/FP. In their current program, USAID is also paying attention to TB, to family planning, to HIV/AIDS, and to vitamin A deficiency. Nothing about RH.

Sharpless Okay. Well, let's take a break and I'll turn the tape over.

Tape 1 ends; tape 2, side 1, begins.

Sharpless Okay, this is the second tape with Mercedes Concepcion on August 18. Okay, we've been talking about your work on the United Nations Population Commission, and we talked about the population conferences. What else stands out when you think about your time on the Population Commission?

Concepcion Oh, I think the most useful part was the preparations for the Bucharest and

the post-Bucharest, because selected commission members were tasked to look at the set of papers that were presented during the 1974 conference and to select those worthy of publication. We acted as a sort of editorial committee for the secretariat, and we were meeting separately at different times. I stayed on the commission till '79. By that time we had [completed] our post-Bucharest work. And with the entry of the UNFPA, who wanted very much to control the commission—the Population Commission was a commission that looked into the work program of the Population Division. So the commission approved and amended, if necessary, the program aspects on which the division would be working for the following two years, because the commission only met every two years.

After Cairo, there was a change in the work of the commission. The commission ceased to function as a population commission and became a population and development commission with an expanded membership. It was now meeting every year in New York. Instead of looking at the Population Division's work program, it was like a mini-conference with some fifty to sixty members. So it was impossible to do the same things that the Population Commission did. Before Cairo, the Population Commission consisted of twenty-eight representatives—that was the biggest number that the commission had at any one time. I think after Mexico, the commission began to meet also annually in New York, never more in Geneva.

So the work—if I can call it work they are doing—has nothing to do anymore with the Population Division. The division has fallen into some kind of disarray also, because it now does what the UNFPA wants it to do,

which should never have happened. After all, the UNFPA is a grant-giving institution. Its work is actually not formal population and development work, it's more in terms of trying to see that the population program goes on in the countries which it supports. And so what it is doing now is trying to, I think, attain some legitimacy by entering into a field that was really not meant for it to do.

And that was partly Salas's [Rafael Salas, executive director of UNFPA, 1969–1987] thrust, because he wanted also to somehow control the division, since much of the funds for the work done by the division came from UNFPA. I think the quality of the people who were left behind degenerated. We no longer have a population division at ESCAP. It's a social affairs division, because the executive [secretary], who is Korean, is not interested in population. So population has disappeared in ESCAP's organization. There are just two people working on this aspect. The division did not have a large permanent staff. Most of the staff, from the beginning, were project people, so there were only two to three permanent staff in the budget. But that's not the case with the Population Division at UN headquarters, with its different sections: fertility and family planning section, mortality, population projections section, migrations section. I don't even know anybody anymore there who is left, except one person who is Mexican. But the rest either have retired—oh, Joe Chamie, I know, but he's very much now seen as a—I don't want to use the word lackey, but he acts like that. (laughs) Forgive me for being so frank, but I think this is the view of everyone in the field, that he is running at the behest of—Nafis

Sadik before, and now Thoraya Obaid [executive director of UNFPA from 2001].

Sharpless

Well, what about your work—you've done quite a bit of work with the World Health Organization [WHO].

Concepcion

Yes. That one also was—when did I start there? I was first invited to serve in a committee to plan a specific project on the social and psychological factors affecting human reproductive behavior. So once that committee had made its recommendations, I was asked to chair this new committee under the Human Reproduction Program [HRP]. Our task was to look at all the project proposals that were coming in. Now, the WHO is very strict about the ethical aspects, since they are dealing with humans. But our committee was exempt, because not one of the members was participating as a project proponent. We made that very clear—we are here to pass judgment on the proposals, but no one must be a proponent or a project director. One can be an advisor or consultant, but even that rarely occurred.

I served two three-year terms. That's all that's allowed. Then I was invited to serve as a member of STAG, which is the Scientific and Technical Advisory Group to the HRP. The STAG is concerned with the HRP work plan. It covers different areas of contraceptive technology. And so I said, "This is all medical and biological—not my field, you know." But they said, Oh, we need social science input. So there were two of us, one Brazilian and myself. Allan Rosenfield of Columbia University was a member of STAG. Since he is a medical doctor he can understand all of these issues of reproduction. So whenever there was something that had

social science aspects, then we were supposed to enter in and critique or— but we were also dealing with the same thing, you look at the proposals, you look at the work that's being done by the divisions of the HRP—you get the director to—and at that time the director of HRP was Dr. Fathalla from Egypt, a very nice man. Now the HRP Director is Paul Van Look, who has been with the program for a very long time. He's—let me see, Dutch—but in any case, he's one of those silent men—very difficult to fathom, but very competent. He attended the last meeting of the Asian Population Conference in Bangkok in December 2002. So when the conversation veered to contraception and technology and so forth, I suggested that we ask the WHO representative who was sitting there to say something about the status of contraceptive technology and whether any one particular method was abortifacient or not—because this was the claim of the U.S. delegation. So, Van Look spoke.

I think I spent twelve or fifteen years at WHO, going to Geneva twice a year for meetings. And then I was also involved partly with tropical diseases, which is a separate program, tropical disease program. There was a big project in the Philippines on tropical diseases funded by WHO. They wanted to see how they could associate this with the work of the HRP. So this was my work with WHO.

Sharpless

How pleased were you, or how satisfied were you, with the work of WHO?

Concepcion

Oh, that was very good, because I thought that most of the projects that we approved and funded—we got reports, because they were supposed to be either one year or two years [duration], so during our stint of six years, we

could get the results reported back to us, and they have been publicized and utilized in terms of—disseminat[ion] in the countries of the region, not only in the countries where they were done, but in [other] countries [of]—Latin America in particular, where most of this work has been [undertaken].

India has been one of the major proponents. There were also projects in Bangladesh. The other South Asian countries have not been able to submit worthy proposals—well, Pakistan to a certain extent. And our committee was composed of people from the regions. So we had a Bangladeshi, an Indian, Thai, we had an American and several Latin Americans. The work was guided by the research head, who was Chilean, Alex Mundigo. He retired, and is now a consultant to WHO. His assistant, a Pakistani, is the one who is involved with the program [now], but it has changed drastically.

There still is a committee, I think, that looks into project proposals, but is of a very different character now from what it was. But they have this news release of all the projects that are going on. They have publications—books on single-country studies and comparative, multi-country studies. This project was very fruitful, I thought, and we were very happy that many of these people were able to be assisted. And I met some of them when I went to Latin America as part of one of my (laughs) evaluation missions. They were very happy with the assistance that they received. They wanted it to be on a continuing basis. Well, that depends on how much money is available in the budget for the work, otherwise projects cannot be supported on a continuing basis. From the Philippines we received very few

proposals. What proposals we received were not very good. I think there were one or two approved but they were very disappointing in terms of implementation. They were approved before I came in, so I did not have anything to do with the approval.

Many of the committee members were familiar with these proponents and their track records. Without a track record, it's very difficult to support a proponent. The way we went about the task, we assigned two people per project proposal before the meeting. So each team member was supposed to evaluate the proposal independently, write his or her comments and evaluation, and present the report during the meeting. Oh, there was a Chilean, [excellent], who was not only a researcher, but she was a clinician, and a medical doctor. Very, very fine woman.

So these evaluation forms were all compiled by the time we got to Geneva. All we had to do was read these thoroughly. If we come to an impasse, for example, when the two who are supposed to be evaluators are not in agreement, the others are asked for their opinion. So it's a sort of collegial decision, but rarely did the team disagree, so sometimes I—I knew whom to call on. Wendy, from the NIH [National Institute of Health], since she knew most of the work that was being done in the U.S., she was a very good resource person. And the Indian had done a lot of research also. So these were the two on whom I depended very much, and, of course, Erica from Chile, these were the three. If I would run into difficulty about solving any issue, then these three (laughs) would be the ones that I would point to for their opinion.

Sharpless And global resources, too.

Concepcion (both talking) Oh, very, very—the committee was very well selected from that standpoint. And then we had other people coming in, a Japanese came in who was also very good—he was an economist, so we had a multi-disciplinary committee. Alex Mundigo, the person who was with WHO as our secretariat, he was also excellent because he had all this background experience. He knew what was going on in all parts of the world, and his memory was fantastic. It was very useful, very useful—I enjoyed that part. The STAG meetings I did not enjoy very much, because frequently I did not know what they were talking about, especially when it came to contraceptive technology, the biological aspects of this, the way this enzyme was working and this enzyme—I was completely lost. (laughs)

Sharpless I can see why you would—Now you've done a lot of evaluation activities—

Concepcion (both talking) Yeah, and all my evaluations had to do with programs, because the UNFPA has a four-year or three-year program, depending on the country. And before the end of the program, in preparation for the next cycle, there must be an evaluation of the current one. These were most of the evaluations that I did—by program. I did Jordan, and Egypt—what else did I do? I think most of them were in the Middle East.

Sharpless My notes say that you've done some in Latin America as well.

Concepcion In Latin America, the evaluation was more in terms of the demographic institutes and regional projects. At that time I was still teaching, so I said, “I can only go either towards the end of the semester,” which would be October, or during the Christmas break. And they were going to start the

evaluation in December. I said, "I cannot leave before Christmas because we still have work to do till about the twentieth of December. So it was agreed that I do the Latin American part. I was also assigned to see the former director of the Latin American Demographic Center in Chile, who was then working in Mexico.

We not only were supposed to look at the program, but to speak to the former students. So we went around the countries, speaking to their employers, in terms of what impact the training had on the work of the institutions. That's why I had to speak Spanish. Since my French is very poor, I could not go to Africa. I could only go to the English-speaking part of Africa. UNFPA needed only one who could speak both French and English, so that is why I did not go to Africa. I only covered the Latin American and the Asian demographic centers.

The UNFPA had also set up these population and development training institutions in several countries. One of them was in India, in Trivandrum. So that was part also of our mission, to evaluate the population and development teaching program to see how effective it was. We did the Latin American one and the Indian one. Somebody else went to Africa. And we looked at the syllabi, the output of the students, then any texts that they used, the competence of the faculty. It was really hard work, because all of these had to be done right there, the materials were not sent to us. My co-evaluator was a Canadian, Alan Simmons, who is with York University. He speaks Spanish fluently. That was very helpful, because when we went to Latin America all the documents were in Spanish and the faculty

preferred to speak in Spanish as well.

One other evaluation that I did was the work programs of both the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean and ESCAP, which were supported by UNFPA. The evaluation dealt with whether they had done what they should have done, and what impact it [had] on the countries in the region. I think one of the recommendations that I made had to do with the management of the ESCAP program. The Executive Secretary at that time, Mr. Kibria, a Bangladeshi, was very incensed because I criticized the management, and he said this was not within my terms of reference, and that he would be seeing Nafis Sadik in Manila, who was there for another meeting, and that he would let her know about this. So I said, “Go ahead, sir. We are an independent evaluation mission sent by the UNFPA. We are not answerable to them in terms of employment, so you can do what you want.” I saw Nafis later on in Manila but she did not mention anything about this.

Sharpless Okay. You did a lot of evaluation work.

Concepcion Yes, I started actually in 1974 in Indonesia. We were evaluating what we thought were women’s projects. It turned out that no, it was family planning programs with livelihood, income-generating projects as part of the incentives for family planning. And that was as early (laughs) as 1974—

Sharpless So, what were some of the best projects that you saw over the years?

Concepcion Best projects? I think that one of the best projects was this one that I did with INSTRAW.

Sharpless INSTRAW is the International Research and Training Institute for the

Advancement of Women? Okay.

Concepcion

(both talking)—is the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women, yes, which was in Santo Domingo. Now it has been absorbed and is a national institute. At that time it was still UN-assisted. It was just based there. And one of their projects is actually to look into the statistics on women. So I wrote a monograph on the data with regard to women, and how to collect them and analyze them, which was being used by the institute. And then they ran the series of training seminars on the use of statistics on women, for the advancement of women. So these were the series of training programs that I organized for most of the Asian countries.

Sharpless

And you would go to the Asian countries and teach these workshops?

Concepcion

Pakistan, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand—these were all local. So the participants would bring the data with them, then we would ask them what they brought along, which was usually census data. Were there any breakdowns by sex, which is the most important thing—and if not, then one of the major recommendations is that they be sex-disaggregated as well as by age. Then we ask them, What do the data tell you about the position of women in your country? For example, in Malaysia the emphasis was on agriculture, because one of the universities that co-organized the workshop was the University of Agriculture. The participants wanted to look at the contribution of women in the agricultural sector. So I said, “Well, usually this is not recorded, because it is unpaid work.” So this would be one that could be made. Most women do not think of their work on the farm as

actually work. My previous work on the labor force stood me in good stead in those instances, because at least I knew what I was talking about. (laughs)

These participants were all women: university faculty, government employees, NGOs—it was a mix. So they got to know one another. Oh, I did Sri Lanka, too—very interesting, the South Asian countries, Bangladesh, Pakistan, because these women were all being introduced, I think, to data and to statistics for the first time. They were collecting data in offices but they never analyzed the data. So it was an eye-opener for them to see how you could deal with data.

Sharpless

Let me turn the tape.

Tape 2, side 1, ends; side 2 begins.

Okay, anything else about the INSTRAW workshops that you did?

Concepcion

Unfortunately I think that some kind of politics came in and INSTRAW lost its support at the UN. But there was this Dominican woman representative, very strong willed, who decided, well, the center would continue, but it would be a domestic one, it would no longer be international. So you don't hear of it anymore now.

Sharpless

Well, thinking about the things that you went out and evaluated for the UN—UNFPA and also UNDP, I think.

Concepcion

Yes. The UNDP had started this household survey capability building project. So they said—they constituted a group, a team, of one Indian, one American from USAID, an Englishman, and me.

Sharpless

What did they mean by household capability?

Concepcion

This was the capability building to undertake household surveys. So we went

and visited Sri Lanka. They told us, We've been doing this for years. And, of course, other countries told us the same thing, Thailand, for example. So one of our recommendations was to identify what particular aspect are you actually contributing to household survey capability, because most of them can teach you more about household surveys than you can teach them.

Oh, UNDP did not welcome our recommendation and were very angry. Tim Wirth of UNDP was saying, "What kind of recommendation was that, that we want to stop it at a certain time and yet we are asking them to continue certain projects." "Because," I said, "there are some projects that are still ongoing. You cannot just say, 'Stop right now.' You have to give them time to finish, so that's why we recommended closure in the year 2000"—or something like that. It did actually stop. But they were very angry and they shelved our report.

Sharpless Okay. That's what we call reinventing the wheel—they were trying to do work that was already being done.

Concepcion Yeah, yeah. The Thais were most vocal. They said, Well, we are doing that, we have been doing that for years. I know you have been doing that, because you have your annual and semi-annual household surveys. In the Philippines we have been doing quarterly household surveys since 1956.

Sharpless In the Philippines?

Concepcion Yes. When ESCAP calls a meeting on household surveys to tell us what is the latest UN manual that has come out, then we use the manual. When the Statistical Office of the UN comes out with the latest methodology on surveys, we adopt it. In the first place, UNDP should never have undertaken

such a project. But somebody sold them this bill of goods. In Africa it may be quite true that some of the African countries do not have the capability yet. But you do not do this sort of thing in Asia, because most of the Asian countries—except for perhaps Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, because they are just getting through the wars, but these have also had some capability. Maybe the South Pacific countries require capability building, but Australia usually does surveys.

Of course, the countries we visited received the money, because it was a source of funds to increase the personnel and to increase the salaries, so naturally they welcomed every penny. They were not in favor of the project, but it was a source of external funding. That was what they told us. “If you don’t like it, why did you receive?” Well, [they] said, It is a source of money, and we are always short of money, so. In the Middle East, which was covered by the USAID man, he came back with the same conclusion. Egypt has had household surveys. Everybody has had them since even prior to the World Fertility Survey program.

Sharpless

Yeah. That’s one example of a project that wasn’t needed or didn’t go anywhere. When you were out evaluating for UNFPA and others, what are some projects that you saw that weren’t working?

Concepcion

Well, it has to be country specific. Most of them revolved around family planning service delivery in these country programs, because this was pre-1994. So, most of the projects—well, I would say because of the emphasis and the way that UNFPA divides its budget, a certain proportion must go to population and development, another to what is now RH, and a certain

proportion to advocacy and IEC. You know, you can't meddle with that. So, if the country's needs are more on census taking and analysis of data, you have only, what, about 10 to 15 percent, of the total budget.

Sharpless And there's no flexibility?

Concepcion No, no, no. It's like written in stone.

Sharpless Okay. And that includes indirect cost.

Concepcion Yes. So that's why these countries are then forced to go into the larger bulk which is for family planning and RH, even if they don't need so much, when their needs would be—like, for example, how do you know that your program is working if you do not have good basic data? So they need to have surveys. Well, the surveys will be part of the population and development component. And so, you will have to look for the money elsewhere. So this [is what this] inflexibility has fomented in terms of the country program development. And another thing is that the way that it works is they have these country support teams now, which is also going out of fashion, I think, and they're rapidly being phased out. The vacancies are not being filled anymore. One of the country support teams is in Bangkok, the other one is in Nepal. So the two are supposed to cover Asia, except for West Asia, because it has its own. So the members of the country support teams will visit the countries to offer assistance, particularly at the time the next country program is under preparation.

For example, at the beginning of this year, the country support team members would have gone to see just what is the situation in terms of how much progress was achieved for the projects that were in the current

country program, terminating at the end of the year. Then, according to them, this or that project needs to be done, whether or not the country requires such project. So there's some dictation on the part of the country support teams. Instead of ascertaining what the country needs, it is more their perception that wins the day. So then they come after the project has been agreed upon to write the documents. So naturally they will write in work for them, since the work that they do is based on how many calls for assistance they receive from the country. Naturally when the country program is being developed, support team members include a clause for their work, their specialties. This is—survival.

And there are some team members who never get many calls. And there are some who get calls, but are incompetent. They cannot even speak straight English. They don't write their reports. Their reports are supposed to be mission reports detailing what they accomplished. Some of them are not even computer literate. So their reports are written by hand. In this day and age, you would expect professionals to be proficient on the computer. I can word process, so at least I can write my report myself on the computer, which I learned by myself. But some of them refuse, or else they will ask that they go as a team, and the second member is the one who will be doing the word processing. I have seen this work. And it's going on. And then, of course, what they are looking for is to not remain in their station—they are all looking to go to headquarters, which is New York. So they're always on the lookout for how they can get to New York. Again, survival.

Sharpless

Well, let me ask you about one thing that you worked on for UNFPA—an

assessment of the population field from the 1960s through the 1980s? Does that ring any bells?

Concepcion

Oh, that was when I was with UNFPA headquarters. That was assessing twenty years of the UNFPA. At first they requested me to write the overview of the twenty years, and I said, “I do not have the time, because I am still teaching.” That was ’87, ’88. So I said, “You want me here, I can only come in segments, two months here, three months there, I have to break up the whole year into segments, because I cannot go away and leave my students. Even if I am no longer,” I said, “the head of the institute, I have my students to think of. Who will take over my teaching?” I said, “We are just a very small faculty. If one leaves for that extent of time, you have to think of who is going to pick up your work.” So I said, “I can do this during the summer”—our summer, which is April and May—“and then I will have to go back and teach, and then I can come back maybe during the semester break.”

The UNFPA said they will do the writing. My work was supposed to be to edit whatever UNFPA proposed. The problem cropped up that when I would report to the head of the technical division, who was a Latin American and a medical doctor, he would call a meeting. We would discuss it. I would say, “These are the changes that need to be done,” and so forth. And then, okay, agreed—nothing happens. It turns out that when he reports to Nafis and she doesn’t like it, the recommendations would not be entertained. So we are back to where we were: call another meeting. Same thing. No action is taken, because if he decides and Nafis vetoes it, that’s it.

So I said, “My goodness! What kind of agency is this that nobody can make any decision because they are so afraid?” There was only one person who could make a decision there, and that was Jyoti Singh, who was then head of the IEC or the media relations or whatever. And he was the only one who could confront Nafis and go against her. But all the rest—no way.

So one interesting [thing], which had nothing to do with the work was, I got a clerk, a male secretary, to assist me, an Afro-American. So after three months I returned to New York.

Sharpless

You were in New York?

Concepcion

Yeah—I [went] back. And my secretary had undergone a sex change during my absence. She asked whether it bothered me. I said, “No, so long as it doesn’t affect your work.” But what I did not realize that in changing from male to female, one changed restrooms. And the women employees did not like that. I didn’t realize that. So they refused to have her use the ladies’ restroom. I asked her whether the agency knew. “Oh, yes.” I then asked, “Does the UNFPA personnel division know?” Because she was a contractual employee, hired from an agency. She said that the UNFPA personnel knew. And so, at first she still wore trousers but gradually she would sport earrings, makeup, and then finally she wore women’s clothes. And I guess this metamorphosis did not sit well with most of the women clerks there. There are very few men clerks. And so they raised a ruckus over this, and she left UNFPA.

Sharpless

So you were left without a clerk.

Concepcion

So I got another clerk—this time a man again. But at least he did not

undergo a sex change (laughter) This one was a white male. The report was too long, so I was told to shorten it as it must fit so many pages only. Okay. One way was to use smaller font. But this [abridged version] did not quite cover some aspects. So back again to lengthen the report. It was that way until the end of my contract. I said, "I have done all that I can do, and must say that, you know, it has not been a very good experience, and that only bolsters my decision never to be employed in a UN agency."

When I was still a student at the University of Chicago, I used to go to New York every summer. I would stay at the UN Population Division. Although I was an outsider, I felt like one of the staff because I knew so many of the people there. I mentioned yesterday that in 1957 the UN Population Division had sent a lady staff member to analyze the Philippine labor force situation. It was then that the UN and the Philippine government came to realize that the population growth rate was underestimated. Up to now I have contact with this lady, Edith Adams, and used to stay with her whenever I went to New York. People would ask me whether I would like to work at the UN. My reply was no, I prefer to be an outsider looking in and being welcomed as part of the organization, but not working for the organization, because I can see all the intrigue, the infighting. I never want to work in that situation. I prefer to stay in my little pond. (laughs) I will go, I said, only for short term consultancies for three weeks or at most one month, but never longer. Not as a permanent part of the organization.

You have to either—all of this UNFPA evaluation missions—the head

of [one] the missions was a person who was formerly with UNDP. So he knew the ropes. He was Welsh, and he could not use the computer. He did not know how to use the computer. So he would write his report in longhand. Naturally the UN will have to supply someone to transcribe his report—Well, all of these clerks would disappear by 5:30 pm, and he needed the draft to look at during the evening for revisions so the following morning it could be retyped. The report was [assigned and divided] between one Jamaican and one Latin American clerk. The Jamaican disappeared at 12:30 pm because it was Halloween, and she had to go home to prepare for Halloween. So she left her half undone. The other one, the Latin American, I could see she was already preparing at five to leave. So I said, “Irma, how far have you gone?” I said, “because Mr. Rees wants this report by this evening.” And then she said, “Oh”—

Sharpless (both talking) And all they’re doing is typing?

Concepcion Yeah, they’re secretaries. They are just transcribing from longhand.

Sharpless Yeah. From his handwriting to their computers.

Concepcion Yeah. So I took over the Jamaican’s work—to just try and put the two halves together. I said, “This is not part of my work,” but I had to do it, because poor Mr. Rees would have no report to look at, and we are under pressure to finish that report. This is the kind of people that they have there.

Sharpless Oh, mercy. Well, let me change the tape. Can we go on for a little while longer?

Concepcion Yes, yes—

Tape 2 ends; tape 3, side 1, begins.

Sharpless All right. This is the third tape with Mercedes Concepcion on August 18.

Okay, what else about your work with United Nations?

Concepcion Hmm—what else have I done? Oh, one of the things that we were asked to do was this—I mentioned already our country support teams, but country support teams were part of what they called the technical support system, TSS. The way it works is in the past the UN regional commissions had regional advisors attached to them. So someone had the bright idea to pool all of these regional advisors into one site to constitute the team. Under the TSS, if the country program needs any assistance, advisory assistance, the country representative of UNFPA is supposed to look at local expertise first. If the local expertise does not exist, then the country support team for the region or subregion can be tapped—that is Bangkok for Southeast Asia, to which the Philippines belongs. If the expertise does not exist in the region's country support team, other country support systems in the other subregions can be called upon, such as the Kathmandu, Nepal team, Africa or Latin America—that's the second level. Then if such expertise still cannot be found, one has to go international. So this is the hierarchy—local, regional, international.

So we were asked to evaluate the TSS, and that's where Mr. Rees served as the team leader. And so we had to look, not only because the members of the country support team, when they were still regional advisors attached to the regional commissions, were paid for by the UN specialized agencies. So there were WHO advisors, an ILO [International Labor Organization] there, and UNESCO [United Nations Educational,

Scientific, and Cultural Organization]. I think the only one that was outside the system was UNICEF [United Nations Children's Fund]. So this specialized agency support was still retained, because the money coming from UNFPA went to these specialized agencies to get their collaboration. So even if the advisors now were members of the country support team, the recruitment and employment was done by the specialized agency. So if you were a population and development specialist, you fell under ILO. If you were a medical and reproductive health advisor, you were WHO. All the rest, either ESCAP or whatever. So you had your particular niche, and also your loyalty to the agency who hired you in the first place and not to the UNFPA who provided the money. So the evaluation had to cover the specialized agencies also, because we had to find out how the system worked and all that.

So apart from the visit to the country support teams at their site, which was Kathmandu, Bangkok, and Santiago, Chile, we had to go on a separate mission to the specialized agencies. So we went to Paris for UNESCO, to FAO [Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations] in Rome, to ILO in Geneva and speak to the people who were looking for candidates for the country support team and find out what were the recruitment criteria, et cetera, how they judged the performance. Oh, it was such a mess. (laughs) And we had to go to the countries that were receiving this support, we had to go and ask them just how these country support teams performed. The problem was the country support teams could not stay in the country beyond two or three weeks—unlike the previous regional

advisors who could stay longer. And so the work in the country would not be done between visits. Then when the CST person is due to visit, that's when the project staff rush to do the work so they have something to show the advisor.

Well, some of these countries need hand-holding. They need CST full-time. But I said, "You cannot have all these people all the time, because they're advisors needed by other countries as well, not just you. What you need is a resident advisor, not this visiting advisor"—resident advisors are no longer in the system like before—"so you will have to build up your capability, and the CST will just visit from time to time to see whether you are implementing the project plan." No, they wanted hand-holding in everything, including report writing.

So you can see that the system was not fulfilling what it needed to do. And then they had what they called the headquarters people in New York who were supposed to be called on if local and regional expertise was not available. This was the international team, the uppermost level. They were supposed to be the ones who were the thinkers, the ones who would write the state-of-the-art papers—but that was never done. And nobody called on them because they were too far. Very rarely were they called upon. Of course, these people were underutilized, so they have to make work for themselves to justify their being there. Some were posted at the UN Statistical Office, one was in the UNDP—doing what, I don't know—and some of these people who were UNFPA personnel were attached to these agencies without any preparation or background. I know one who was our

former UNFPA country director, who was sent to one of the units in the UN secretariat. And I asked what she was doing there. No one knew. And I think she certainly did not know what she was supposed to be doing. So nobody called on her for assistance, because her background was journalism, not demography, statistics, or medicine.

Sharpless Yesterday we talked about the program in the Philippines and how it has been very dependent on who is in office. How successful do you think the United Nations program has been over the course of the last, let's say, forty years?

Concepcion In the Philippines?

Sharpless Nope—globally, what you've seen. I mean, in the Philippines as well, but—

Concepcion (Both talking) Well, you have to divide that, because when you talk about the United Nations, you will have to talk about the Population Division, specialized agencies, about multilateral funding—all of that. So if it is program support, we have our UNFPA Fifth Country program support, which ends in December 2004. As I said earlier, the UNFPA now under Thoraya is veering away from RH. She is now going into culture and religion. So I don't know what the new country program would be like and I have not been invited to any of the presentations. I know that there is an ongoing country situation report being made. We already had a mid-program report. And that was in terms of the millennium development goals [MDG] which are not very different from the goals that the Program of Action has set, because demographic targets are involved. So that midterm evaluation of the UNFPA Fifth Country Program was in terms of the millennium

development goals and how the program was responding to it. Of course, the country was responding to the goals in terms of the infant mortality rate. Unfortunately the latter cannot be measured [accurately] because there [is incomplete] data, since the vital registration system is still underreported. And the other goals? Poverty reduction—I forget the rest. But in any case, that was the thrust of the midterm evaluation.

I don't know who is doing the final evaluation—I have not been privy to who is the one who has been assigned. There is usually a team, a local team, who is working on what they call the country report, and then once the country report is completed, the country support team will come in and develop the program thrust for the new program cycle. I have not been getting news from the UNFPA field office to find out what is being done. I have not had the time to go sit with the staff to find out whether they have already undertaken the program development. Usually I get invited to the meetings, the big meetings, where they talk about the next country program.

Sharpless

Um-hm. Now, with all the ups and downs over the years, what's kept you going?

Concepcion

Well, what we have been programming for a long time is the attainment of the net reproduction rate of one, which is replacement. And this goal has been moving from year 2010. In fact, there was one goal under the former secretary of health who I said was ready to sign the voucher for the contraceptive importation. He wanted replacement fertility by 2007. We told him it was impossible, to set it as a target, given the trend. "But," he said, "for me a target has to be high so that they will aspire to it even if they don't

reach it.” That was his outlook. We told him, Even 2010 is unattainable.

“Oh, no, no, no—2007 it is!” So he had all these estimates of what would be the contraceptive requirements that will achieve replacement by 2007, and an NRR [net reproduction rate] equal to one. So he was given several scenarios. So now that scenario has to be changed.

We are now doing the population projection, and they asked me, What do you think? I said, “Well, an NRR of one,” I said, “in 2020 is the earliest we can think about, given the trend.” USAID had just funded a project on FP, TB, HIV/AIDS and vitamin A supplementation. The project chief of party is a former USAID man who retired, who was employed as one of the program officers here in the USAID Manila office in the early days. So I asked him, “Bill, how can you get a CPR of 60 percent and a TFR of 2.7 within the project life”—which was 2003. I didn’t say anything at the time when we had the first meeting, but when we had a presentation of the results of the 2003 NDHS, the National Demographic and Health Survey (pause in recording)

In any case, I told them that 2020 would be the earliest. And then I said, “Make it 2030 and 2040.” So these are the three scenarios that we have. The earliest and the fastest would be 2020—Oh, then when they came out with the NDHS results for 2003, what did it show? The total fertility rate had gone down by 0.2 in five years. I said, “Bill, at that rate, what would be the annual decline?” I said, “It would be 0.04. So by 2006, where will we be? From 3.50 or 3.36. How do you expect to achieve a TFR of 2.7?” He said, “I hope and pray.” I said, “You’d better go down on your

knees now and pray to attain that. How could you ever set that goal?” “Oh, the goal can always change.” I said, “Better change it now, because you will look ridiculous if you still insist on the original goal.” Unfortunately the project staff and advisors had a meeting at the end of July but I was not there, so I could not say what I would have said about the targets.

Sharpless But what’s kept you from giving up all these years?

Concepcion As I said, “Here we are again, back to square one,” so we start all over again!
(laughs)

Sharpless Right.

Concepcion That’s it. “As long as we are alive,” I said, “we have hope that something will happen (laughs) and that some miracle will occur.” I am still a consultant and advisor. That’s [how] I am still involved. But if I’m no longer a consultant, then I can sit back and let them do what they wish. (laughs) But I am still involved, so I have to be a part of it and hope for a better future. That’s why when the Philippine Press Institute organized briefings for journalists, they asked me, Where is the program going? That’s a—(laughs) sixty-dollar question!

Sharpless Yes. Well, it’s very hard to encapsulate a career in just a few hours as we have done. Is there any big topic that we haven’t talked about that we need to touch on?

Concepcion ESCAP asked me to do a piece for the *Asia-[Pacific] Population Journal*, because I was the only one who had participated in all the past Asian population conferences, on the change as I see it over the decades, from 1963 to 2002. “Well,” I said, “you have to give me all the reports because I

can't remember that much from 1963 onward." So they gave me the reports, and even the reports themselves have changed considerably. They have been shortened, they contain only very few details, not even highlights, and they concentrate more on the speeches rather than on the shifts in the discussion. First of all, well, it is an outcome of the UN decision that all conference reports must not exceed so many printed pages. So this shortening has led to an inability to capture actually what occurred in those meetings. You write about who opened the conference, what was the agenda, how many organizations attended, how many delegations were there, et cetera.

Sharpless Really dry stuff.

Concepcion The dry stuff. When I looked at the first report it contained the papers, it contained the lengthy discussions, lengthy discussion captured, and the publication was this thick.

Sharpless So—an inch thick.

Concepcion Very interesting. The next conference—'72 up to '82, I think, then became shorter and shorter, and then they focused more on the programs of action rather than the discussion that led to such programs. And of course, you had this division of the meetings among senior officials and the ministers, so you had to go through these reports. After I submitted the paper, ESCAP noted that it did not have an outlook for the future. So they requested a concluding section on what I saw for the future. I said, "I think we should not have any more conferences, especially after the contentious conference of 2002, unless the United States changes"—although they deleted the name of the country, citing instead this one country. Of course, everybody will know it's

the United States. I said, “Unless the U.S. changes, there’s no point having any more conferences.” And I said, “What needs to be done,” I said, “is for the economic commission to go after each of these countries to see that they meet the MDG as well as the targets of the Program of Action and any other international covenants.” That’s it. So I said, “That’s how I will conclude.”

(laughs)

Sharpless

Okay.

Concepcion

So, are we through?

Sharpless

We’ll be through when you say we’re through.

Concepcion

Okay, unless you have any other questions—

Sharpless

I think that’ll do it. Thank you so much, Dr. Concepcion.

End Interview 2

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