

**SOUTHEAST ASIA'S POPULATION IN A CHANGING ASIAN CONTEXT:  
POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

**International Union for the Scientific Study of Population**



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<sup>1</sup> Acknowledgments

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## FOREWORD

The 2002 IUSSP Regional Population Conference represented an important event for the College of Population Studies (CPS) and the Asia MetaCentre for Population and Sustainable Development Analysis. As the Conference Coordinator, CPS felt very privileged to have another opportunity to serve the regional community in the field of population and development. In addition, this Conference drew more than 350 experts in the field from all over the world.

This document is a product of the collaborative work of the International Organising Committee for the 2002 IUSSP Regional Population Conference. I would like to thank in particular Dr. Landis MacKellar and Dr. Mercedes B. Concepcion for synthesizing the key conclusions and policy implications derived from the Scientific Programme summaries prepared by the Session Organisers. Many thanks are also extended to Dr. Mary Kritz and Dr. Napaporn Chayovan for their suggested amendments while reviewing the report. In addition, the International Organising Committee and the National Organising Committee of the 2002 IUSSP Regional Population Conference would like to recognise the financial contribution of the Rockefeller Foundation for the publication of this report.

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# **SOUTHEAST ASIA'S POPULATION IN A CHANGING ASIAN CONTEXT: POLICY IMPLICATIONS<sup>2</sup>**

## **Background**

The International Union for the Scientific Study of Population (IUSSP) with the collaboration of the College of Population Studies, Chulalongkorn University, acting on behalf of the Asian MetaCentre for Population and Sustainable Development Analysis, organised the 2002 IUSSP Regional Population Conference under the title *Southeast Asia's Population in a Changing Asian Context*. The Conference was held at the Siam City Hotel, Bangkok, Thailand, from 10-13 June 2002. Among those providing direct support were the United Nations Population Fund, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Wellcome Trust, the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis, the Asian MetaCentre for Population and Sustainable Development, the World Health Organisation, the Thai Population Association, the Tourism Authority of Thailand and the Chulalongkorn University Book Center. In addition, a number of participants received travel and per diem support from the institutions with which they are affiliated.

The Conference provided a forum for population and development experts, policy makers and programme managers to discuss emerging population problems in the context of the region's rapidly changing population dynamics and to consider the policy implications of new trends. The Conference also served to foster and encourage closer collaboration among population centers in the region, especially in relation to South-South Cooperation. Key operational and policy issues relevant to population and development themes were considered and lessons learned based on the Southeast Asian experience.

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<sup>2</sup> Background Paper prepared by the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population (IUSSP) on the key findings of the IUSSP Regional Conference held in Bangkok, Thailand, 10-13 June 2002 for the 5<sup>th</sup> Asian and Pacific Population Conference to be held at ESCAP, Bangkok, Thailand, 11-17 December 2002.

Some 350 participants from 40 countries registered for the Conference. All the world's major regions were represented with 86 participants coming from Thailand, followed by the United States (40) and India (36). Participants ranged in ages from 21 to 75 years and older; 41 percent of the participants were women.

In anticipation of the Fifth Asia-Pacific Population Conference (APPC) which has for its theme *Population and Poverty in Asia and the Pacific* to be held at ESCAP, Bangkok, from 11-17 December 2002, the International Organising Committee agreed that a policy and programmatic document of the key Conference findings be submitted as a background paper for that meeting. In preparing summaries of their respective sessions, the Scientific Programme organisers were asked to focus on identifying the overall dynamics of population and development, the links between population and poverty, the anticipated future trends particularly in the context of globalisation, and policy implications.

This paper summarizes the issues discussed for each of the major thematic areas explored at the Conference. Several topics covered at the meetings, including gender, adolescents, methods, and policy, cross cut the thematic issues.

## **Fertility and Reproductive Health**

Five sessions focused on fertility. The topics covered included fertility trends and prospects, impacts of economic booms and crises on fertility, family planning and reproductive health, adolescent sexual and reproductive health, and social, economic and cultural forces that shape fertility differentials. Several factors were identified as likely to influence fertility trends and declines in the years ahead, including the spread of education, especially for women, reduction of infant and child mortality rates and contraceptive use. At the same time, it was recognised that demographic transition theory alone is not sufficient fully to explain differentials across all societies, hence the need for contextual analyses.

Poverty is a strong correlate of high fertility, and a major factor encouraging the small-family norm in Southeast Asia has been significant economic growth and its associated changes such as expanded household incomes, increased educational opportunities for children and heightened survival of children. Among the countries where these forces have had a clear impact on fertility trends are the Republic of Korea, Singapore and Thailand. One topic that generated particular interest and discussion was the effect of the Southeast Asian economic crisis of the late 1990s, which led to a worsening of poverty in some countries and among some population sub-groups. According to information introduced at the Conference, progress in improving education and health, particularly among children, was slowed. In countries lacking a strong population policy, such as the Philippines, fertility decline appears to have been impeded, at least temporarily, by the economic crisis. In Thailand, by contrast, a country with very strong government commitment to ICPD goals, the economic crisis seems to have resulted in somewhat low fertility.

There is wide inter-country variation in fertility levels and trends in the Southeast Asia region. In the Lao PDR, the average number of births per woman remains 7, infant and child mortality is still high, and Government has only recently accepted the need for a population policy. In strong contrast, Vietnam, where reproductive health care, protection of the elderly, and gender issues are major socioeconomic policy concerns, the crude birth rate is now 43 per cent below its 1960 level. There is also considerable variation, much of it ethnic, within countries. In Singapore, although fertility decline continues for all three major ethnic groups (Chinese, Malay and Indian) despite a strongly pro-natal government policy, the policy appears to have had some success for the Malay population. The implication of this regional and national-level variation is that “one size fits all” population policies may be neither feasible nor desirable.

China represents a unique case in the region, not only for its population size but also because it experienced extremely rapid fertility decline while the country was still at a relatively low level of economic development. A review of the Chinese experience

suggests that while the demographic transition can be initiated by institutional actions in the absence of notable socioeconomic development, it cannot be completed without significant socioeconomic development. An important question in that country is whether urban areas will shortly experience the "second demographic transition" observed in Europe, i.e. the transition to persistent "lowest low" fertility.

Globalisation has brought new attitudes, new cultural values, and new role models into the region. One area, closely related to fertility, which has responded to these new forces is nuptiality. Southeast Asia has experienced a significant rise in the prevalence of very late (after age 30) marriage and the appearance in a few settings of non-negligible lifelong celibacy. These Southeast Asian trends are in marked variance with the situation in some other countries, for example, in Bangladesh, where very early marriage (before age 15 for girls) remains the norm. Variations across the region in cultural practices continue to be associated with fertility differentials.

A session organised by the World Health Organisation looked at issues related to adolescent sexual and reproductive health in the region. Among the main findings were that sexual behaviour among unmarried adolescents is not uncommon in Asian societies and that, where information is available, sexual activity is on the rise. These adolescents are at high levels of risk for unwanted pregnancy, low birth weight babies, HIV/AIDS, etc., not only because of lack of access to contraception but also because of lack of access to information. Nonetheless, governments and service providers are extremely uneasy about providing basic reproductive health services to adolescents. There is need to remove ambiguities at policy and programme levels with respect to whether adolescents should receive services, to train providers, to ensure confidentiality, and particularly to address the special needs of adolescents in extreme poverty or those who are manifesting high risk behaviours. As traditional family structures show signs of stress, messages received from the media and peer groups take on greater importance in the life of adolescents. In this environment, it is important to strengthen the family as a primary refuge for the adolescent.

## **Mortality and Health**

Five sessions focused on mortality and health. Topics covered included inequalities in adult mortality, HIV/AIDS, emerging health threats, infant and child mortality, and influences of development, urbanisation and environment on population health. High mortality, especially high infant and child mortality, are indissolubly linked with poverty - not just income poverty but also more qualitative dimensions such as illiteracy, disease, and hunger. There is a high degree of synergy between various components of poverty, resulting in a complex causal structure requiring study. Countries with the fastest declines in child mortality seem to have the highest levels of economic development and per capita GDP. Likewise, economically stable households tend to have lower rates of child mortality. At the household (and even national) level, economic success depends upon educational achievement, not surprisingly, the educational levels of parents - and particularly of women - are highly correlated with living conditions and health practices that determine infant and child survival.

Country-level analyses indicate that access to safe drinking water and health services, especially in times of emergency, are also important determinants of infant and child mortality, and regional analysis highlights the role of adequate caloric intake. However, data indicate that some countries, such as Thailand and Sri Lanka, have performed much better in reducing infant and child mortality than would be expected on the basis of the various household and community indicators reviewed. This suggests that policy commitment and an enabling socio-cultural environment can play important roles in shaping health and mortality outcomes.

A number of sessions focused on HIV/AIDS and identified an alarming upward trend in this disease. The epidemic in Southeast Asia is relatively in its early stage and macro impacts are not felt in the short run. However, micro level impacts are now being felt strongly. Despite increasing help available from government and NGOs, the ultimate safety net for persons with AIDS in the region is their parents and non-infected siblings.

The impact of a child's disease can be devastating for elderly parents. Unfortunately, relatives have such low incomes that they do not have adequate funds for treatment, care giving, and funeral expenses. The economic impact of HIV/AIDS for families is severe. Significant numbers of older persons are being left to care for orphans, and the economic hardship of caregiver households naturally also affects the orphans they are caring for.

The resurgence of deaths from tuberculosis and pneumonia associated with HIV/AIDS calls into question the traditional model of epidemiological transition, which holds that infectious disease death rates continuously decline over time. The Conference also considered a number of other emerging health threats of relevance to the region. For instance, the introduction of new, high-energy content foods and adoption of a more sedentary lifestyle appears to lead to the emergence of obesity as a health problem in some countries. Per capita cigarette consumption continues to rise in the region, and data analysis suggests that increases in price may not be very effective at reducing demand for cigarettes in poor countries. The ageing of populations is also bringing to the fore the problem of chronic and disabling diseases, such as stroke, and the requirements for long-term care of the disabled elderly.

### **International and Internal Migration**

Six sessions were held on migration processes within the region and to parts outside of the region. These sessions focused on a range of issues, including trends in migration and urbanisation, the causes and social consequences of international female labour migration, the influence of national age structure on international migration trends through labour force demand and supply, causes and social consequences of immigration into fragile eco-systems (highlands, rainforests and coastal areas), whether internal and international migrations promote conflict among ethnic groups or between immigrants and local populations, and policy measures that shape internal and international migration.

Southeast Asia is among the most dynamic regions of the world in terms of migration. Some of this reflects the extent to which the region has been affected by globalisation processes and the increasingly flexible movement of all factors of production across national borders. However, trends also reflect the continuity of traditional migration streams. In the past, countries did not begin to attract international migrant workers until they were at a fairly advanced stage of economic development. In Southeast Asia, however, some countries (such as Thailand and Malaysia) are already important destination countries for international migrants from other parts of the region. The role of interregional labour migration will probably continue to grow as a number of countries in the region, among them China, Hong Kong SAR, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Singapore, Taiwan Province and Thailand begin to experience shrinking labour forces as a result of fertility declines and changing age structures. While large-scale migration is often thought to lead to cultural tensions, this has not been studied systematically. The degree to which immigrants, including highly skilled immigrants, depress wages in the host country remains unresolved.

It is important for national and local planning agencies to take into account international labour migration and to acknowledge the partial existence of an East and Southeast Asian labour market in many occupational areas. Governments of both areas of origin and destination should give greater attention to monitoring the situation of international migrant workers and to protecting the rights of such workers. To do so requires cooperation between sending and receiving countries. While bilateral agreements are valuable, policy makers in East and Southeast Asia should also begin to consider sub-regional migration arrangements, as have gradually been implemented in Europe. Bilateral policies tend to be more successful but tend to give the appearance of exclusion. From the human rights perspective, multilateral policies are more favourable, but more difficult to implement. Regional policies would be a middle ground.

International migration of women presents special issues and problems. Trafficking in women in the context of the international sex trade is an important problem in the region and requires region-wide, gender-sensitive policies. Many women whose

migration has no connection to the sex trade nonetheless also experience ill-treatment in host countries. Policies to assist migrant women in host countries need to take into account gender roles and norms and family roles in sending countries.

A special plenary session was devoted to a debate on whether Southeast Asia's borders should be open to international migrants. One speaker spoke in favor of open borders, another spoke against open borders while a third took an intermediate position, arguing that while there may be some conditions when it would be appropriate for countries to open their borders to unlimited inflows of labour, in today's economic and social context in the region, most countries find it necessary to impose restrictions. That position gathered the most support from the audience.

### **Age structure change**

The importance for economic and social policy of changing age structures was addressed in several sessions and a special half-day session, sponsored by the Asia and Pacific Division of the United Nations Population Fund, examined the regional response to the Global Programme of Action on Ageing.

At present, rapid declines in the youth dependency ratio associated with fertility decline is providing a "window of opportunity" for economic growth in many Southeast Asian countries. Eventually, however, fertility decline will work its way up the age ladder, resulting in accelerated population ageing. The more spectacular the fertility decline (as in China) the more accentuated will be the ageing phenomenon. Policy makers in Southeast Asia may look at the case of Japan, which experienced its fertility decline in the 1950s, as an example of the types of socio-economic impacts of population ageing that are likely to be experienced. Forward-looking policies regarding employment of older workers, the nature of pension and health systems, etc., can contribute much to avoiding future problems. Care of the elderly, especially the chronically ill older persons, is a major emerging issue. The higher longevity of women, as well as the fact that women

traditionally supply much of the elderly care, renders this a highly gendered topic. The majority of older persons within the region continue to reside with their children but the number living alone or with an aged spouse is on the rise. At the same time, increased education and employment opportunities for women are diminishing the availability of the traditional source of elder care.

### **Urbanisation and Population Distribution**

One session focused on trends in and explanations of urban-rural mortality differentials and estimations of disease burdens due to poor air and water quality and found that these factors do have important implications for human health in urban areas. Another session examined trends in urbanisation and the urban hierarchy. That session showed that there are important issues in defining megacities and their boundaries. Studying only officially bounded areas, which understate the real built-up area, distorts the picture of megacity growth. Megacities already present enormous challenges for planning, as well as unique governance issues, and these challenges will increase in the years ahead as urban population growth continues to outpace rural population growth. At the same time, it was pointed out that most of the Southeast Asian urban population lives in cities of below half a million, which should not be neglected in favour of a concentration on megacity issues and problems.

Since over half of the population in most Asian countries continues to live in rural areas and poverty is more concentrated in rural areas, the needs of rural populations have to be kept in mind. Several sessions addressed issues pertinent to land use and development in rural areas. Migrants are increasingly moving into upland areas seeking additional plots in which to plant crops, toward coastal areas for fishing, and into fragile rainforests areas. While these migrations can be understood as household survival strategies to cope with poverty conditions, evidence does suggest that there are adverse effects on the environment. These trends need to be monitored and policy actions taken which have less harmful effects on the environment.

## **Globalisation and Development**

A concern addressed at many sessions was how economic and social development can be advanced within the region in order to ameliorate the negative effects that poverty has on many population processes. In addition, several sessions and one plenary session focused specially on these issues. Some questions that were addressed included how population dynamics are affected by globalisation processes, the consequences of population growth and decline and structural change on social sector needs (education, health, social security), macroeconomic linkages (savings, labour markets, productivity), and links between poverty and population change.

Consensus emerged that globalisation and the demographic transition, two of the major trends in this era, are closely linked. Mortality decline has been affected by flows of technology and improvements in living standards that have occurred as countries are integrated into the global system. Fertility change has been driven also by improved standards of living as well as by attitudinal changes disseminated by the global media. At the same time, demographic transition has affected globalisation. Movements of international capital into Southeast Asia have been attracted, in part, by the rapidly growing, well trained labour forces available in this region. While Japan also has a well trained labour force, it has attracted less capital in recent years because its labour force growth had declined while labour costs increased.

A special plenary session was devoted to a debate on whether globalisation has increased or decreased poverty. Various speakers at this debate argued that while globalisation has undoubtedly brought some gains to the region, it has also left significant sectors of the population behind in poverty and efforts now need to be taken to raise the standard of living of that segment of the population.

## **Research Methodology, Data Needs, and Training Efforts**

A few sessions focused on the profession of population studies and how it carries out its work. New methodological approaches, including the use of rapid assessment techniques and other qualitative approaches, carrying out probabilistic population projections in the region, data collection and dissemination systems and demographic training were all discussed.

The discussions on data collection and dissemination gave rise to a general consensus that censuses will remain the main source of population data and also provide a basis for developing sample frames for the foreseeable future. However, they will receive the needed fiscal support only if they meet emerging data needs and if data are widely made available to stake holders. An especially important area is the lack of available data suitable for analysing gender issues. In a session on gender, participants noted that with the passage of time researchers are realising that many types of data previously made available for both sexes combined need to be disaggregated. In addition, topics such as unpaid domestic work and childcare, for which little data are available need greater attention.

Southeast Asia has benefited from a good supply of trained demographers. However, there is continuing need for governments, donors, and universities to provide scholarship opportunities within the region. There exists a multiplicity of market segments each with its particular needs. To some degree, such diverse markets are catered to by some form of population training. However, demographic training tends to be limited to 1-2 disciplines within the region. Students still need to be exposed to core demographic concepts and analytical methods to help them understand the implications of demographic dynamics and the linkages between demographic dynamics and broader economic, social and environmental dimensions.

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