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"State Of World Population 2002:
People, Poverty And Possibilities"*

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AN AUSTRALIAN PERSPECTIVE ON THE UNFPA'S "STATE OF WORLD POPULATION REPORT 2002: PEOPLE, POVERTY AND POSSIBILITIES"

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INTRODUCTION

The 'State of World Population 2002' report of the UNFPA is a comprehensive and well documented analysis of the current global population situation and the links between population and poverty. The focus of the report is squarely on less developed nations but it is of relevance to Australia in a number of direct as well as indirect ways which are explored below. At the outset, though, it is worth underlining that the report demonstrates that an understanding of population processes and trends and population policies and programs based on that understanding can contribute to the reduction of poverty. Population does not provide the sole solution to the important global goal of halving the global numbers in poverty by 2015 but it can contribute to the solution. In the same way, understanding of population change and population intervention in Australia is not the only solution to important global goals such as environmental sustainability, social equity and economic prosperity. However, it can be an independent and important partial contributor to the solution of these problems.

Before examining some aspects of the report's relevance to Australia, I'd like to make a few general comments about its content. Firstly, the report maintains that population issues (such as fertility, population growth, age structure change, population distribution, population movement etc.) are of importance in understanding and addressing global poverty. Moreover, evidence is produced that achievement of population goals has in the past, and can in the future, help reduce poverty. This has occurred in at least two ways:

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- There is clear evidence presented that the substantial fertility reductions which have been achieved in many countries have been causally linked with increasing productivity, more savings, more productive investment and rising incomes.
- Secondly, human wellbeing has been enhanced by investments in population programs aimed at universal health care (especially reproductive health), universal education, gender equity etc.

In short, the study explicitly states that demographic trends and processes – fertility, mortality, population mobility, age structure change etc. – impinge importantly on economic and social development. Moreover, policy intervention in these areas can produce economic and social dividends.

While there is an appropriate emphasis in the report on future challenges, it also documents the massive achievements in reducing global fertility and population growth trends over the last quarter century. *Population policy and action have produced results.* Population policy intervention have been partly responsible for the secular lowering of fertility in many developing nations. Nevertheless, there is a down side to this success. Much of the achievement in lowering fertility has resulted from the international mobilisation of funds and directing them to population related programs in less developed countries. However, it is apparent that some donor nations are reducing the funds they make available for this work. In some quarters the massive achievements in fertility reduction have convinced some that the ‘population crisis has been averted’ and we should now move on to direct funding of other problems. The battle is not yet won and indeed the continuation of fertility decline is dependent on a maintenance of investment in effective population programs. Satisfactory demographic outcomes the report correctly maintains, depend on appropriate policy and action. They are based on good data, good research and enable the free choices of individuals and couples. Universal access to reproductive health care, education and women’s empowerment are not only important population goals in their own right but they are also conditions for ending poverty.

What, then, are the implications of the report for Australia? Understandably, the report is squarely targeted at the majority of the world’s population living in less developed nations. However, there are two areas of considerable relevance to Australia, one direct, the other indirect. Most obviously there are directions for the role that Australia can play in the efforts to develop better policy and program interventions in the population areas in

less developed areas, especially Asia and the Pacific. This addresses Australia's role as a responsible, global and regional citizen and as one of the more developed countries who are development assistance donors. To what extent is Australia funding multilateral and bilateral programs in population fields? In 2002-03 Australia will supply \$230 million of direct assistance in health (13 percent of overall aid expenditure), \$280 million (16 percent) on education and \$65 million (0.4 percent) to address gender inequality. The breakdown in the health sector includes family planning, reproductive health care (8 percent), STD/HIV-AIDS (17 percent), population policy and management (2 percent). There is clearly room for extra commitment from Australia in this area. In Australia in the past much of our effort in this area has been hampered by misconceptions of anti-abortion lobby groups that population programs fund abortion activity. Australia does not meet *the OECD target of the total budget to be allocated to population activities (4 percent)*. Hence there is scope both for increasing overall assistance spending by Australia and that directed toward supporting population programs.

A second direct way in which Australia can contribute toward the development of effective population related programs and policy in less developed countries is through supporting relevant research and training. The development and execution of effective population interventions depends on access to timely relevant data, appropriate research and availability of skilled trained people. Australia's record in research and training, especially in the Asia-Pacific region, is a strong one. Through first the late Professor W.D. Borrie then Professors Jack Caldwell and Gavin Jones and others from the Department of Demography at the Australian National University, Australians have been major contributors to both population research and the training of leading population researchers and planners in less developed nations. Several other universities also have made substantial contributions in these areas. However, for this effort to continue will require continued investment and commitment. The expertise built up in this area can quickly dissipate if available resources are wound back.

What of the relevance of the report for the Australian demographic situation? Australia is a relatively small nation with 19.7 million residents in 2002 but it is increasing at 1.2 percent per annum – the average rate for the total world population. Clearly, the contemporary population debates in Australia are in the main different to those canvassed in the report. There has been an interest in population issues in Australia over the last year

or so which has been unprecedented for several decades. They have been important in the last federal election, population issues have been taken up by several key Australian lobbying groups, there have been a number of national conferences addressing population issues and there has been unprecedented public debate on population related issues. Some of the main questions include the following:

- What population levels should Australia be striving toward? Some groups, especially those which are business related, suggest 50 million people by the middle of the century. Others, often environmentally focused, advocate an immediate stop to population increase so that there is a significant decline in the total population.
- Can ageing of the population be ameliorated by population related interventions?
- What levels of immigration should Australia have and what mix of migration policy categories should it be included?
- What should the mix of permanent and temporary migration be?
- What should Australia's response to asylum seekers be?
- Is Australian immigration contributing to a costly brain drain from less developed countries?
- Is Australia losing too many of its most talented people to larger developed countries?
- Can and should the government attempt to influence Australian fertility?
- Are the demographic attributes of the indigenous population moving closer to those of the remainder of the population?
- Do young Australian women have the same choices in balancing family and work life as young Australian men?
- Is there an increasing polarisation between haves and have nots in the Australian population?
- Is there an increasing mismatch between where Australians live and where the resources are available to sustain them?
- Is the population of the wheat/sheep and pastoral belts of Australia falling below the minimum needed to provide access to a basic array of services?
- What are the implications for continued population growth for environmental sustainability in Australia?

It is not possible to expand on any of these issues here but in the light of the UNFPA report a few points can be made:

- Population, contrary to widespread opinion in Australia, is not a static backdrop for the interplay of social, economic and political forces. Population processes and patterns, while influenced by those forces, also operate independently. They need to be understood. All planning is for people and understanding how the population is changing is thus fundamental to planning.
- Population, contrary to widespread opinion in Australia, is amenable to policy intervention. Many of our policies already have considerable effects on the Australian population. There is a need for an integrated population policy for Australia which has a vision of the future Australia.
- Population does impinge directly on economic and social wellbeing.
- Effective and informed policy can influence population outcomes in a positive way.
- Gender equity, human rights and choice are crucial in achieving positive population goals.
- There is a need for sound, timely and policy oriented population research to backstop the development of effective and equitable population policy.
- Population analysis does not provide a 'silver bullet' to improve social and economic wellbeing but it can contribute to the multidisciplinary effort needed to achieve them.

Population debates in Australia have a long history. However, too often they are characterised by bigotry, misinformation and self-interest. Too seldom are they informed by accurate population data and research and too seldom is the debate a broadly based one involving all elements of the community. If we are going to address the challenges of global (and Australian) population futures there is a pressing need for expanding and understanding of population processes and for the development of informed interactions to influence population outcomes. This will not provide a total answer to improving levels of economic and social wellbeing but it can contribute in a significant way to achieving these worthy goals.