Although migration policy-making remains mostly driven by short-term economic objectives and human rights frameworks (for example, for the admission of family migrants and asylum seekers), demographic arguments are gaining grounds in migration debates in some of the major immigrant-receiving countries where population growth has been (and is expected to be) largely driven by net migration. In the UK, the rise in immigration levels over the past decade has fuelled the idea that Britain's demography is not 'sustainable'. The impact of immigration on population growth has become a ubiquitous issue in public debates about growing housing needs, congested road networks and public transport, loss of countryside to eco-town developments, and public service provision. In the Australian election of 2010, both major parties fuelled a heated public debate about population growth, linked to widespread public anxieties about migration, asylum seekers, and the 'failure of multiculturalism'. The association between immigration and population growth has also featured strongly in US debates where vocal population control and environmentalist lobbies advocate immigration restrictions.

Without entering into the merits of the costs and benefits of immigration and population growth – a polarised debate that is typically informed by partial and highly contested evidence – it is legitimate to ask whether it is desirable to prioritise demographic objectives in migration policies. And, if so, is it feasible to use migration policies to achieve predetermined levels of net migration and thereby manage population growth? Taking the achievement of a particular population size as a goal of migration policies is beset with practical and ethical challenges, and there are numerous constraints on attaining a net migration target.

Demographic sustainability is a notoriously imprecise concept and demographic objectives (for example, a ‘desirable’ pace of population growth or a stable age structure) only make sense when their broader economic, social and environmental implications are taken into account. Competing priorities exist between these policy domains: for example, a migration policy aiming at maximising economic growth may look very different from one prioritising environmental sustainability. There is no evidence of an ‘optimum’ population size that maximizes general wellbeing. An obvious risk in setting such a number is that a complex series of issues affecting virtually every area of public policy are reduced to an arbitrary, round number.

The scope for managing migration as a policy instrument to meet ‘desirable’ demographic objectives raises ethical questions: not only in the functional logic underpinning the use of migration policies to achieve exclusively the receiving country’s national interests, but also in the risk of putting the blame on migrants for making population growth ‘unsustainable’. It also has numerous constraints. An important challenge for long-term demographic planning is that migration trends are subject to a high degree of uncertainty and are extremely difficult to predict. Governments have little or no control over significant parts of the flows that make up the net migration aggregate. In liberal democracies, emigration of nationals cannot be limited. For EU member states, the regime of free circulation of EEA citizens and non-EEA permanent residents, combined with considerable diversity in demographic trends across the EU, means that it would be difficult to adopt an immigration policy inspired by demographic objectives within a shared system of European migration governance – an argument that is often put forward by far-right anti-immigration lobbyists as a rationale for the UK to leave the EU. Internal mobility, which can have major implications for infrastructure and public service provision, is also difficult to manage in many states, though China, for example, has tried. Some categories of foreign immigrants can be controlled, but not without economic and social costs. Restricting highly skilled workers’ and students’ mobility might have detrimental implications for the competitiveness of the economy and for the country’s geopolitical influence. Limiting rights to family reunification and international protection can undermine compliance with international human rights frameworks and ultimately clash with some key liberal values.

One constructive element of introducing population growth into migration debates is that it marks a move away from a narrowly-framed migration debate focusing on short-term labour market objectives and considering migration in isolation, to a broader, long-term perspective that sees migration as a structural phenomenon and emphasises the need for an integrated policy framework considering migration in relation to other socio-demographic trends. However, given the difficulties both of formulating desirable demographic objectives and of achieving them by managing the net migration aggregate, it is reasonable to wonder whether the emerging rationale to reduce net migration in order to curb population growth is a genuine policy objective or another rhetorical argument to justify exclusionary immigration regulations.

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