

The challenges of a changing population in Asia

by Athar Hussain

Following current trends, Asia's population will grow by 757 million people to reach 4.3 billion by 2025. This growing population will be unevenly distributed across Asia's three regions: South-Asia, South-East Asia and East Asia. This has implications for the environment, education, the role of women and social security.

A report from the London School of Economics and Political Science, UK, looks at the impact of current population trends in Asia. The growth rate for Asia as a whole is 1.1 percent per year. This appears low, but follows a much higher rate over the last 50 years. India's population rose from 361 million in 1951 to just over one billion in 2001, while the Chinese population has also more than doubled to 1.26 billion in 2000.

This growth has been accompanied by some significant changes in the health of the Asian population. The infant mortality rate has fallen from 184 to 51 infant deaths per 1000 live births. Life expectancy at birth has increased by 25 years. The fertility rate has fallen from six children per woman to 2.6. HIV/AIDS will have little effect on indicators such as life expectancy over the next 20 years, although infection rates are growing.

National population profiles across Asia's three regions, which were similar in the 1950s, now reveal sharp differences:

- South Asia has a high population growth rate (almost three times higher than in East Asia), a high fertility rate, and a mortality rate (per 1000 live births for under-fives) of 89.
- South-east Asia has a moderate population growth rate, a moderate fertility rate, and a mortality rate of 53.
- East Asia has a low population growth rate, a low fertility rate, and a mortality rate of 39 (10 or less in Hong Kong, Japan and Singapore).

Such uneven population trends can halt the progress of Asia's development. For example, higher fertility and population growth rates are generally associated with a lower literacy rate and lower levels of education, especially among girls, and lower life expectancy.

Policies are needed to overcome these demographic differences, especially to deal with the age structure of the population, growing urbanisation, education and the protection of the environment. While these issues affect most Asian countries, they are particularly important for India and China. Recommendations include:

- India should promote faster development in its northern and eastern states.
- China should close the gaps in education and health between rural and urban populations.
- While most discussion of pensions in China is focused on urban areas, the government should consider the more serious problem of a growing elderly population in rural areas.
- Countries with high fertility rates must invest more in basic education.
- Investment in water services and regulation must be increased to deal with the likely water shortages across Asia.

Literature / Links:

Hussain, Athar, Robert Cassen and Tim Dyson (2006): Demographic Transition in Asia and its Consequences. In: IDS Bulletin 37.3, pp. 79-87.

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