

Below Replacement Fertility in Sri Lanka*

Causes and Consequences

Introduction

Historically, populations have replaced themselves. Each couple has had at least two children so that one generation could replace the next generation. If couples on average have more than two children, each generation becomes larger than the previous generation and population grows over time. In fact during much of the second half of the last century, this is exactly what happened. For many countries and for the world as a whole, couples had many more than two children and population growth rates increased rapidly. National and international attention was focussed on the "Population problem" and the consequences of rapid population growth on economic well-being and social progress received much public attention.

However, during the past decade, a relatively new population issue has been evolving in some countries. First in Europe and other developed countries and lately extending to developing countries particularly in Eastern and South-eastern Asia. Couples in these countries are having on an average, fewer births than are necessary for generations to replace themselves. More and more countries are exhibiting levels of fertility below which demographers call "replacement level fertility". If such low childbearing patterns continue in these countries, their populations will decline if the short fall in births is not matched by migration.

According to United Nations estimates, in the year 2000, there were 67 countries at or below replacement fertility comprising 44 per cent of the World Population. The United Nations Projections indicate that by 2015 there will be 88 such countries representing two thirds of the World Population (United Nations, 2001).

During the past decade, both political and scientific pronouncements about low fertility have been plagued with mis-understanding and confusion. The issue has long been closely tied to political ideologies and cultural values.

In this regard I wish to quote an eminent demographer Teitelbaum (2000) has noted that "in reality, fears of low fertility are always framed in terms of regional, national or sub-national populations defined culturally. To put it crudely, since the onset of mortality decline two centuries ago, there have been no shortage of humans, only perceived or relative shortages of particular kinds of humans. The most critical categorisation is that of national population groups. Within these, there have been concerns about sub-national groupings along socially defined dimensions such as race, religion and language. It is for this reason that eminent French politicians could decry the prospective

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decline of the population of France and at the same time urge the repatriation and restriction of immigrants".

It is in this background that one needs to examine the present the causes and consequences of below replacement fertility in Sri Lanka.

Fertility trends in Sri Lanka show a continuous decline in fertility since 1962 and reaching below replacement level (1.9 children per woman) during 1995-2000. Although the more recent data are confined only to districts outside the north and east, it is very likely that even if data from the north and east are included, the fertility level would remain at replacement level (2.1) or lower. Because according to the 2001 Census, only 13 per cent of the total population live in the north and east.

What are the causes of fertility decline in Sri Lanka?

The rise in age at marriage of females and increased use of contraception have undoubtedly contributed to fertility decline.

The rise in educational attainment females no doubt has influenced both the age at marriage of females and contraceptive use. The increase in contra-

ceptive use from 32 percent in 1975 to 70 percent in 2000 would not have been possible if not for the Government sponsored family planning programme which provided easy accessibility and availability of services to all segments of the adult population.

The need for population planning in Sri Lanka was stressed by economic planners as far back in the 1950s. The Government policy on population and family planning was stated in the Ten Year Plan as follows: "Family planning has been frequently interpreted as offering a substitute for positive planned action aimed at promoting economic development based on industrialisation. Such a misuse of the idea of family planning, however, should not prevent it from being utilised properly, not as a substitute, but as an integral element of a broad policy designed to raise the standard of living of the people" (National Planning Council, 1959).

Later in 1971, The Five Year Plan of the Government stated in a more positive manner the need to reduce the rate of population growth as follows: "A word must be said about the implications of population growth both for short-term or long-term economic development. The continued growth of population at present high rates will pose problems, which would defy every attempt at solution. In the short-term any further increase of the number of births from the present level of around 370,000 per year will place inordinate strains on the school system, on hospitals and the supply of other goods and services and in such a situation it is only by a shift of investment from productive activities that it would be possible to maintain these services even as present levels. In the long run, the expansion of population at present rates would result in a population of about 27 million in the year 2000. Even a rapid decline in fertility rates the population would grow to 20 million by the year 2000. The strain on resources imposed by the present rate of population growth would be almost intolerable. The Plan thus gives very high priority to the diffusion of family planning facilities amongst the mass of adult population." (Ministry of Planning and Employment, 1971).

* Based on the author's Presidential Address at the Annual Sessions of the Population Association of Sri Lanka, July 2002.

What are the future trends in Fertility?

According to projections (Abeykoon, 1998) the total fertility rate will depress to a level of 1.7 and again gradually rise to replacement level by the year 2045 by which time our total population is expected to stabilise around 23 million. In recent years there has been considerable discussion and debate with regard to the reliability of the total fertility rate as a measure indicating the extent to which the current generation would replace itself. Bongaarts and Feeney (1998) two well-known demographers have argued that the total fertility rate is distorted by changes in timing of childbearing. They have noted that total fertility rates give an inaccurate indication of the level of completed fertility implicit in current reproductive behaviour because numbers and rates of births are depressed during years in which women delay childbearing and inflated in years where childbearing is advanced. By extrapolating current low levels of fertility into the future some demographers have ignored the fact that these rates are temporarily depressed due to rising age at childbearing. Eventually the age at childbearing will stop rising and the removal of the fertility depressing effect will result in an increase in the total fertility rate. This is very likely to happen in Sri Lanka. In fact, the most recent Demographic and Health Survey conducted in the year 2000 has shown that the average age at first birth has been advanced by two years since 1993 (Department of Census and Statistics, 2002).

What are the Benefits to Society from Low Fertility?

(a) Low fertility enables the population to grow at a slow pace and facilitates the improvements in per capita incomes. For instance, in Sri Lanka the gross National Product has grown below 5 per cent per annum in real terms over the past five decades. If population had grown at a rate of nearly 3 per cent as in the 1950s, per capita incomes would have increased at a much slower pace and Sri Lanka would have been in a more difficult economic situation today.

(b) Secondly, better birth spacing with contraceptive use has contributed to the reduction of infant and maternal mortality rates in Sri Lanka. In addition, the current decline in the absolute number of births and the primary school going population would enable the qualitative improvement of maternal and child health care services and primary education facilities.

(c) Thirdly, as a result of fertility decline Sri Lanka's current age structure is ideally suited

for economic expansion. The age pyramid is neither broad at the base nor wide at the apex. The bulge in the young working ages known as the "demographic bonus" therefore should be well invested for economic expansion.

What are the Consequences of Low Fertility? The following section highlights a few examples:

(a) One of the major concerns expressed with regard to fertility decline in Sri Lanka is the possible decline in the absolute number of those in the work force.

The number entering the labour market would decline only marginally from 276,000 during the year 2000 to 254,000 during 2025. However, a larger number would withdraw due to population ageing resulting in the net additions declining from 165,000 to 37,000 during the same period (Abeykoon, 1998). This would considerably ease pressure in the labour market and enable the improvement of labour productivity through the application of modern technology. Shortage of labour, however, may occur due to non-demographic factors such as preferences for particular types of jobs. In fact this is already seen in countries like Thailand and Malaysia where considerable amount of cheap labour is drawn from neighbouring countries, as the native populations are unwilling to take up 3D jobs. What are these 3D jobs. They are the difficult, dirty and dangerous jobs. If such a situation arises in Sri Lanka, it could take advantage of the cheap surplus labour in other South Asian countries.

(b) Next, population ageing is seen as an important social and health issue. In Sri Lanka the proportion of population over 60 years of age is expected to increase from about 10 per cent today to 20 per cent in 2025. However, given the relatively high life expectancy for both males and females and the high percentage of those in the age group 15-19 years still engaged in educational and training activities, the conventional definition of "age dependency" may be misleading. A more reasonable definition would be to shift the age boundaries upward to 20 and 70 years to reflect the changing patterns of youth and aged dependency. It should be noted that a significant proportion of Sri Lankans in the age category 60 to 70 years are relatively healthy and physically and mentally able to contribute to economic activity. If we exclude those in the age group 60 to 70 years from the elderly population the proportion of those 70 years and over in the total population drops to 4.4 per cent and will increase to only 9 per cent by the year 2025, which is lower than the current proportion of those 60 years and over. This puts the problem of population

ageing into better focus and makes it easier for planners to address the ensuing issues (Abeykoon, 2000).

(c) One of the important concerns in low fertility multi-ethnic countries is the ethnic composition and its future change. Sri Lanka is no exception in this regard. Considerable concern has been expressed in certain quarters about the possible changes in the ethnic composition due to declining fertility. The demographic changes of major ethnic groups in Sri Lanka over the past five decades show a continuous decline in the rate of growth of population as well as declines in mortality and fertility levels of all ethnic groups. The differentials in mortality have narrowed over time. Fertility levels have shown a downward trend among ethnic groups. A clear inverse relationship between fertility and the mother's education is observed among all ethnic groups. Given this relationship, it is very likely that all ethnic groups would reach replacement level fertility at least by the end of the first quarter of this century with continuing rise in the educational attainment of young females particularly among the minority ethnic groups. Population projections by ethnic groups show that when Sri Lanka's population stabilises at around 23 million, the Sinhalese would comprise about 16 million, Sri Lanka Tamils 3 million, Moors 2.5 million and Indian Tamils 1.5 million. By then, the proportionate share of the Sinhalese would be about 71 per cent and the Moors will comprise about 10 per cent of the total population. The slower ageing of about 30 per cent of the population would be economically advantageous as the country advances into the first few decades of this century (Abeykoon, 2001).

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