

Population Ageing in East and South-East Asia: Current Situation and Emerging Challenges

By Ghazy Mujahid

*UNFPA Country Technical Services Team
for East and South-East Asia
Bangkok*



Reviewed by John Knodel*

This is the first report in a series on population ageing planned by the UNFPA Country Technical Services Team (CST) for East and South-East Asia. It provides a comprehensive and timely overview of the extent and implications of population ageing in the region and the policy responses to it. The report contains a wide range of information on one of the most critical demographic issues of the coming decades for many countries in the region. It is written with clarity, presented in an attractive format and should appeal to social and demographic researchers as well as government officials responsible for social and economic planning.

Following an informative executive summary and brief introduction, the main body of the report consists of eight chapters (referred to as sections). The first five are relatively short and deal with key demographic aspects. Population ageing at the regional level is placed in the broader global context, revealing that its pace in East and South-East Asia overall will be far more rapid than elsewhere. At the same time, the report highlights the considerable current and future diversity of the situations within the region. Perhaps most importantly, the demographic analysis underscores the virtual inevitability in all 15 countries in the region of both rapid

* Professor, Population Studies Center, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan, United States of America, e-mail: jknodel@isr.umich.edu.

growth in the numbers of older persons (defined as aged 60 and older) and the increasing share that they will constitute of the total population. The inescapable implication is that even the countries with a low percentage of older persons cannot afford to be complacent about population ageing.

The demographic analysis also brings out three features common to all countries in the region: (a) the ageing of the older population itself, with those aged 80 years and older increasing their share among older persons in general; (b) the disproportionate share of older persons who are women, especially among the oldest old; and (c) the higher levels of ageing among rural than urban populations owing primarily to out-migration of young rural adults to towns and cities.

The sixth chapter of the report reviews a wide range of social and economic implications of population ageing. These include demand for health services, long-term care requirements, changes in family support, needs for social security and welfare benefits, and the special vulnerabilities of older persons arising from the AIDS epidemic, conflict situations and emergencies (such as natural disasters). Given the many different issues covered in this section, the treatment of any specific one is necessarily succinct. Indeed, a separate report devoted solely to implications that would permit a fuller accounting of these issues could be a welcome addition to the series, especially given the burgeoning amount of research that has recently taken place on these topics in the region.

The longest chapter of the report summarizes policy responses to population ageing. It starts with a brief review of global and regional initiatives undertaken by the United Nations. The bulk of the chapter is then devoted to a country-by-country description of national responses. This useful summary makes it clear that almost all of the 15 countries in the East and South-East Asian subregions have framed some kinds of policies, plans or laws related to older persons. A critical assessment of the implementation and effectiveness of those measures is understandably beyond the scope of the report. Still, even on paper, it is evident that substantial variation exists in the importance given by different countries to dealing with population ageing. Not surprisingly, the economically more advanced countries tend to assume a higher degree of government responsibility for their elderly populations. At the same time, in most of the countries in the region, social security systems are not yet well established. Thus most Governments emphasize the responsibility of families for providing support and care for their elderly members.

The last chapter provides a series of conclusions and recommendations. Given that population ageing affects many aspects of life, for old and young persons alike, the recommendations span a wide range of issues. Taken together,

they provide a solid rationale for the need to mainstream population ageing into development policies, programmes and strategies.

Following the report text are a series of annex tables. They provide, in a convenient comparative format, much of the basic statistical information on which the report draws.

The report wisely avoids alarmist rhetoric. Thus, although it tends to characterize family support as being in decline, citing reductions of co-residence with adult children as evidence, it also recognizes that in many settings in the region, the shift has been modest and that traditional family ties largely remain strong. An important point not mentioned, however, is that technological change, particularly in communications and transportation, allows family members to maintain relationships and crucial services over a geographical distance that previously required co-residence or physical proximity. As the reviewer's recent research in Thailand has revealed, the advent of mobile (cell) phones has radically improved the extent to which contact and social support are maintained between elderly parents and their adult children who live away (Knodel and Saengtienchai, 2007). At the same time, advances in transportation have facilitated migrant children's return in times of urgent need, while financial support across almost any distance has been facilitated by instantaneous electronic transfers of remittances. Thus, the significance and meaning of living arrangements for the welfare of elderly parents are being transformed as a result.

Although not a central theme in the report, issues related to gender and ageing receive some attention. As in much of the literature of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), however, only those specific to women are emphasized. Although older women are more numerous, men still constitute 47 per cent of the region's population aged 60 years and older and some consideration of their gender-specific vulnerabilities would seem justified. For example, survival of older men is lower than that of women in all 15 countries. Yet, rather than seeing this as a problem for men who are dying at higher rates and younger age, the emphasis is instead on how this disadvantages women by contributing to widowhood. Likewise, the frequent references to older women being economically disadvantaged may be overemphasized. A recent comparative study, not cited in the report, suggests that the situation is more complex than portrayed in the report and varies both by country and the particular measure of economic support and well-being examined.

Despite these minor oversights, the report is a timely and valuable contribution that should serve as a resource for calling attention to a vital population issue that Governments and societies in the region need to face sooner

rather than later. Hopefully, it will serve to reconfirm the commitment of those Governments which treat population ageing as a major social and economic policy concern and stimulate interest and awareness in those where population ageing has yet to be effectively addressed.

References

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