

Population and Development

Since independence, India has recognised the role of population in development. In the latter half of the 20th century, India's population boomed, courtesy a remarkable dip in mortality. India's population crossed 1 billion at the turn of the century. In 2008, its population stood at approximately 1.15 billion. However, as mortality dipped, fertility declined too, thus decelerating the pace of growth from over 2% per annum (late 20th century) to about 1.6% now. The current total fertility rate is 2.8 births per woman (Source: NFHS -3 India Report, 2005-06, IIPS Mumbai).

India's demographic transition is clearly visible in the above data. Fertility and growth rate are expected to decline further. Yet, while fears of population explosion recede, India still adds 16 million people to its population every year. About two-thirds of India's population growth now comes from the momentum of having a young population.

Although mortality in India has declined substantially, compared to life expectancy of 22.9 years a century ago [Source: 1901-10, Census Commissioner, India] to 63.5 years in 2002-06, the level is unsatisfactory by global standards. Even after a decline, the infant mortality rate of 57 per 1,000 remains at an unacceptable level. Maternal mortality is also unacceptably high at 303 deaths per 100,000 live births.

Fertility in India has declined through voluntary regulation, with nearly half the couples of reproductive age using modern contraceptives. However, despite numerous contraceptives being available, the dominant method is female sterilisation. The burden of contraception falls disproportionately on women. Though the age at which women marry has steadily risen, more than half still marry before 18 years - the legal minimum age.

Recent developments, future concerns

Changing age structure

With declined fertility, the share of the working age population has risen, yielding a welcome, if short-term, 'demographic dividend' and boosting growth. Over time, the numbers of the old will rise, as in developed nations. Currently, families care for most Indian elders. Only a small section is covered by institutional support. An imminent rise in the number of the aged calls for institutional measures for old-age security.

Upbeat urbanisation

India has urbanised slowly—only 27.8% of its population lives in urban areas [Source: 2001 census]. However, due to the changing economy in the country, the urbanisation trend is projected to touch 40.7% by 2030 (Source: UN World Urbanization Prospects: The 2005 Revision). Even at current levels, overcrowding is common; many urban citizens are compelled to live in unhygienic slums and, consequently, be deprived of basic services, including information/access to reproductive health services and adequate nutrition. As urbanisation quickens, it is imperative to strengthen urban planning. Accordingly, a major urban renewal programme has recently been launched in India.

Sex ratio at birth

The dip in sex ratio at birth, due to pre-natal sex-selection, is disturbing. Estimates indicate that the ratio is now over 110 boys per 100 girls, well above the normal [range 103-107]; in some regions, the numbers are very problematic, with the ratio crossing 120 boys per 100 girls. A law prohibiting prenatal sex detection is in force, but it will be effective only if it is implemented rigorously, combined with mindset change in families and communities.

Lack of equity

With socioeconomic disparities and rural-urban differentials persisting, some population groups are socially deprived. Thus, mortality among the poorer sections is above average. Through robust poverty alleviation schemes, there has been considerable success in reducing poverty as a whole. While nearly half of the Indian population was categorised as

poor in the 1970s, now only 27.5% falls in this category. However, the proportion of the population living on less than two dollars a day is still very large, at 77%.

Gender issues

Policy discourse has increasingly focused on reproductive rights, gender-based violence, men's involvement and quality of care. By 2001, literacy rates had risen to 53.7% for females and 75.3% for males, yet disparities persist. Various national policies have been formulated to address economic and social inequities faced by women. In the recent times, women's participation in economic activities has shown an increase, but is still well below the potential. Some direct consequences of gender-based discrimination are clearly visible, such as a more skewed sex ratio at birth, higher childhood mortality among girls, very high maternal mortality, and low age at marriage.

India's population programme

India's national planning process has integrated population as a key area since 1951. In 2000, the National Population Policy was reformulated to achieve long-term population stabilisation by 2045 and replacement level fertility by 2010. The policy reiterates the commitment to voluntary and informed choice, and to citizens' consent while accessing reproductive health care, including family planning. The immediate objective is to address the unmet need for contraception. However, population and health programmes cannot function in isolation. These have rightly been part of the overall socio-economic developmental policies.

Meeting the emerging needs

Policy and programmatic responses are required to meet the emerging needs of changing fertility patterns, the changing age and sex structure of India's population and its urbanization. Equity and gender concerns need to be kept center stage in addressing population and development priorities.

What UNFPA India does

UNFPA's focus is on providing policy support to better understand emerging demographic trends and patterns. The Fund will assist in building capacities to better utilize demographic data in comprehensive planning, particularly at district level. UNFPA will also support the 2011 census of India.