

Notes for

## FACT SHEET 8. AN AGEING POPULATION IS NOT DISASTROUS

(vy's published paper is below, to be integrated in)

The solution to an ageing population cannot be by increasing the younger population, because they in turn will age and need more younger populations – the problem can only get worse and worse

It is absurd to worry about the demands on the economy and shortage of labor with an ageing population at the same time as worries about youth unemployment.

•Who put forward the 'ageing population' argument for increased population and why? (See FACT SHEET 7)

Answers include:

One key is the increasing good health of the aged, and prevention of chronic debilitating illnesses. The increasingly healthy aged still contribute, socially and intellectually, as well as in material production, such as farming. They are the backbone of volunteers and civic action. People at 70 are today mostly healthier than most people were at 60 even a few decades ago. Old people with super and investments are not even a tax burden.

Modern methods of production mean that very few workers are needed to keep the rest of us alive (And look at the average age of our farmers today, and how many are over 70!) At present, at age 40+, employees can become permanently unemployed - yet with modern health, half the 65-75 age-group and thousands over that age are still capable of great contributions to our society. Childcare is more costly than aged care apart from the debilitated 'Struldbrug' aged.

The present consternation over the ageing and stabilisation of Japan's population is misplaced. Overcrowding has been an increasing problem. Rather than yet further population growth, what is needed is economic innovation that can solve its present perceived problems of decline in property values and in scope for speculation, and reduced consumption of natural resources leading to lower profits and unemployment.

Thousands of prosperous societies in the past with stable populations, have had solutions to the 'aged' problems in one way or another – including the Chinese roles of honour given to the elderly – although they did not have such a high proportion of survivors as today.

Myths and fallacies are currently influencing governments in deciding population policies. Even the 2000 report on Replacement Migration from the United Nations Population Division is a fable for our times in its arguments about continuing population growth being essential in developed countries (never mind in the developing ones.)

The report argued that the demographic characteristics of the very low fertility countries must change if they are to end up with an economically

sustainable age-structure'. Pro-natalist policies can be promoted to avert a supposed disaster of 'excessive population ageing'. Yet encouraging more local births may be evading and ignoring important issues - and would be a crying national shame while more than 23 million refugees are homeless and hungry.

Critics of the position of the UN report have included Jill Curnow in a monograph on 'Myths and the Fear of an Ageing Population'<sup>2</sup> and Henri Leridon writing in the bulletin, *Population & Sociétés*, of INED, the National French Institute For Demographic Studies, the primary public institution on demographic policy in France.<sup>3</sup> Leridon commented on the United Nations work on replacement immigration: 'To want to maintain at all costs the ratio of [aged to youth] is truly to try and fill the Danaïde's well.'

One reason for fearing an ageing population can be from seeing Australia's rural problems when the young people leave for cities. However, this is a problem of lack opportunities for the young - a lack of desirable employment - not the problem of too much work for the young that the 'ageing population' scare envisages.

An important part of the myth of disaster from ageing-populations is the fallacy that growth must be unending. This has been promoted by pressure groups that benefit from population growth through escalating values of real estate, mass markets, demands for building, and, in supporting immigration, importing cheap docile labor for unpleasant jobs, and already-skilled personnel that have not cost the reception country any expense in education and training.

However, there is less recognition that growth has downsides. Russell & Russell's have surveyed the lessons of past civilisations which have grown beyond the resources available to them, and collapsed.<sup>4</sup>

The story of Easter Island is like a microcosm of what we can see elsewhere in the world today. Prosperity is not dependant upon continual quantitative growth and can be destroyed by it. 'Growth' is currently like riding an accelerating bicycle and having to keep pedalling because otherwise we would fall off. Yet at some stage there must be a stop - or a crash.

Many developed as well as developing countries show problems that are increasing by growing population further -

- Excessive loss of arable land to urban development,
- The social problems of congested cities,
- A huge pool of the unemployed and even unemployable - much of it recent immigrants who are on the lowest rung of the jobs ladder -
- Increasingly risky and often inhumane methods and of mass food production,
- Intractable traffic,
- And a cultural malaise that can infect the second generation of immigrants even if the first-comers bring 'fresh blood' and energy.

Growth can stop without disaster. There are alternative advantages for profits and employment in a stable or even declining society. A look around Australia - or any country - shows so much qualitative improvement that is needed and possible that there should be no shortage of jobs and profits without requiring continual increased consumption and waste of diminishing resources.

If all the jobs that needed to be done were being done, including conserving resources and preventing waste, there need be no unemployment, even if there were fewer people needing new housing and commodities.

But the arguments for fearing an ageing population paradoxically include lack of younger workers to support them.

Mind-boggling figures have been thought up by the United Nations Population Division report on 'Replacement Migration' such as that to keep the support ratio of workers to dependents constant, South Korea, for example would need 94 million immigrants per year, 'almost twice its current population, adding up to 5.1 billion by 2050, that is 5/6ths of today's world population'. Immigrants themselves age - and so according to the growth myth, even more immigration would then be needed to support them.

There is overwhelming evidence against the myth that without continuing population growth, an ageing population could not be supported by its working members. Over the last fifty years the proportion of Australians aged under fifteen has shrunk to 20% while those aged over 65 has increased to 12% , with no noticeable difficulties, and over the next fifty years, proportions are expected to be 16% and 24%. Support ratios of workers to the elderly of 4:1 are not a problem for Western countries. The total dependency of old people in nursing homes is only on average 7 months for men and 2 years for women. On average, people require two years of substantial health care before their deaths - regardless of whether they are young or old.

Aged pensions are only one third of the total value of Commonwealth income support payments (1996-7 figures) and the proportion of self-funded retirees is increasing as superannuation becomes nearly universal. The greater problem that Australia should be facing is the increasing proportion of younger people who require support and are unemployable for many reasons, from minimal brain damage through drugs and accidents, to inadequate literacy. (With so much youth unemployment, why is Australia unable to skill and train its own young people, rather than importing them from developing countries?)

Most old people contribute to the community and the economy in inestimable voluntary work in every area, including as grandparents, who provided 68% of all informal child care in Australia in 1997. Today with better health, a higher proportion of older people are still capable of regular employment in many fields - the irony is that enforced retirement can now commence at 45 or 50. So much for the threatened shortage of workers.

On the other hand, the degree of total dependency of children is increasing - even up to 24 years old. Their rearing and education costs far more in worker time and in expense than costs of the elderly. Fewer children and more elderly would be less burden on the 'workers' in between. The chief economic advantage is as a market for consumer goods and services that is greater than older people require. But who pays?

We can think - why should populations remain constant at their present possibly unsustainable levels? World population only reached one billion in the 19th century and it is now 6 billion and rising - and there are now no more 'empty' continents to pour into, only more extending deserts. The greatest contributions to civilisation have been made by small cities no bigger than Geelong.

There are good reasons for considering that the only good reason for immigration to developed countries is humanitarian. Since population problems globally are 'too many people' rather than 'too few', it is also practical as well as humane to take international action about the growing millions of economic and political refugees by stopping the social, economic and political causes that are producing such distress, so that people can live prosperously in their own countries. Refugees in Africa alone now outnumber the total population of Australia.<sup>5</sup>

At present Britain as well as Australia has pretty unnatural methods of segregated child-care and much needs to be done to make being a child and having children more enjoyable in shared community. The social drawbacks to one and two-child families are needless. It is also desirable that the most civilised features of our Western heritage should not be submerged, but shared with the world - regardless of the races who inherit it. But it should be faced that to promote pro-natalist policies in countries still prosperous is openly callous and even 'dog-in-the-manger', in view of the misery at the gates from burgeoning populations elsewhere

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## AGEING POPULATIONS ARE NOT DISASTROUS

### The myths about them

Some people think populations must keep growing, like running in order to stand still in *Alice in Wonderland*

Condensed from - Valerie Yule, 2001. Are ageing or declining populations disastrous? *Galton Institute Newsletter*. 42. 7-8.

Myths and fallacies currently influence governments in deciding population policies. Even the 2000 report on Replacement Migration from the United Nations Population Division is a fable in its arguments about continuing population growth being essential in developed countries (never mind in the developing ones.)

The report argued that the demographic characteristics of the very low fertility countries must change in order to keep an economically sustainable age-structure'. Pro-natalist policies can be promoted to avert a supposed disaster of 'excessive population ageing'. Yet encouraging more local births may be evading and ignoring important issues - and would be a crying national shame while more than 23 million refugees are homeless and hungry.

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### **The myths that need exposing**

The fallacy that growth must never stop is the major part of the myth of disaster from ageing populations. This has been promoted by pressure groups that benefit from population growth through escalating values of real estate, mass markets, demands for building, and, in supporting immigration, importing cheap docile labor for unpleasant jobs, and already-skilled personnel that have not cost the reception country any expense in education and training.

However, there is less recognition that growth has downsides. Russell & Russell have surveyed the lessons of past civilisations which have grown beyond the resources available to them, and collapsed.<sup>4</sup>

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Western governments fear the solvable economic challenge of a stable population with a higher proportion of elderly, and a fatal flaw of global capitalism is the push for continually growing markets and cheap labor. But other bogeys are worse. The losses of fertile lands and seas, and escalations of economic refugees, animal extinctions, oil and water wars, slum megapolises and toxic pollutions, are among the consequences of population pressure documented regularly in the pages of the press. The greatest problem today is to find humane solutions to ghastly problems. The greatest problem for which humane solutions are most urgent and most difficult is that of population growth devastating the earth's resources and amenities.

It is desirable that the most civilized features of our Western heritage should not be submerged, but this does not require continual growth or even static or reduced Western populations. When our heritages are shared with the world, it does not matter who are the races who inherit it.

### References

1 Chamie, J. Director, Population Division, United Nations, New York, was the spokesman for the widely-reported press release, 'Replacement Migration: Is it a Solution to declining and Ageing Populations?', January, 2000 and for the final report, March, 2000.

2 Curnow, J. (2000). Myths and the fear of an ageing population. Occasional paper prepared for Sustainable Population Australia.

3 Leridon, H. (2000) Vieillesse démographique et migrations: quand les Nations unies veulent remplir le tonneau des Danaïdes.... Population & Sociétés, No. 358. Translation by Sheila Newman

4 Russell, C. and Russell, W. M. S. (1999). Population Crises And Population Cycles. London: The Galton Institute.

5 The common assumption that Australia can be 'filled up' ignores three facts - unpredictable and occasionally enormous droughts; generally poor soils, still deteriorating; and Australia's rim of habitable land does not even encircle its vast and growing aridity.

Web-pages linked to <http://www.vicnet.net.au/~ozideas> include:

Concepts, economic - <http://www.vicnet.net.au/~ozideas/ecocon.htm>

Jobs, alternatives jobs for the future

<http://www.vicnet.net.au/~ozideas/jobsfut.htm>

Population - <http://www.vicnet.net.au/~ozideas/poprus.htm>