

# A Statement On Population and Climate Change



**Friends of  
the Earth  
Sydney**

In recent months, calls for population control policies have come to the fore in discussions about how best to tackle climate change. **Friends of the Earth Sydney is troubled by the risks associated with calling for population control in the name of climate change.** Such demands can justify the undermining of women's reproductive rights and fuel racist migration and border control agendas.

**Already, we can see this playing out in federal politics.** One of the first actions of Prime Minister Gillard was to utilise the rhetoric of "sustainability" as a rationale for dumping Rudd's "Big Australia" policy.<sup>1</sup> This clever use of our environmental concerns has been labelled by many as classic "dog whistle politics"; Gillard has appealed to the left with the rhetoric of sustainability whilst subtly placating the right with compromises of reduced immigration and suggestions of tougher border control policies. Whilst the "Big Australia" policy was far from perfect, we cannot let politicians and other power holders co-opt our concerns about sustainability and climate change to push through population policies that are racist and sexist.

**As a movement, we should reject population control policies, and instead fight for solutions to climate change that are not only effective, but also just for the global community.**

## Population control will not solve climate change

A compelling reason to rethink our calls for population control is the fact that population size, growth and movement is not the *cause* of climate change. Climate change is a complex global issue driven by over-consumption, unbridled economic growth and our dependence on fossil fuels, especially coal. Restricting the flow of people into Australia does not address any of these global root causes of climate change.

Right now, Australia is burning more coal, building more coal-fired power stations, and increasing its export capacity to export even more coal more than ever before. Australia's coal industry is the single biggest carbon emitter in Australia, not to mention the industries' impact on scarce water resources and its effects on the health of communities across Australia and internationally. Therefore, even the most draconian population control policies will not stop dangerous climate change because they won't stop the coal industry.

So, instead of focusing on controlling the movement of people, we should be targeting governments and corporations, to fight for change that addresses these root causes of climate change.

## We can't blame migrants for Australia's over-consumption

Many climate groups who call for a sustainable population rely on the fact that when migrants come to Australia they often adopt Australia's carbon-intensive lifestyles, which increases domestic emissions. We suggest that this is simplistic and dangerous argument. To begin with, by merely restricting the movement of people into Australia we do nothing to stop unsustainable levels of consumption by Australians that cause environmental damage.

But more importantly, we must recognise that our way of living in Australia, which is a rich so-called "first world" nation, has created the conditions where people want to escape poverty, labour exploitation and environmental problems in

poorer “third world” nations by migrating. Yet it is this very process of “first world” development that has caused the climate crisis. We cannot then turn our backs on the very people that we have exploited to build our carbon intensive lifestyles; we must recognise our carbon debt and act in global solidarity to stop the global problem of climate change.

As a huge emitter both historically and presently, Australia has an enormous ecological debt to pay. By reducing migration we’re penalising migrants for a problem that Australians have caused. To challenge over-consumption and social inequity, we must target the social structures that are at the root of the problem, not the individuals who are victimised by them.

Furthermore, often arguments for population control overlook the fact that Australia is a colonised nation. The urge to protect “our” food and water reserves, fails to recognise that we are colonisers. We must remember that we are part of a culture that has and continues to disrespect Indigenous peoples and their lands and waters. We cannot demand population control – or *any* action in the name of climate change– that does not provide space for traditional owners to make decisions about their lives, lands and waters.

Because of climate change there is even more imperative to confront over-consumption and share the world’s resources. What we need to talk about is how to share these resources equitably and sustainably.

### **Demands for population control are feeding racist border control agendas**

A side-effect of the focus on population, sometimes intentional sometimes accidental, is the use of the environmental concerns to push racist agendas. At times, right wing groups have used arguments about environmental issues to benefit anti-immigration agendas (such as in July 2009, when the Australia First Party announced that it would contest the federal election on an anti-immigration platform for the benefit for the environment and social cohesion).<sup>2</sup> Although such groups may pay lip service to arguments about sustainability, their aim is to persecute people from different cultural backgrounds. When we, as a movement, talk about limiting population growth, we feed these racist agendas.

### **Population control policies may open the door for sexist policies**

Blaming climate change on population growth

helps to make way for the re-emergence and intensification of top-down population policies, which are deeply disrespectful of women, particularly women of colour and their children.

Just one example of this is the PopOffsets project, launched by the UK-based Optimum Population Trust. The project enables predominantly white people in minority (rich) nations to continue to over-consume whilst absolving their climate conscience by paying an organisation to ensure predominantly non-white women from majority (poorer) nations access family planning centres and have fewer children.<sup>3</sup> This project effectively pushes the responsibility of solving climate change onto women in the majority world and makes women into an object of control - all in the name of climate change. As a movement, we cannot support such policies. The risks for justice are just too great.

### **A climate justice approach to population and climate change**

We can envision a world with a safe climate that does not invoke racist and potentially sexist calls for population control. Whilst the population size, growth and movement of any community undoubtedly impacts on the relationship between people and the environment, **population change does not necessarily mean climate change.**

In Australia, many communities are already feeling the pressure from the lack of affordable housing, scarce water reserves, and aging public transport and infrastructure. These are real issues, but we cannot blame migrants for these problems. Nor can we ignore the history of colonisation in this continent, and Australia’s ecological debt as a wealthy carbon-hungry nation. **Instead, we can help build a global climate justice movement to confront the root causes of environmental destruction and work together to share our resources equitably and collectively so that our world is safe for all people, no matter where they live.**

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[1]Bonny Symons-Brown, “Gillard Rejects Rudd’s ‘Big Australia’”, *SMH Online*, <<http://news.smh.com.au/breaking-news-national/gillard-rejects-rudds-big-australia-20100627-zbov.html>>

[2] Jensen, Erik 2009, 'Right-wing genie out of the bottle', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 July, p 5.

[3] <http://www.optimumpopulation.org/releases/opt.release3dec09.html>