

CHAPTER IV

POLICY OBJECTIVE

4.1 The population of a place or country is one of the major factors influencing the pace and direction of its long-term social, economic and political development. The report published by the Commission on Strategic Development in 2000 articulated the vision of Hong Kong, as follows: *“The implementation of Hong Kong’s long-term vision should also be guided by a number of overarching goals, including enhancing income and living standards for all members of society; ensuring that Hong Kong becomes the most attractive major city in Asia in which to live and work; developing a socially cohesive and stable society that recognises that the community’s diversity strengthens its cosmopolitan outlook; contributing to the modernisation of China while also supporting Hong Kong’s long-term development”*. The key objective of Hong Kong’s population policy is to secure and nurture a population which sustains our development as a knowledge-based economy.

4.2 We believe that the proposed population policy should strive to improve the overall quality of our population to meet our vision of Hong Kong as a knowledge-based economy and world-class city. In this context, we should also aim to redress population aging, foster the concept of active and healthy aging, promote social integration of new arrivals, and most of all, ensure the long-term sustainability of our economic growth. We believe the achievement of these goals will lead to a steady improvement of the standard of living of our people. Most Legislative Council Members, academics and opinion leaders whose views we have canvassed concur.

4.3 One overall conceptual question that has to be discussed before proceeding to policy formulation is whether there could be a notion of an optimum population for Hong Kong. According to the Population Research Expert Group under the CPU, the concept of an optimum population was much discussed in the 1950s and 1960s by demographers, economists, and experts in some other disciplines. All such attempts to determine the optimum population for the world or for

a particular place have essentially failed. This is because the world is in a continuous state of change and the population necessarily changes in response. To try to determine an optimum population, views or assumptions would have to be taken on a long list of parameters such as standard of living, development density and environmental quality, etc., all of which are by no means static. The result thus derived is bound to be arbitrary and subjective, and in all probability misleading.

4.4 We consider that any population policy for the HKSAR should move away from the idea that there is a simple optimum population figure. In an open economy like Hong Kong, while the HKSARG needs to formulate policies which can contribute to sustaining Hong Kong's economic development and quality of life, and influence population flows, market forces and individual choices are also at work which are largely beyond Government control. It would be more useful to ensure that there is sufficient flexibility built into the future policy formulation and implementation processes for Hong Kong to be able to respond quickly to changing demographic conditions and market situations.

4.5 Furthermore, because population policy cuts across a wide range of social and economic objectives, it would be illusory to treat the various complex issues involved simply by reference to an asserted optimum population target. Insofar as enhancement of economic development is concerned, it is more meaningful to pay regard to the quality of the population as against just the quantity. For the sake of redressing population aging, the emphasis should be on a structural shift towards the younger age groups, rather than just on an optimum population level or growth pace. On the other hand, there will still be mounting constraints on overall population growth in the long run, imposed by the very limited land mass of the territory and related environmental considerations.

4.6 During our discussions with them, many interlocutors also echo this view. They have told us firmly that many factors affect demographic change and that as the pace and scope of our integration with the Pearl River Delta change over time, some are beyond the control of the HKSAR Administration. It is thus conceptually risky to seek to work towards a pre-conceived optimum population target for

Hong Kong. Instead, it is imperative that regular revision of policy instruments should form part of the policy itself, so that it possesses a built-in flexibility to respond quickly to changing demographic conditions and market situations. Further, policy interventions which seek to influence either the level or quality of population usually take effect over a long period. At risk of stating the obvious, any report on population policy cannot produce immediate effects.