



## **Sustainable Population Australia**

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Foreign Affairs and Aid Subcommittee

Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade

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### **Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade (JSCFADT) Inquiry into**

## **The role of Australia's international development program in preventing conflict**

Sustainable Population Australia (SPA) commends the Committee for undertaking this review. As global volatility is rising, it is important to better understand the underlying drivers of conflict and what interventions might be most effective.

SPA is an independent not-for-profit organisation seeking to protect the environment, human security and quality of life by ending population growth in Australia and globally, while rejecting racism and involuntary population control. SPA is an environmental advocacy organisation, not a political party.

Peace and stability are at the core of SPA's mission to create sustainable societies in which people can flourish. Two of SPA's Patrons, Dr. Anne Poelina and Professor Ian Lowe, are on the board of the Australian Peace and Security Forum.

Population growth remains a major underlying stressor, generating conflicts worldwide. Additionally, population pressures (crowding and resource scarcity) worsen the impacts of conflicts and undermine post-conflict recovery.

Exceptions exist, such as the current Ukraine war, where complex geopolitical legacies are at play. However, even there, past pressure for 'lebensraum' has pushed ethnic Russians to colonise the Donbas and laid the ground for ethnic tensions.

In summary:

1. This submission argues that Australia's greatest strategic investment in preventing future conflicts would be enhanced support for voluntary family planning programs in least-developed and low-income countries where fertility remains above two children per woman.
2. We further argue that it is time for Australian aid to re-engage with sub-Saharan Africa, as the region of most rapid population growth and, consequently, the world's hotspot for violence. In the 1990s, Australia focused its aid closer to home, leaving Africa to European and North American aid. However, with the demise of USAID, the rest of the developed world must dig deeper to help Africa avoid further conflicts.

## Evidence of the role of population growth in conflict

The links between population growth, hunger and conflict are well known. The mechanisms are well summarised in the Population Institute's 2015 Demographic Vulnerability report.<sup>1</sup> The links between conflict and the way population growth strains access to natural resources has been demonstrated by Thomas Homer-Dixon.<sup>2</sup> More recently, Nobel-award winning economist Daren Acemoglu and colleagues reviewed the literature and demonstrated a strong causal association between population growth and resource-related conflicts since 1940.<sup>3</sup> A complex interplay of historical grievances and political actions often masks the role of underlying ecological tensions. These actions are the sparks, while overpopulation is the tinder they ignite.

The Rwandan genocide was a tragic example of this interplay, as Rwanda's former Minister for Agriculture and Environment James Gasana has documented.<sup>4</sup> Yemen, historically called "Arabia Felix" (Fortunate Arabia) for its relatively well-watered fertility, squandered its environmental advantages through population growth, which continues to soar despite 10 years of war. Similarly, Pakistan was the most resource-rich region of South Asia at independence but has been the region's laggard in reducing birth rates and now faces increasing instability. Once by far the richer cousin, Pakistan's GDP per capita has been overtaken by Bangladesh's thanks largely to Bangladesh's family planning programs.

A 2003 study by Population Action International found the risk of conflict could be largely attributed to three stress factors: the proportion of those aged 15 to 29 in the adult population, the rate of urban population growth, and the per capita availability of cropland and fresh water.<sup>5</sup> All three factors are functions of the birth rate.

A vicious cycle exists between food prices and violence. A 2011 study demonstrated spikes in world food prices triggered violence during the 'Arab Spring' and elsewhere.<sup>6</sup> A joint study of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the

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<sup>1</sup> Walker, D. (2015) *Demographic Vulnerability: Where Population Growth Poses the Greatest Challenges*. Population Institute, Washington. <https://www.populationmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/imported-files/Final-DVI-report.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Homer-Dixon, T.F., Boutwell, J.H., Rathjens, G.W., 1993. Environmental change and violent conflict. *Scientific American*, 268 (2), 38–45.

<sup>3</sup> Acemoglu, D., Fergusson, L., Johnson, S., 2020. Population and Conflict. *The Review of Economic Studies*, Volume 87(4): 1565–1604. <https://doi.org/10.1093/restud/rdz042>

<sup>4</sup> Gasana, J., 2002. Remember Rwanda? *World Watch Magazine*, 15 (5), 24–33. [https://www.academia.edu/28702224/WORLD\\_at\\_BULLET\\_WATCH\\_WORLD\\_at\\_BULLET\\_WATCH\\_Remember\\_Rwanda\\_Working\\_for\\_a\\_Sustainable\\_Future](https://www.academia.edu/28702224/WORLD_at_BULLET_WATCH_WORLD_at_BULLET_WATCH_Remember_Rwanda_Working_for_a_Sustainable_Future)

<sup>5</sup> Cincotta, R.P.; Engelman, R.; Anastasion, D. , 2003. *The Security Demographic: Population and Civil Conflict after the Cold War*. Population Action International: Washington, DC, USA. [https://pai.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/The\\_Security\\_Demographic\\_Population\\_and\\_Civil\\_Conflict\\_After\\_the\\_Cold\\_War-1.pdf](https://pai.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/The_Security_Demographic_Population_and_Civil_Conflict_After_the_Cold_War-1.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Lagi, M., Bertrand, K.Z., Bar-Yam, Y., 2011. *The Food Crises and Political Instability in North Africa and the Middle East*. New England Complex Systems Institute. <http://arxiv.org/pdf/1108.2455.pdf>.

World Food Programme (WFP) found that violence and conflict were behind incidences of acute hunger in many parts of the world.<sup>7</sup>

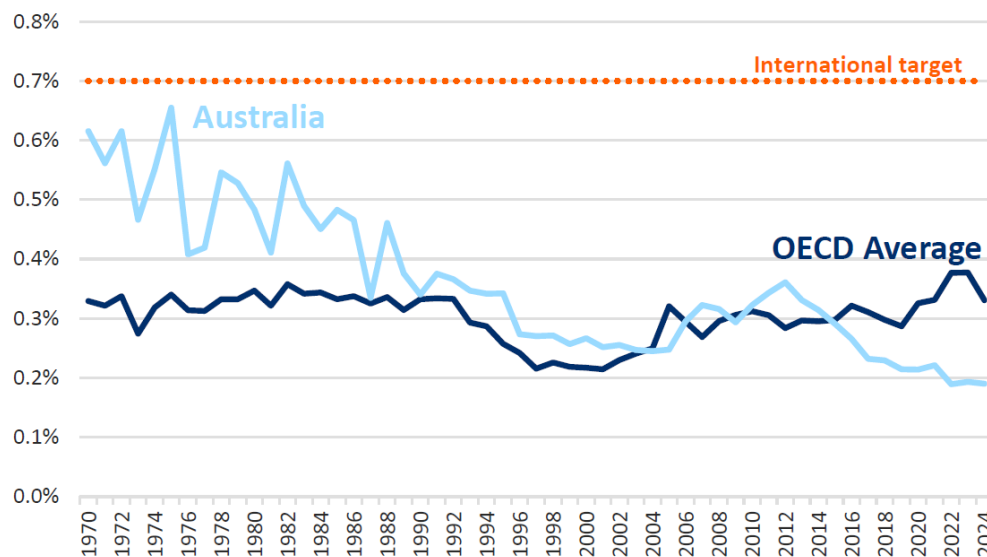
A study in Africa found that, while conflict tended to increase food prices, rising food prices increased the incidence of conflict with greater certainty. And food prices rise wherever demand outstrips supply.<sup>8</sup>

The 2022 *Ecological Threat Report* by the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP) found that 37 of the 52 sub-Saharan African countries recorded an extremely high level of food insecurity.<sup>9</sup> The report noted food insecurity is highly correlated with violent conflict, and both are associated with rapid population growth. According to the IEP report, “*The 40 least peaceful countries will have an additional 1.3 billion people by 2050, accounting for almost half of the world’s population.*”

### Australia’s dwindling aid funding must be restored

We note that, despite joining the international commitment back in 1970 to aim for a foreign aid budget of 0.7% of Gross National Income, Australia’s aid budget has steadily dwindled, currently sitting below 0.2% of GNI. This trend is disastrous for low-income countries whose needs are growing along with their burgeoning populations.

**Figure 1: Official development assistance (ODA) vs international target GNI, %**



Sources: OECD (2025)

<sup>7</sup> FAO and WFP, 2022. *Hunger hotspots: FAO-WFP early warnings on acute food insecurity – October 2022 to January 2023 Outlook*. Rome, 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Raleigh, C., Choi, H.J., Kniveton, D. 2015. The devil is in the details: An investigation of the relationships between conflict, food price and climate across Africa. *Global Environmental Change* 32, 187-199.

<sup>9</sup> Institute for Economics & Peace. *Ecological Threat Report 2022: Analysing Ecological Threats, Resilience and Peace*; Institute for Economics & Peace: Sydney, Australia, 2022.  
<https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/ETR-2022-Web.pdf>

Source: Matt Saunders and Richard Denniss, *Foreign aid and climate finance, Australia's dismal track record*. The Australia Institute, 21 Nov 2025.<sup>10</sup>

We commend the Australian government for the emphasis given to gender equity and reproductive rights within the aid program. However, reproductive health and family planning each receive only around 0.1% of the aid budget. Raising this proportion to 2%, within a modestly more generous aid budget, would enable transformative change without diminishing other program areas.

We note DFAT's funding of UNFPA's "Transformative Agenda for Women, Adolescents and Youth in the Pacific" program<sup>11</sup> in the Pacific, which has commendable goals but it is unclear whether UNFPA has the capability to deliver on its ambitions. Also, Papua New Guinea, home to the majority of the Pacific Islands' women, is not included.

We also note that sub-Saharan Africa receives almost no Australian aid for family planning. By any objective analysis, sub-Saharan Africa is the region with the greatest unmet need for reproductive health services and the region under greatest risk of outbreaks of violent conflict. Refugee outflows will increasingly impact Australia. President Trump's cancelling of USAID, historically by far the largest funder of family planning aid, makes it vital for Australia to increase its commitments to Africa.

### **Family planning deserves higher priority in Australia's aid program**

In obeisance to the United Nations' post-1994 taboo on regarding population growth as a problem, DFAT does not refer to population growth in its justifications for family planning. It states rightly that women should have access to reproductive health care, including family planning, as a right, and that "access to family planning is one of the most cost effective approaches to reducing maternal and child mortality."<sup>12</sup> However, it does not mention the fact that rapid population growth is deepening poverty, generating food and water insecurity and undermining political stability in low-income countries.

This silencing of the links between population growth and development occurred following the 1994 United Nations Conference on Population and Development in Cairo. From that time, the UN has falsely equated "demographic goals" (such as an expressed desire to lower a country's population growth rate) with coercive birth control measures.<sup>13</sup> As Cleland and colleagues (all veteran reproductive health experts)

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<sup>10</sup> Saunders, M. and Denniss, R., 2025. *Foreign aid and climate finance, Australia's dismal track record*. The Australia Institute, 21 Nov 2025. <https://apo.org.au/node/332928>

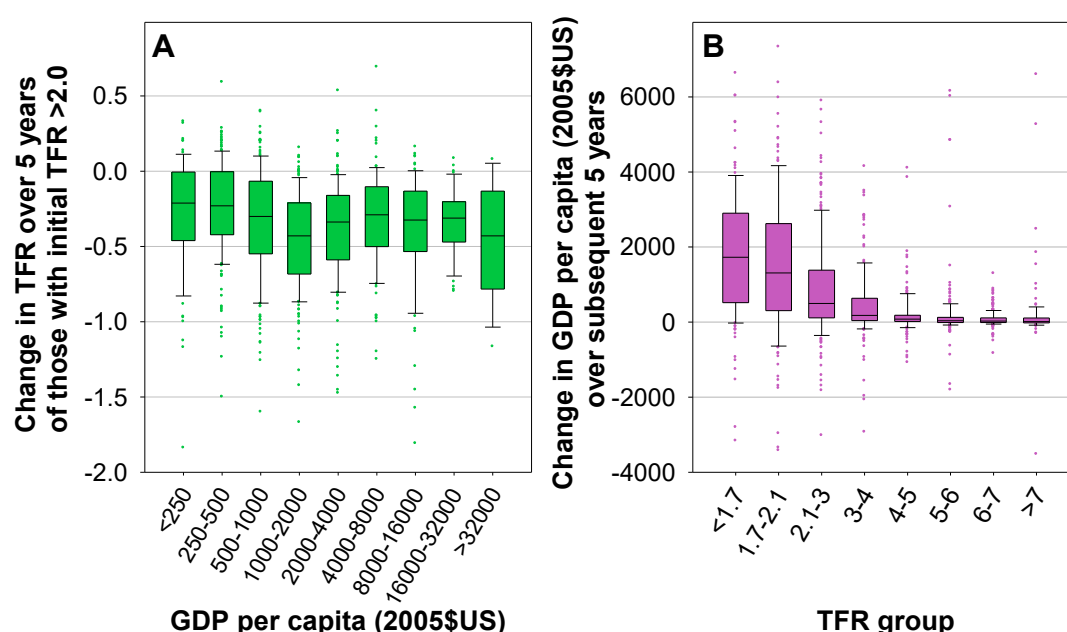
<sup>11</sup> UNFPA Transformative Agenda for Women, Adolescents and Youth in the Pacific Booklet 2023 <https://pacific.unfpa.org/en/publications/transformative-agenda-booklet>

<sup>12</sup> DFAT, *Family planning principles*. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/fam-plan-principles.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> O'Sullivan, J., 2024. *UN World Population Day 2024 focuses on anything but world population*. The Overpopulation Project, 10 July 2024. <https://overpopulation-project.com/un-world-population-day-2024-focuses-on-anything-but-world-population/>

conclude, “No contradiction needs to exist between respect for reproductive rights and strong advocacy for smaller families and for mass adoption of effective contraceptive methods.”<sup>14</sup> While elevating the importance of women’s reproductive rights was a valuable outcome of the Cairo conference, the reality is that political commitment and funding for family planning plummeted over the following decade. Cleland *et al.* attribute this decline to removing family planning from development agenda. Relegated to a mere health issue, progress slowed or stalled in many countries.<sup>15</sup>

Fertility decline is not a product of economic development as often claimed, it is an essential prerequisite. Figure 2 shows that national income levels have not influenced the rate of fertility decline (Chart A), but national fertility levels profoundly affect the likelihood of economic betterment (Chart B).



*Figure 2. Exploring the direction of causation relating enrichment to fertility decline: (A) the rate of fertility decline as a function of level of income, and (B) rate of economic development as a function of level of fertility. Data points represent each country in each five-year period between 1960 and 2010. All countries and time periods with available data are included. Box plots span 25 percentile, median and 75 percentile and whiskers extend to the 10<sup>th</sup> and 90<sup>th</sup> percentile. GDP per capita (inflation-adjusted 2005\$US) are from the World Bank economic database, and fertility data from UNDESA (2015).*

No country has moved from least-developed to middle income status without first reducing its birth rate through family planning provision and promotion. The economic

<sup>14</sup> Cleland, J., Bernstein, S., Ezeh, A., Faundes, A., Glasier, A. and Innis, J., 2006. Family planning: the unfinished agenda. *Lancet* 2006; 368: 1810–27. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(06\)69480-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(06)69480-4)

<sup>15</sup> Bongaarts, J., 2008. Fertility transitions in developing countries: progress or stagnation? *Stud. Fam. Plan.* 39 (2), 105–110. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1728-4465.2008.00157.x>

burden of population growth rates above 2% makes it almost impossible for a country to get ahead, regardless of its resource base. Once that resource base is crowded, environmental strains such as deforestation, soil degradation, water depletion and pollution undermine traditional livelihoods generating internal migrations and ethnic tensions. We see these dynamics repeated from the Solomon Islands to Syria, Sudan and the Sahel.

Surveys in developing countries show that most women want to limit childbearing. The Guttmacher Institute estimates that, as of 2019, of the 1.64 billion women of reproductive age (15–49 years old) who live in LMICs, 923 million wanted to avoid a pregnancy. Of these women, 705 million had access to and were using modern contraceptives and an estimated 218 million women (24%) had an unmet need for modern contraception.<sup>16</sup>

In 2019, of an estimated 228 million pregnancies in LMICs, 111 million (49%) were unintended (not wanted or occurring too soon), 69 million were aborted and there were 30 million unplanned births. About three quarters (77%) of the unintended pregnancies occurred among women who for various reasons were not using effective modern contraception. If women's contraceptive needs were fully met in LMICs, Guttmacher Institute estimated each year there would be:

- A 62% decline in safe abortions, from 33 million to 13 million;
- A 72% decline in unsafe abortions, from 35 million to 10 million;
- A 74% decline in the number of women needing medical care for complications from unsafe abortion, from 20 million to five million;
- A 78% decline in maternal deaths due to unsafe abortion, from 23,000 to 5000;
- A 70% decline in unplanned births from 30 million to 9 million;
- A 46% decline in the cost of abortion-related care from USD 2.8 billion to USD 1.5 billion.

The Guttmacher Institute concludes, “Every \$1 spent on contraceptive services beyond the current level would reduce the cost of pregnancy-related and newborn care by \$3.”

The very same dollar, by contributing to slowing population growth, also improves child nutrition and education outcomes, reduces unemployment, relieves environmental stresses, avoids greenhouse gases, improves social cohesion and consequently lessens the risk of violent conflicts.

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<sup>16</sup> Sully, E.A., Biddlecom, A., Darroch, J.E., Riley, T., Ashford, L.S., Lince-Deroche, N., Firestein, L., Murro, R., 2020. *Adding It Up: Investing in Sexual and Reproductive Health 2019*. Guttmacher Institute: New York, NY, USA, 2020. <https://www.guttmacher.org/report/adding-it-up-investing-in-sexual-reproductive-health-2019>

## **Responses to the inquiry's terms of reference**

1. *the role of Australia's international development program in building resilience in fragile states, including by strengthening community and civic participation, governance, security reform and human capital:*

Rapid population growth severely impedes a country's development of human capital, adequate infrastructure and human services for economic flourishing, and civic participation.

Countries where poverty is deepening tend to be politically unstable. This is particularly true where distinct ethnic groups compete for resources. Where birth rates and population growth have been reduced, social cohesion and trust in government has improved as people begin to enjoy the benefits of improving services, infrastructure and employment options.

2. *the strategic use of Australia's international development program to prevent conflict in the Indo-Pacific:*

The Solomon Islands conflict of 1998 – 2003 exemplifies tensions generated by outmigration from overcrowded areas to more developed areas, which could not absorb them without lowering opportunities for the people already there. The Australia-led Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) helped restore order, but the peace remains fragile as ongoing population growth creates a strong head-wind against economic development.

Similarly, inter-group violence in PNG remains at a simmer, with little prospect of receding toward genuine stability as long as the country fails to generate the employment growth needed by its growing population. The PNG government is acutely concerned about population growth and would welcome Australia's help in strengthening family planning efforts.

Timor Leste's post-independence development would have been much more successful if not for their post-war baby boom. Its population in 2025 is around 66% greater than at independence in 2002. For its first decade, it endured population growth rates greater than 2% per year, rates at which only petro-states have been able to reduce poverty. Now the growth rate has slowed but a big cohort of young adults born in the post-independence period have entered the labour market with low employment prospects. While fertility has been falling steadily since around 2008, the fall has slowed more recently.

Smaller island states have escaped tensions by out-migration and heavy dependence on remittances from their diaspora. Being more ethnically homogeneous also helps them maintain peace. However, the capacity and willingness of destination countries to keep absorbing their overflow can't be guaranteed into the future.



3. *options for effective support through Australia's aid program in pre-conflict and/or post-conflict zones:*

Both pre- and post-conflict zones have high unmet needs for reproductive health service, including family planning.

Regions at risk of conflict can be identified by their high population growth and youthful age structure including large cohorts of underemployed young adults. Ethnic diversity adds volatility to this mix, especially where one ethnic group is migrating into another's customary territory.

Support for refugee camps and reconstruction efforts should prioritise reproductive health and family planning services. Purely from a women's health perspective, it is not a good time to get pregnant when homeless and dependent on food aid. Aid programs should be conscious of the natural tendency for a baby boom after conflict. This tendency should be nipped in the bud through good outreach and promotion of family planning.

4. *the impact of international development in the maintenance of peace and prevention of conflict, including for early identification and mitigation of conflict:*

The best mitigation of conflict is improving economic circumstances. Economic improvement has proven to be impossible to sustain in the presence of rapid population growth (see Figure 2). Decelerating population growth has never failed to stimulate economic betterment, social cohesion and trust in governance systems.

Demographic data systems are also vital for planning and implementing improved services, including health, education, power, transport, water and sewage. The dismantling of USAID has ended the program of Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) which assisted most low-income countries to collect vital data on households, demographics and health status. Australia should step into this void with extra funding to assist UN agencies to continue these vital data collection efforts.

5. *any related matters:*

The demise of USAID under the Trump administration profoundly changes the landscape for international development assistance.

While the need is immense for other developed countries to step up to fill the gap, more often they have been reducing aid budgets. Sweden and the UK, in particular, have justified aid cuts as due to the cost of catering for foreign asylum seekers at home. This risks a vicious cycle, where the withdrawal of aid interventions leads to greater flows of asylum seekers.

As a product of right-wing populist government, USAID's abolition goes hand in hand with right-wing nationalist attitudes toward self-interest above foreign aid, as well as



pronatalism overriding women's reproductive rights. The Trump administration has been described as prosecuting a "war on pregnant women".<sup>17</sup> Other countries, such as Poland, Türkiye and Iran, have moved to reduce women's access to fertility control to boost birth rates. Even China is increasing the cost of contraceptives.<sup>18</sup> These are backwards steps for gender equity and risk placing more children into poverty.

The rising power of populist right-leaning parties is clearly linked to voter frustration with high immigration rates. Unless immigration can be moderated at home, the rise of right-wing populism seems inevitable and the political license for foreign aid is likely to dwindle. Within those smaller programs, the donor's trade interests are prioritised and gender equity, reproductive rights and family planning will be casualties.

In this climate, Australia can't afford to regard our aid interventions as "niche", focusing on our back yard and relying on bigger economies to deal with Africa and the Middle East. We also must reprioritise those interventions most likely to generate lasting economic and ecological stability.

In the remaining high-fertility countries, there can be no more powerful interventions than those aimed at accelerating fertility decline. These remarkably inexpensive interventions invariably repay more than their cost directly through avoided medical services for mothers and infants, then multiply their value manyfold through economic stimulus, steadily improving infrastructure and human capital, slowing and eventually reversing the deterioration of environmental assets, and importantly, greater stability with lower risks of violent conflict.

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December 2025

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<sup>17</sup> Rushton, G., 2025. *America's war on pregnant women*. ABC Long Read, 6 December 2025. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-12-07/pregnancy-criminalisation-abortion-fetal-personhood-miscarriage/106097546>

<sup>18</sup> Zhao, I., 2025. *Condoms and contraceptives to become more expensive in China as Beijing accelerates push to lift birth rate*. ABC News, 4 December 2025. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-12-04/china-add-tax-on-condoms-and-contraceptives-to-boost-birth-rate/106097254>