

The Long Term

This sheet explores some of the major long-term issues affecting the world and Australia. It also considers some approaches to addressing them.

Global issues

In 2000, the United Nations issued a Millennium Declaration and set down eight Millennium Development Goals, agreed to by all the world's countries and major institutions.

The Millennium Declaration included a commitment to ensuring that globalisation becomes a positive force for all the world's people. It acknowledged that currently the benefits of globalisation are very unevenly shared, as its costs are unevenly distributed. It also recognised that developing countries face special difficulties. The Declaration affirmed the values of freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect for nature and shared responsibility. It also addressed the following issues of global importance: peace, security and disarmament; development and poverty eradication; protecting the environment; human rights, democracy and good governance; protecting the vulnerable; meeting the special needs of Africa; and strengthening the United Nations.

Global poverty

Through the Millennium Declaration, the United Nations resolved to "spare no effort to free our fellow men, women and children from the abject and dehumanizing conditions of extreme poverty, to which more than a billion of them are currently subjected."

The eight Millennium Development Goals (MDG) represent an unprecedented international effort to improve the living conditions of the world's poor. The MDG set the following targets to be met by 2015:

- *Eradicate extreme hunger and poverty* – Reduce by half the number of people living on less than \$1 per day, achieve productive employment for all and reduce by half the number of people who suffer from hunger;

- *Achieve universal primary education* – Ensure that all boys and girls complete a full course of primary schooling;
- *Promote gender equality and empower women* – Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education;
- *Reduce child mortality* – Reduce by two thirds the mortality rate of children under five;
- *Improve maternal health* – Reduce by three quarters the maternal mortality rate and achieve universal access to reproductive health;
- *Combat HIV/AIDS and other diseases* – Halt and begin to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS, malaria and other major diseases;
- *Ensure environmental sustainability* – Integrate the principle of sustainable development into all countries' policies and programs, significantly reduce biodiversity loss, reduce by half the number of people without safe drinking water and basic sanitation, and significantly improve the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers (by 2020); and
- *Develop a global partnership for development* – Develop further an open trading system; address the special needs of the least developed countries; address the special needs of landlocked developing countries; deal comprehensively with the debt problems of developing countries; develop productive work for youth; provide affordable access to essential medical drugs in developing countries; and make available the benefits of new technologies in developing countries.

These goals are very ambitious, and many will not be met. However, because goals have been set and there is regular monitoring of progress towards their achievement, the international community has been put on notice. Even where there is failure, much will be learnt about the measures needed to meet goals of this kind in the future.

Global environment problems

Over the past 50 years, humans have changed ecosystems more rapidly and extensively than ever before, largely to meet rapidly growing demands for food, fresh water, timber, fibre and fuel. Human impacts on the natural environment have brought about numerous global environmental problems such as climate change, substantial biodiversity loss, resource depletion, atmospheric and water pollution, land pollution and degradation, and overpopulation. Human actions have also affected the great biogeochemical cycles of the planet (that is, the way that chemical elements cycle through the Earth's crust, oceans and atmosphere).

Over-exploitation of natural resources – through activities such as clear felling (logging), mining, over-fishing and overgrazing of cattle – destroy the habitats of other species and cause endangerment or extinction of plants and animals. Human waste disposal practices contaminate surface water, groundwater, soil and air, and produce greenhouse emissions which contribute to global climate change. These effects, together with the effects of massive global population growth and urbanisation, disrupt natural ecosystems. Such disruption not only undermines future ecological stability, but also undermines ecosystem services – that is, the benefits that ecosystems provide for humankind, such as the provision of food, water and fibre, the decomposition of wastes, the control of disease and the maintenance of nutrient cycles for crop pollination.

Several studies have catalogued and set targets in relation to global environmental threats. The International Geosphere-Biosphere Program (IGBP) is studying how human actions are affecting land, oceans, atmosphere and biogeochemical cycles. In its 2004 report, *Global Change and the Earth System*, the IGBP noted that “global change is more than climate change. It is real, it is happening now and in many ways it is accelerating.”

The *Millennium Ecosystem Assessment* report, released in 2005, examined the state of global ecosystems and ecosystem services. It examined 24 ecosystems and found that 15 of them were being degraded or used unsustainably. The report found that human-caused changes are having an escalating impact on biodiversity and increasing the risk of abrupt and irreversible damage to ecosystem. It concluded that the greatest human burdens related to these changes are being carried by the poor.

The 2010 edition of *Global Biodiversity Outlook* highlighted constant – and in some cases, intensifying – biodiversity losses globally. It indicated that habitat loss, unsustainable use and overexploitation of resources, climate change, invasive alien species and pollution continue to affect most countries in alarming proportions, affecting the livelihoods and food security of hundreds of millions of people.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is another major international reporting system. (See the Australian Collaboration fact and issue sheets for further discussion of the IPCC's work.) Under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Kyoto Protocol, of which Australia is now a signatory, each participating country has been given a target for the reduction of greenhouse gases. Although many countries have found existing climate change targets difficult to meet, there is wide consensus in the scientific community that more challenging targets need be set in order to deal adequately with the problems of climate change.

Issues facing Australia

Currently, Australia has no domestic goals or medium-term targets comparable to the UN Millennium Development Goals. Such goals and targets will be indispensable, however, in tackling the following long-term issues which demand sustained attention in Australia:

- **Environmental problems.** Measures are needed, for example, to prevent water and land degradation and loss of biodiversity, all of which have social and economic as well as environmental impacts.
- **Health care.** Preventative health measures are needed to promote well-being and reduce the cost of medical care for the whole population, especially to support the health, development and well-being of children and young people and of other population groups, such as people with mental illness.
- **Poverty and inequality.** Concerted efforts are needed to eliminate poverty and reduce socio-economic disadvantage.
- **Education.** The education system should significantly increase the skills and capacities of the whole population in order to give more people the opportunity to find meaningful work and to increase the economic prosperity of the nation.

- **The plight of Indigenous people.** Priorities include closing the gap in life expectancy and health outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people; addressing Indigenous disadvantage in housing and education; dealing with substance dependence, violence and crime in Indigenous communities; and recognising Indigenous rights, including native title.
- **Australia's future relationships to Asia and its region.** This requires among other things better and more comprehensive teaching of Asian Studies and Asian languages.
- **Adequate investment in infrastructure.** Building Australia's economic capacity will strengthen productivity and promote sustainable economic growth and better living standards.
- **A genuine commitment to the solution of global social and environmental problems.** Australia needs to play its full proportionate part in global action. As one of the world's developed countries, Australia's needs, for example, to be active in bringing about an effective response to climate change.

Identifying and debating the long-term issues

Ideally, our governments and elected representatives would take the initiative to enter into a dialogue with the Australian people about the long-term issues facing the country and the approaches that might be needed to respond to them. Individual governments do not, however, do this; their focus is typically adversarial, short-term and significantly concerned with electoral advantage.

A national conversation is needed that engages the media, parliament, universities, business communities, non-government sectors and Australian citizens on a continuing basis, leading eventually to purposeful action. While there are many ways in which this conversation can be carried on, it is unlikely that it will be sustained and continue to attract the attention of the media unless it is drawn into the heart of the political system. The parliament, therefore, has a key role to play. There is scope to use parliamentary committees, especially Senate committees, to explore and debate long-term issues across party lines and thereby to

give weight to these discussions, to better inform the electorate and to prepare it for changes that may be needed in response to emerging contingencies.

This is standard practice in many countries. The Finnish Parliament has, for example, a Standing Committee for the Future with a formal mandate, among its other roles, to review the government's long-term plans. The German Parliament (Bundestag) has Study Commissions, made up of equal numbers of parliamentarians and outside experts. They investigate matters of significance to the German nation and publish their findings widely. To achieve the same in Australia, various barriers must be overcome including the absence of standing committees with long-term mandates, parliamentary funding being controlled by the Treasurer, inadequate resources for inquiries, lack of opportunity to involve outside experts and inadequate arrangements for the propagation of findings. However, these barriers are not insurmountable.

Improving Australia's capacity to deal with long-term problems

Once some broad agreement has been reached concerning the major long-term issues and their significance to the nation, the focus needs to shift to mechanisms for action and implementation. One key requirement is collaboration between federal, state and local government.

In Australia's federal system of government, significant powers and responsibilities rest with the states. Effective long-term strategic plans therefore require collaboration between the Australian government and the states and territories. Ministerial councils are the principal vehicles for developing wide-ranging collaborative national policies; the peak ministerial council is the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) which was established in May 1992. COAG comprises the prime minister, premiers, territory chief ministers and the president of the Australian Local Government Association. Its role is to initiate, develop and monitor the implementation of policy reforms of national significance which require cooperative action by Australian governments.

COAG has achieved a number of successes including the establishment of an independent statutory body, the National Competition Council. This intergovernmental

agreement on the National Competition Policy has contributed significantly to Australia's economic performance.

The National Competition Policy was followed by the National Reform Agenda which helps governments to take a long-term perspective and work together on issues such as health-care, housing, Indigenous reform and disability.

The agreement and joint efforts of Commonwealth, state and territory governments are greatly needed in the face of major challenges such as those posed by Australia's ageing population and the increasing competitiveness of the global economy. Much more could be done through collaborative policies and the establishment of new councils to address other long-term issues facing Australia. Climate change, for instance, could very profitably be tackled this way.

Actions for the longer term

In sum, to better prepare for the longer term, Australia needs to:

- Develop a wide ranging national conversation about longer term issues, trends and contingencies
- Determine priority areas for urgent action today
- Find ways of setting multi-partisan medium-term targets for their solution
- Convince political parties of the great benefits of parliamentary inquiries as vehicles for non-partisan investigation of longer term problems, the value of strengthening their capacities and the benefits of including outside experts (as in other countries)
- Strengthen the role of all collaborative mechanisms for tackling long-term problems, especially the role of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG)
- Make more transparent the long-term work of central government agencies (as has been done in the UK)

Useful sources

Australia 21 website. Retrieved 02 August 2013 from www.australia21.org.au

Australia 21 is a non-profit body devoted to longer-term research. See especially its current research projects.

Council of Australian Governments (COAG) website. Retrieved 02 August 2013 from www.coag.gov.au
This site explains the role and work of COAG.

International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme (IGPB) website. Retrieved 02 August 2013 from <http://www.igbp.net/>
This site describes the work of the IGPB, a research programme that studies the phenomenon of Global Change.

Marsh I., & Yencken D., 2004, *Into the Future: The neglect of the long term in Australian politics*, Australian Collaboration and Black Inc., Melbourne.

This book discusses recent changes in political structures, the proliferation of interest groups, attitudes to politicians and, in the light of these changes, means of strengthening long-term capabilities in the parliament and government.

Millennium Ecosystem Assessment website. Retrieved 02 August 2013 from <http://www.maweb.org/en/index.aspx>
This site provides access to the reports of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, an international synthesis by over a thousand of the world's leading biological scientists that analyses the state of the Earth's ecosystems and provides summaries and guidelines for decision-makers.

Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity (2010). *Global Biodiversity Outlook 3*. Montréal. Retrieved 02 August 2013 from <http://gbo3.cbd.int>

This reports summarises the latest data on status and trends of biodiversity and draws conclusions for the future strategy of the Convention on Biological Diversity.

United Nations Development Programme. *Millennium Development Goals* website. Retrieved 02 August 2013 from <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/mdgoverview/>

This site lists the UN goals and provides background information, fact sheets on progress and country-by-country reports.

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