



Policy-at-a-glance – Sustainable Population for Australia Policy

- Key message:** PHAA recommends that the Australian Government –
1. Immediately commission an inquiry into Australia's population policy options, including among its terms of reference quantitative evaluation of each of the areas of impact, and analysis of the proposed policy changes, identified in this policy;
 2. Increase international aid for voluntary family planning and reproductive health services, and for improving educational access for women; and
 3. Increase Australia's target for greenhouse pollution reduction, based on revised population trajectories.

Summary: Population stabilisation will be brought about not by coercive or punitive restrictions on fertility, ethnic discrimination or an end to immigration, but by changes to immigration and welfare policies that remove perverse incentives and support attitudinal change to engender a balance between personal choice and social and environmental responsibility.

This policy seeks to outline a series of principles and tangible actions for Australian, State/Territory and Local Government designed to achieve these goals.

Audience: Australian, State/Territory and Local Government, policy makers and program managers.

Responsibility: PHAA's Health Promotion and Environmental Health Special Interest Groups (SIGs)

Peter Howat, Convenor, Health Promotion SIG –

p.howat@curtin.edu.au

Peter Tait, Convenor, Environmental Health SIG –

aspeter@bigpond.com

www.phaa.net.au



SUSTAINABLE POPULATION POLICY

Joint policy developed by the Health Promotion and Environmental Health Special Interest Groups

PREAMBLE

Australia, as a resource rich and wealthy nation, has a global responsibility to consider environmental stresses facing developing countries when examining population planning. However, the Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA) believes that unfettered population growth in Australia offers no significant benefits to health and wellbeing, while progressively increasing risks of a range of adverse outcomes.

Population stabilization in Australia ought not be brought about by coercive or punitive restrictions on fertility, ethnic discrimination or an end to immigration, but by changes to immigration and welfare policies that remove perverse incentives and support attitudinal change to engender a balance between personal choice and social and environmental responsibility.

Population flux depends on the interaction of public policy and cultural values and attitudes. The accelerated population growth experienced in recent years has been achieved through public policy change, supported by arguments we believe are either misconceived or misconstrued as being in the public interest, while in fact representing only short-sighted or narrow vested interests¹. The misinformation associated with these policies and arguments has also shifted attitudes towards family size, labour market management and demographic age profiles.

Despite the dramatic impacts that population growth is having on social, environmental and economic trajectories², Australia has no population policy. No objective inquiry has led to the recommendation of current strategies, and the only studies published of its consequences are those commissioned by vested interests.

¹ O'Connor, M. and Lines, W.J. 2008. *Overloading Australia*. Black Ink Press,

² Betts, K. 2009. *Review of Overloading Australia*, Mark O'Connor and William J. Lines. *People and Place*, vol. 17, no. 1, page 76.

The Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA) notes:

Australia's population could be stabilized readily, with little additional growth, through changes in public policy without coercive or punitive measures against any current behaviours. Attitudinal changes will follow as the benefits of this strategy are more widely realized.

Impacts of population growth are felt in many areas, including:

1. **Services:** The constant imperative to expand capacity of hospitals, schools, transport infrastructure and utilities results in a situation where these services are almost constantly working at or beyond their capacity, with negative consequences for the quality of services provided. Skills shortages in health services in particular are exacerbated by high staff turnover due to the stress of such circumstances³. Underinvestment in infrastructure is usually blamed, but the relationship between population growth rate and the scale of investment needed is not acknowledged. The scale demanded by our current growth rate⁴ would seem to be beyond the capacity of government to both fund and manage. In the inevitable compromises, capacity takes precedence over improvements in quality. Neglect of investment even for a short period, such as an economic downturn, results in a rapid deterioration of service provision against the relentlessly increasing demand. Those most affected are already disadvantaged groups, including new migrants. Australia has a responsibility to ensure adequate services are available for these groups. Stabilizing population would greatly diminish the unmet need in this regard, and in addition, allow investment to focus on quality rather than quantity.
2. **Food security:** Australia's agricultural production, prior to recent droughts, has been estimated to provide sufficient food for up to 100 million people. Currently, food exports contribute significantly to our national earnings, and to the food security of other countries⁵. At our current growth rate, and assuming this production level is maintained, we would exceed our food production capacity in the last quarter of this century. However, with the risk of crop failures increasing due to climate change, much of our current grain land will become unprofitable to plant. Irrigated production is already declining rapidly, with reduced river flows and increasing competition between agricultural and urban water needs⁶. Australia is at risk of becoming a net food importer by the middle of this century, while it is likely that most food-exporting countries will also reduce or eliminate their exports, particularly of staple foods. No foreseeable agricultural advances will change this outcome. Such a vulnerable position should not be wilfully pursued through policies of deliberate population growth.

³ International studies reviewed in O'Brien-Pallas, L., Griffin, P., Shamian, J., Buchan, J., Duffield, C., Hughes, F., Spence Laschinger, H.K., North, N. and Stone, P.W. 2006, The Impact of Nurse Turnover on Patient, Nurse, and System Outcomes: A Pilot Study and Focus for a Multicenter International Study. POLICY POLIT NURS PRACT 2006; 7; 169

⁴ If average infrastructure lifespan is 50 years, a 2% annual replacement rate is implied. A 2% annual population growth rate would double this requirement for infrastructure creation. Australia's current growth rate is 1.9% p.a.

⁵ Bureau of Rural Sciences 2008. Australia's agricultural industries at a glance 2008.
<http://affashop.gov.au/product.asp?prodid=13943>

⁶ The above reference documents steadily declining water usage by agriculture, and agriculture's declining proportion of total water usage.

3. **Nutrition:** Food security is generally considered in terms of the total calorie requirement for a population. However, our capacity to maintain or improve diet quality is undermined long before calorific shortage is reached. Many high-value foods already depend on unsustainably high harvests of wild stocks (fish), limited areas of fertile, well-watered land (horticultural crops and dairy) or high energy inputs and high greenhouse gas emissions (red meat). If current dietary recommendations were taken up by all Australians, we would not have domestic capacity to meet this demand. It is unethical to advocate optimum diets which are inaccessible to an increasing proportion of the population. By pursuing a higher population, we choose to limit good nutrition to the rich.
4. **Housing affordability:** Population growth is the main driver of escalating property prices⁷. Prices are further magnified by speculation, underwritten by the guarantee that demand will continue to increase. This has placed unprecedented financial burden and insecurity on people entering the housing market, and on tenants, including many of the most vulnerable sectors of society. Encourage governments to maintain adequate stocks of public housing relative to demand.
5. **Skills and training:** In a stable population, professional and trade training is needed to replace retiring skilled workers. Thus, assuming an average working life of 33-40 years per skilled worker, the annual graduation needs to be around 2.5-3% of the total workforce in each skill area. In a growing population, graduations also have to grow the total workforce (not the population of graduates) proportionally. For a national growth rate of 1.5% per annum, graduate requirements increase from 3% to 4.5% of the workforce: a 50% higher training burden than in a stable population. Over the past decade, as Australian population growth has increased, spending on higher education has not increased to accommodate this extra burden. Immigration may have alleviated the resulting skills shortages in selected areas, but has increased them across the board. Stabilising population would make a far more cost-effective contribution to aligning training capacity with training needs. Furthermore, utilising immigrants, such as skilled health professionals, from developing countries has substantial negative consequences for their country of origin⁸.
6. **Stress and depression:** Increasing incidence of stress and depression are seen as consequences of “the pace of modern life”, but the reasons for the ever-increasing pace are rarely questioned. Marketing of consumerism has been blamed for loss of meaningfulness in life⁹, but other major contributors are alluded to above, including the treadmill of growth, with both providers and clients of overstretched services suffering

⁷ While the Office of the Minister for Immigration rejects this relationship, the property industry frequently affirms it, such as in an article from “Your Mortgage” magazine, 17/03/2009: NSW to be spared by the damage of reduced immigration. <http://www.yourmortgage.com.au/articles/2907/default.aspx> accessed 19/03/2009.

⁸ Chen, L., Evans, T., Anand, S., Boufford, J. I., Brown, H., Chowdhury, M., Cueto, M., Dare, L., Dussault, G., Elzinga, G., Fee, E., Habte, D., Hanvoravongchai, P., Jacobs, M., Kurowski, C., Michael, S., Pablos-Mendez, A., Sewankambo, N., Solimano, G., Stilwell, B., de Waal, A. & Wibulpolprasert, S., 2004, 'Human resources for health: overcoming the crisis', *Lancet*, vol. 364, no. 9449, p. 1984-90.

⁹ Hamilton, C. and Mail, E. 2003. Downshifting in Australia: a sea-change in the pursuit of happiness. Discussion Paper No. 50, Australia Institute, ISSN 1322-5421.

increasing frustration and powerlessness, and debt burdens contributing to the social dislocation of work-centric lifestyles¹⁰.

7. **Demographic profiles:** Population growth has been advocated in order to prevent demographic ageing, and preserve the relatively young population profile that has resulted from past high growth. The PHAA recognises demographic ageing as an issue that requires planned adaptation of health and community services. However, the attempt to avoid demographic ageing, through enhanced population growth, is ineffective¹¹, unnecessary and counter-productive to public health outcomes¹². Demographic ageing partly results from deliberate and desirable advances in longevity, through avoidance and treatment of illness and trauma, and as such should be celebrated. Implications for dependency ratio should not be cited without reference to relative costs of young dependents, infrastructure and training costs associated with population growth rate, and factors (including fertility rate) affecting workforce participation rate. The benefits of population stabilization are likely to significantly outweigh the costs of demographic ageing.
8. **Global environmental change:** Some aspects of global environmental change have been covered under Food Security and Nutrition above. Other aspects such as loss of biodiversity, land degradation, deforestation, persistent organic pollutants, stratospheric ozone depletion and ocean acidification are beyond the scope of this policy to discuss in detail. Climate change is the most pressing aspect of global environmental change and perhaps the greatest current single threat to public health, with impacts ranging from expanding range of tropical diseases, water and food scarcity, increased incidence and intensity of extreme weather events, violent social unrest and mass movements of people in response to hunger or displacement by rising sea levels. The scale of potential disruption to human wellbeing is difficult to estimate. Yet the capacity of our society to respond adequately to mitigate catastrophic climate change is severely hampered by both our consumption patterns and our population growth rate. According to the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme White Paper¹³, Australia's expected population growth to 2020 means that a 34% per capita reduction in greenhouse pollution is needed to achieve only 4% national reduction from 1990 levels. Europe, with slower growth, can achieve 30% total reduction for the same 34% per capita. If we achieve a 34% per capita reduction by 2020, a slight increase in our growth rate could wipe out the gain altogether, whereas immediate adoption of population stabilization strategies could turn 4% into 20% or more. Indeed, the same investment would yield higher per capita reductions, making higher national targets possible. Population growth magnifies all our environmental impacts and dilutes all mitigation efforts. Consequently, population

¹⁰ Price, S. 2008. Stress and debt make Sydney a violent city. SMH 13 January 2008.

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/national/stress-and-debt-make-sydney-a-violent-city/2008/01/12/1199988650425.html>

Davis, M. 2008. The Land of Plenty. Melbourne University Press. See Prologue p xvii.

¹¹ Betts, K. 2008. Population ageing in Australia: policy implications of recent projections. *People and Place* 16(4): 43-51.

¹² McGavin, B. and Murray, T. 2009. The Demographic False Alarm. <http://candobetter.org/node/1027> accessed 06/04/2009.

¹³ Department of Climate Change, 15 December 2008. Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme: Australia's Low Pollution Future. White Paper. <http://www.climatechange.gov.au/whitepaper/index.html>

stabilization adds value to all other efforts, and it is unlikely that effective climate change mitigation will be achieved without it.

9. **International Development:** The greatest barriers to poverty alleviation in least developed countries are overpopulation (resulting in unsustainable intensities of resource use and consequent environmental degradation) and population growth rate (growing demand for services faster than they can be maintained, let alone improved)¹⁴. Some advocate high immigration in order for Australia to ‘do our bit’ for poor people. Yet, even at our current record intake, which is the highest per capita intake in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)¹⁵, we absorb only one in 400 of the annual global population growth. We could make a far greater contribution, not only for those who would emigrate but for all who cannot, by supporting family planning to reduce future demand on resources. It is not widely appreciated that the current unmet demand for family planning accounts for most of, if not more than, the surplus births each year¹⁶. No coercion or education of women is needed, only access to information and contraceptive technologies for people to realize their current preference to limit the number and spacing of births. The PHAA welcomes the Rudd Government’s withdrawal of restrictions on Australian aid for family planning¹⁷, but believes that Australia’s domestic policies are detrimental to this cause. By enunciating a belief that population growth is necessary for economic prosperity, Australia undermines the commitment to population stabilization in developing countries. The PHAA does not advocate any reduction in Australia’s support for international refugees. Refugee intake is currently less than 5% of all immigration, and could be substantially increased within a socially responsible immigration policy. The best way to ensure Australia’s future capacity to support refugees is to contain other inputs to our population. Even more important is to mitigate the causes of conflict and ecological crisis that generate refugees, by contributing to global population stabilization, and climate change mitigation and adaptation, through both leadership and material assistance.

¹⁴ All Party Parliamentary Group on Population Development and Reproductive Health, “Return of the Population Growth Factor: Its Impact on the Millennium Development Goals” (HMSO, London, 2007); for the report and oral and written evidence, see www.appgpopdevrh.org.uk/. Conclusions are summarised and discussed in Campbell, M. et al. 2007, Return of the Population Growth Factor, *Science* 315:1501-1502.
<http://www.sciencemag.org/cgi/reprint/315/5818/1501.pdf>

¹⁵ Canada has claimed this title since 1990, but Australia’s net overseas immigration for the year ending 30 September 2008 was 235,900, 1.1% of our population, considerably exceeding Canada’s rate of around 0.76% per annum. ABS, 3101.0 - Australian Demographic Statistics, Sep 2008, released 18/03/2009:
<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/3101.0?OpenDocument>

¹⁶ The UNFPA estimates that some 200 million women worldwide would like to delay or prevent pregnancy, but are not using effective contraception. This is certainly a conservative estimate, as access invariably increases demand - see Campbell, M. 2007. Why the silence on population? *Population and Environment* (2007) 28:237-246.

¹⁷ Minister for Foreign Affairs, Stephen Smith, Media Release 10/03/2009. Australian Government Committed to Maternal and Child Health in Developing Countries.
http://www.ausaid.gov.au/media/release.cfm?BC=Media&ID=9112_7385_8599_9705_8357

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA) recommends that the Australian Government:

Immediately commission an inquiry into Australia's population policy options, which includes among its terms of reference, a quantitative evaluation of each of the areas of impact listed above, and analysis of the potential policy changes below.

- Investigate policies that contribute to a sustainable population.
- Investigate the potential impacts of withdrawing the 'baby-bonus', and reallocating these funds to child welfare and programs to assist people to avoid unintended pregnancies.
- Increase funding for post-secondary education to ensure that capacity exists to meet Australia's future skills needs, as well as providing professional training as development assistance to developing countries in our region.
- Address barriers to workforce participation and training access, including flexible work arrangements, relocation and transitions between welfare and work, affecting disadvantaged sectors of the community.
- Increase international aid for voluntary family planning and reproductive health services, and for improving educational access for women, by exceeding our donor obligations to the United Nations family planning program under the Cairo 1994 United Nations International Conference on Population and Development, and in bilateral aid programs.
- Include assessment of fertility and barriers to family planning access in each program as an integral element of sustainability of aid outcomes, and prioritize unmet need for family planning in each aid program.
- Increase Australia's target for greenhouse pollution reduction, based on revised population trajectories.

The Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA) recommends that State and Local Governments:

- Refrain from establishing development plans based on timed population trajectories, but plan for unavoidable additional population without timelines, take measures to defer population increases and ensure that planning instruments such as land zoning and infrastructure provision do not accelerate population influx.
- Undertake carrying capacity evaluation, separately evaluating each limiting resource (water, renewable energy, land, limits to liquid fossil fuel (peak oil)) and impact (biodiversity and ecosystem functions, waste and pollution) and options affecting their carrying capacity, and basing population caps on the most limiting factor. Maintenance of all current ecological systems should be a minimum requirement, and populations lower than current should be considered if the current population is negatively impacting ecological values.

The Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA) resolves that:

The National Office, Environmental Health and Health Promotion Special Interest Groups and Branches will -

1. advocate to the three levels of government to implement the recommendations listed above; and
2. Incorporate a session at the 2010 PHAA Annual Conference on this topic to raise awareness of the issues within the public health sector.

ADOPTED 2009

Adopted at the 2009 Annual General Meeting of the Public Health Association of Australia. Initial draft developed by Dr. Jane O'Sullivan with input from the membership of both the Environmental Health and Health Promotion Special Interest Groups (SIGs).