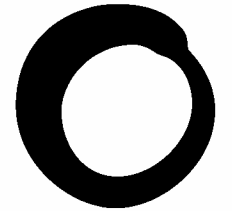


Briefing Note



**Friends of
the Earth**

Immigration, population and the environment

This briefing aims to answer some common questions about the relationship between immigration, population and the environment.

It answers the following questions:

1. Doesn't increasing population growth mean that there will be too many people for the Earth's resources? Why isn't Friends of the Earth tackling population growth?
2. Does Friends of the Earth agree that immigration to the UK causes environmental damage because it puts greater pressure on housing, roads, water, waste production and sewage systems?
3. Is the answer a 'balanced migration policy' where numbers in equal numbers out?
4. Will the current policies of governments like the UK create more refugees, including environmental refugees?

At the end is a list of websites that can provide further detailed information and research on the issues of immigration, migration and asylum seekers.

Friends of the Earth inspires solutions to environmental problems, which make life better for people.

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- the most extensive environmental network in the world, with almost one million supporters across five continents and over 60 national organisations worldwide**
- a unique network of campaigning local groups, working in over 200 communities throughout England, Wales and Northern Ireland**
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Friends of the Earth, 26-28 Underwood Street, London N1 7JQ

Tel: 020 7490 1555 Fax: 020 7490 0881 Email: info@foe.co.uk Website: www.foe.co.uk

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1. Doesn't increasing population growth mean that there will be too many people for the Earth's resources? Why isn't Friends of the Earth tackling population growth?

While population growth puts pressure on the world's natural resources, Friends of the Earth does not believe that it is the main cause of environmental degradation. The world's richer nations, including the UK, are putting by far the greatest pressure on the world's atmosphere, oceans and forests. The richest 20 per cent of people consume 86 per cent of the Earth's resources and tend to have the lowest birth rates.

Climate change is a clear example of this. G8 countries make up 13 per cent of the world's population yet they account for 45 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions – 65 per cent if historical emissions are taken into consideration.¹ The average UK citizen emits 2.59 tonnes carbon dioxide per year, about half that of the average American, but over one hundred times the average emissions of citizens of many African countries.² Climate change is being worsened by unsustainable use of resources like fossil fuels and the fuel-hungry ways in which we move food and other raw materials around the planet. Fast-growing economies such as India and China will simply replicate the damaging use of fossil fuels in industrialised countries unless urgent action is taken by the richest countries to take the lead on reducing carbon emissions. The critical issue is not population growth, but per-capita emissions.³

There is not much time left to tackle climate change. Scientists say that levels of carbon emissions must peak and then decline within the next 10-15 years if we are to limit the change in temperatures to an increase of no more than two degrees centigrade. A rise of more than two degrees could lead to devastating environmental damage and human suffering.⁴

Other environmental problems are also caused by over-consumption of resources:

- in most towns and cities, air pollution that exceeds safe standards and damages health is largely the result of too many vehicles on the roads;
- rainforest destruction is fuelled by illegal logging and mining for raw materials that make up everyday products;
- farming practices that spoil the environment are encouraged by inequitable trade policies that favour intensive farming by big corporations over small-scale family farming.

Even if the world's population stopped growing today it would not remove pressures on the environment. Humanity already outstrips the planet's capacity to sustain us by 20 per cent.⁵ Nor would capping population do anything to tackle the gross inequalities in resource use between rich and poor.

The same is true of the UK's population. Within the UK we have limited environmental resources which need to be carefully managed now and in the future. Environmental pressures on rivers, air quality, open space and urban areas are a result of over-consumption of resources, unsustainable travel patterns and failure to respect environmental limits. There are limits, for example, to the amount of waste we can expect the Earth to deal with, or the amount of pollution we can emit into the atmosphere without harming our health.

A reduced UK population could mean that we consume and pollute less, but demographic changes are very slow to take effect. Even if the UK population was to decline, these changes would take far longer to have an impact than the amount of time that is left to tackle climate change. Our resource use would have to significantly reduce at the same time to resolve pressures on environmental limits.

Friends of the Earth's priority, therefore, is campaigning to reduce per-person climate emissions and resource use in countries like the UK, in order to protect the communities most affected by environmental problems.

2. Does Friends of the Earth agree that immigration to the UK causes environmental damage because it puts greater pressure on housing, roads, water, waste production and sewage systems?

A broad and ill-defined category of 'immigrants' are routinely blamed in the press as well as by politicians for putting additional pressures on everything from the health service, public transport, housing and the environment to overcrowding in prison, as well as scare stories of crime and terrorism.⁶ As noted below, figures and projections used in debates on asylum and immigration are generally unreliable and inflammatory (see question 3).

More housing, more roads, more waste, more sewage and more demands on water do potentially damage the UK's environment. But Friends of the Earth believes that the biggest cause of these problems is current Government policy on housing, transport and waste. Government policies should promote sustainable development and the responsible use of resources, whatever the population of the UK.

- **Housing.** Friends of the Earth is committed to the proper provision of new housing to meet social needs and has major concerns about current government housing policy. Our concerns are not about the alleged pressure on the housing sector caused by immigration. Evidence suggests that, regardless of legal status or ethnic origin, new immigrants typically live in poor quality housing in deprived inner city neighbourhoods.⁷ Government housing policy⁸ is not currently driven by a desire to provide housing for immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers and will not provide for enough social housing in general. But we believe it will lead to major pressures on water use, local transport and so on, whatever the population size of the UK. This is because the policy is driven by the Treasury and is based on market demand and the dubious premise that building more houses will stabilise the housing market.⁹

This approach will release large areas of land in southern England for housing, with potentially serious implications for the environment, the economy and people's quality of life. It undermines the logic of planning all new development in a way that uses transport and social infrastructure more efficiently. In the rest of England existing regional inequalities, especially in northern and western regions, will be exacerbated. This will cause continued decline with people being denied opportunities for employment and sustainable livelihoods.¹⁰

- **Waste.** All people generate waste and dealing with this waste puts pressure on the environment. The cause is not the additional pressure caused by immigrants, a minority of the overall population, but the Government's failure to manage resources and limit waste. Measures are needed to reduce resource use and waste production then re-use, recycle and compost more of the waste that is left. Underlining the Government's waste strategy should be the recognition that the UK currently uses more than its fair share of the Earth's finite resources and that this generation must leave enough resources for future generations to meet their own needs.¹¹
- **Transport.** We live in a car dominated society, which for many people in the UK has brought greater mobility and independence. In the past 30 years traffic on our roads has more than doubled. The emissions from road transport are contributing to climate change, and are forecast to rise for years to come. Yet over half of Britain's poorest households don't have access to a car. Many of these households live in the areas with the most traffic, most accidents and worst pollution. These problems are not caused by population growth. They are caused as a result of successive governments failing to invest in decent, affordable public transport and failing to make the cost of motoring take account of its environmental and social impacts. There is a lack of provision for walking (a key transport mode for people from poorer households) and cycling. And land-use planning policies perpetuate our car-dominated society by putting the places people want to go, such as jobs, food shops and leisure facilities, in places where they are only accessible by car.

3. Is the answer a 'balanced migration policy' where numbers in equal numbers out?

Many of the figures used or put forward in the asylum and migration debate are inaccurate and inflammatory.¹² Numbers on migration to and from the UK are generally unreliable and often deliberately manipulated. For this reason, it is unhelpful to enter into a debate about numbers. The key issue is the need for the government to implement policies which respect environmental limits, whatever the population of the UK.

One common proposal is a migration policy that balances numbers coming into the country with numbers going out, supposedly to prevent further environmental stress. There are a number of problems with this argument.

- Maintaining a 'stable' population would do nothing in itself to address the UK's contribution to climate change or the country's unsustainable and inequitable use of resources.
- The argument makes assumptions about the environmental impact of people arriving and leaving the country. It is too simple to assume that people moving to the UK will consume the same amount and create the same amount of pollution as people leaving the UK; they may well consume and pollute less, especially if they are seeking asylum or on a lower income.
- Friends of the Earth does not accept that because average emissions or consumption per person are significantly lower in a developing country than in the UK, a person should stay there, regardless of the problems they may be facing. People have a right to move and have various reasons for doing so, which may include global imbalances of power and resource use, poverty, human rights abuses and environmental degradation.

4. Will the current policies of governments like the UK create more refugees, including 'environmental refugees'?

The demonisation of immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers by some sections of the UK press ignores the reasons why people leave their homes (see endnote 6). Some flee persecution, human rights abuses, conflict or political turmoil, severe environmental change or degradation. Others feel compelled to leave by poverty or their economic and social situation or because they believe they can make a better life for themselves and their families elsewhere. Persecution and conflict around the globe are fuelled by poverty and inequalities, both within and between countries. In addition to refugee flows this has also led to economic migrants leaving their countries to try to find new opportunities in other countries, often close to home but sometimes far away.

The Government recognises this problem. The UK Sustainable Development Strategy acknowledges that more effective responses to reduce risks of instability – and thereby prevent crises – are possible and that the international community needs to take more responsibility for its own actions. It says: "We have created a relatively good quality of life in this country for most of us but we now realise that this may have been at the expense of communities elsewhere in the world."¹³

Yet the Government and UK companies continue to contribute directly or indirectly to the causes of flight.

- Projects such as large dams, oil and gas pipelines supported by the UK Government or in which UK companies are involved have often led to population displacement, sometimes exacerbating or generating conflict and human rights abuses. According to the World Commission on Dams 40-80 million people have been forcibly evicted from their homes to make way for the world's 48,000 large dams, with many receiving no or inadequate compensation.¹⁴ The Ilisu Dam project in Turkey would displace up to 78,000 people, mainly Kurds. The project was once supported by UK company Balfour Beatty and is now attracting the interest of Siemens, a company listed on the UK stock exchange.
- Current trade rules hurt small farmers and fisherfolk worldwide, especially in developing

countries, and prevent people's access to and use of the natural resources on which they depend.¹⁵ This creates poverty, which in turn is a contributory factor in many people's decisions to leave their homes and countries.¹⁶ Despite this, the UK government continues to negotiate for further trade liberalisation through the World Trade Organisation.

- At the same time as contributing to humanitarian efforts to alleviate some of the worst consequences of conflicts, including massive refugee flows, the Government provides millions of pounds in support to governments with appalling human rights records, including those involved in conflict.¹⁷ The UK Government is the second largest arms exporter in the world. Through arms sales, the transfer of military technology and other military and security products as well as poorly implemented export control legislation, the UK bolsters oppressive regimes responsible for human rights violations. For example, long term conflict and serious human rights abuses in Afghanistan and Iraq, countries where the UK is currently militarily involved, have led to the creation of nearly 2.5 million refugees.¹⁸ According to Amnesty International and Oxfam, the Government has sold arms or military equipment to developing countries, such as Tanzania, in contravention of its own policy on sustainable development.¹⁹
- Many armed conflicts lead to significant environmental destruction or damage, sometimes causing further population flows. Conflicts such as the current conflict in Iraq and the 1990 invasion of Kuwait, in which the UK Government has been heavily involved, have not only led to death or displacement of hundreds of thousands of unarmed civilians, but also significant environmental damage.²⁰

As a party to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, the UK is under a legal obligation to protect refugees and not forcibly to return them to their country of origin where they are deemed to be at risk from serious human rights abuse. Every person has the right to seek protection and to have the merits of their case fairly considered. Asylum seekers are granted protection under the convention while the formal determination of their status is considered. The UK government has been condemned for non-respect of the Refugee Convention by the UNHCR as well as refugee and human rights organizations, for example for introducing measures which prevent those seeking asylum from being able to gain entry, in contravention of the Convention.²¹

'Environmental refugees'²²

Millions of people are already displaced by environmental factors, sometimes for long periods of time or even permanently. The factors leading or contributing to somebody's flight as an 'environmental refugee' include landlessness, deforestation, desertification, soil erosion, water deficits and droughts, agricultural stress and the accumulated effects of land abuse, natural disasters and severe weather. Environmental reasons for leaving home are often inextricably linked to economic factors or poor governance while environmental flight may be accompanied by more traditional and recognised forms of persecution.²³ At present, the vast majority of 'environmental refugees' move internally (or are 'displaced') within the borders of their own country, a plight which is often ignored by their own governments as well as by those internationally who have contributed to the environmental change which led to the flight.

There are no accurate figures on how many people are displaced permanently or on a long term basis by significant or permanent environmental change. The International Red Cross estimates the number at around 25 million people throughout the world.²⁴ As the effects of climate change take hold, such as rising sea waters and extreme weather events, it is anticipated that the numbers affected will increase. In October 2005, the Institute for Environment and Human Security at the United Nations University in Bonn reported that environmental factors attributable to climate change will create up to 25 million new 'environmental refugees' over the next five years. By 2050, they estimated, there could be some 150 million.²⁵

While there is some controversy over the estimated scale of displacement,²⁶ there is consensus that the majority of those affected are likely to be poor, without power and in developing countries while climate change is fuelled predominantly by the unsustainable life-styles of people in developed countries. Developed countries therefore have a moral obligation to provide a humanitarian

response to the plight of refugees who flee as a result of climate impacts. Developed countries must also take immediate action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.²⁷

Further information

www.unhcr.org Tel. 00 41 22 739 8111 Website of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Contains information and statistics on refugee populations and flows worldwide, including the UK, as well as the international law that protects refugees and asylum seekers.

www.refugeecouncil.org.uk Tel. 020 7346 1214 (campaigns line) The largest organisation in the UK working with asylum seekers and refugees. Website includes statistics, news, research and policy papers and briefings. Aims to raise awareness of the links between the different aspects of UK policy that impact on refugees' countries of origin and how they impact on flows of asylum seekers to the UK.

www.liberty-human-rights.org.uk Tel. 020 7403 3888 A UK human rights and civil liberties organisation. Website includes information on the rights of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers as well as on human rights in the UK as well as news, briefings and policy documents.

www.amnesty.org Tel. 020 7413 5500 An international human rights group and movement campaigning for the respect and protection of human rights world wide. Website includes up to date information on most countries in the world, including the UK, as well as information on the rights of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

www.thecornerhouse.org.uk A UK research and advocacy group focusing on human rights, the environment and development. Aims to support democratic and community movements for environmental and social justice. Website includes policy and research papers on range of human rights, environmental and development issues, including refugees and corporate accountability.

www.oxfam.org.uk Tel. 0870 333 2700 An independent charity which works internationally as part of a world-wide movement to build a just and safer world and to overcome poverty and suffering. Website includes information on refugees in the UK and information on rights, environmental and development issues including conflict, trade, climate change and natural disasters.

Notes

¹ Friends of the Earth International (2005) "Nature: Poor people's wealth: The importance of natural resources in poverty eradication" p.42. www.foei.org

² Gregg Marland, Tom Boden, and Bob Andres (2002) "National Fossil-Fuel CO2 Emissions". Carbon Dioxide Information Analysis Centre <http://cdiac.esd.ornl.gov/trends/emis/top2000.tot>

³ Secretary of State for International Development, Hilary Benn, said in a speech on 23 February: "People increasingly point the finger at the rapidly industrialising economies of China and India. But although China does emit around 14 per cent of the world's greenhouse gas emissions, second only to the United States, per person it produces 8 times less than the US." <http://www.dfid.gov.uk/news/files/Speeches/wp2006-speeches/beyond-aid230206.asp>

⁴ European Council (2005) Presidency Conclusions, 22 and 23 March 2005 http://ue.eu.int/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/ec/84335.pdf; and Rt Hon Margaret Beckett MP "Strengthening the trans-atlantic partnership on climate change: good business?" Speech to Columbia University, New York, 3 May 2004. <http://www.defra.gov.uk/corporate/ministers/speeches/mb040503.htm>

⁵ WWF (2004) "2004 Living Planet Report".

⁶ Article 19 (2003) "What's the story? Results from research into media coverage of refugees and asylum seekers in the UK", www.article19.org; Sarah Sexton, Nicholas Hildyard, Larry Lohmann (2005) "We're a Small Island: The Greening of Intolerance", www.thecornerhouse.org.uk; and Jeff Crisp (2003) "A new asylum paradigm? Globalization, migration and the uncertain future of the international refugee regime". Working Paper No. 100, UNHCR Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit, www.unhcr.org. UK laws relating to immigration and asylum have been repeatedly amended over the last few years, with a focus on deterrence, control and restrictions. These policies and the government's record on immigration have been the subject of heated debate in the media. The term 'immigration' is often used, inaccurately and pejoratively, to cover a wide grouping of people: economic migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. Major non-governmental human rights, humanitarian and refugee organizations such as Liberty, Article 19, Oxfam and the Refugee Council, have

expressed concern at the media's reporting of these issues and at the lack of political leadership from government to counter the rising tide of hysteria and racism it has generated. Media portrayal is increasingly of angry young men, danger, crisis, terrorists, scroungers, "bogus asylum seekers", "illegal refugees", "would be illegal immigrants" and "asylum cheats". Such terms are not only pejorative but inaccurate and meaningless. Every one has the right to seek asylum under international law and should be considered as in genuine need of protection until proved otherwise.

⁷ David Robinson and Kesia Reeve (2006) "Neighbourhood experiences of new immigration: Reflections from the evidence base". Report by the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University. Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

⁸ Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (2005) "Consultation paper on new planning policy statement 3 (PPS3): Housing". Consultation ends 27 February 2006.

⁹ Friends of the Earth (2004) "Housing: Building a sustainable future". Evidence given by Friends of the Earth to the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee on the issue of housing in the wake of the Barker Review.

¹⁰ Friends of the Earth (2005) "Implementing the Barker Report: Or how to wreck the environment and ignore the homeless (oh and last one out in the North, turn out the lights...)".

¹¹ Community Composting Network, Community Recycling Network UK, Green Alliance, FOE, FRN, Waste Watch and Women's Environment Network (2005) "From waste to resource: a new strategy for 2005: a statement of policy recommendations for the Waste Strategy 2000 review".

¹² Many newspapers have reported figures as fact without giving a clear indication of source, and estimates are often reported as fact. Few of those who report figures try to give a sense of proportion. In reality most of those who leave their homes as political refugees or 'environmental refugees' or in search of greater economic security remain in their regions of origin. The burden of hosting large numbers of refugees falls mainly on poorer countries such as Tanzania and Guinea. Refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants make up only a minority of the UK's population. The figures are further confused by inaccurate use of the terms immigration, refugees and asylum seekers. The Refugee Council provides easy access to the latest Home Office figures and the UNHCR website to global figures. See 'Further Information'.

¹³ HMG (2005) "Securing the Future: Delivering UK sustainable development strategy" page 139. HMSO.

¹⁴ World Commission on Dams (2000) "Dams and development", final report.

¹⁵ Friends of the Earth International (2005) "The Tyranny of Free Trade: Wasted natural wealth and lost livelihoods".

¹⁶ Ilisu Dam Campaign Refugee Project, The Cornerhouse and Peace in Kurdistan (2003) "Listen to the Refugee's Story: How UK Foreign Investment creates refugees and asylum seeker".

¹⁷ For example, the DFID country assistance plan for Rwanda 2003-2006 shows that in this period the UK government was committed to giving the government of Rwanda £47 million pounds in aid at the same time as serious concerns were being raised about human rights abuses committed by members of the Rwandese armed forces or its proxy militias operating in the conflict in neighbouring DRC. This was despite official denials to the contrary and human rights committed in Rwanda. Amnesty International (2003) "DRC: 'Our brothers who kill us': economic exploitation and human rights abuses in the east" (AI Index: AFR 62/010/2003, 1 April 2003); Amnesty International (2004) "Rwanda: Deeper into the abyss – waging war on civil society" (AI Index: AFR 47/013/2004, 6 July 2004).

¹⁸ UNHCR (2005) "2004 Global Refugee Trends." 17 June 2005, page 3. www.unhcr.org/statistics

¹⁹ Amnesty International, "The G8: global arms exporters. Failing to prevent irresponsible arms transfers", (AI Index: POL 30/007/2005, 22 June 2005)

²⁰ Friends of the Earth (2003) "War in Iraq: Why Friends of the Earth is opposed". Media briefing, 13 February 2003.

²¹ UNHCR (2006) "Country Operations plan, Overview. Country: United Kingdom. Planning Year: 2006. www.unhcr.org; and Jeff Crisp (2003) "A new asylum paradigm? Globalization, migration and the uncertain future of the international refugee regime". *New issues in refugee research* working paper no. 100, UNHCR Evaluation and Policy Analysis unit. Concerns expressed in the UNHCR Country Operations Plan include the removal of support from individuals with families whose asylum claim has not been successful, the reduction in the legal aid budget for immigration and asylum work, the amalgamation of the two tier adjudication process and the creation of a criminal offence for a person not to possess without a 'reasonable excuse' a valid travel document, and the classification of certain 'serious' crimes which could be used to refoule (forcibly return) refugees.

²² The current definition of a refugee as defined in the 1951 UN Refugee Convention refers solely to political refugees i.e. those fleeing a well-founded fear of persecution. There is an academic and political debate on whether the definition of a refugee should be expanded to include 'environmental refugees'. Some

campaigners argue that there is an urgent need to review the convention and provide international recognition and protection to the millions of people, largely from developing countries, which are being forced, often permanently to leave their homes. Others argue that the term 'environmental refugee', which is widely used although it has no meaning in law, allows states to derogate from their obligations towards refugees, and any amendment of international refugee law in the present climate would be certain to lessen rather than increase the protection granted under the current Convention. Richard Black (2001) "Environmental refugees: Myth or reality?" *New issues in refugee Research* working paper no. 34, UNHCR Evaluation and Policy Analysis unit.

²³ Stephen Castles (2002) "Environmental change and forced migration, making sense of the debate". *New issues in refugee research* working paper no. 70, UNHCR Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit.

²⁴ International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (2001) "World Disasters Report 2001".

²⁵ The Guardian (2005) "50m environmental refugees by end of decade UN warns", 12 October 2005; Friends of the Earth Australia: Climate Justice Campaign, June 2005.

²⁶ Some have argued that such large figures are unsupported by evidence, and are over dramatic perhaps as an attempt to prompt action to protect the lives and livelihoods of millions of people by raising the profile of environmental flight: Richard Black (2001) "Environmental refugees: Myth or reality?" *New issues in refugee research* working paper no. 34 UNHCR Evaluation and Policy Analysis unit. Others have argued that the use of large, potentially questionable figures, feeds into perceptions of refugees as a security threat: Norman Myers (2005) "Environmental refugees: An emergent security issue": paper given at the 13th OSCE Economic Forum, Prague, 23-27 May 2005.

²⁷ Stephen Castles (2002) "Environmental change and forced migration, making sense of the debate". *New issues in refugee research* working paper no. 70, UNHCR Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit.