

Abstract

**Sustaining Population Development
in Asia through Healthy Reproduction**

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Asia, home to two thirds of the world's population living in nearly 40 countries, is a dynamic region in all dimensions, demographic, economic and socio-cultural. An overwhelming majority of countries have advanced or are advancing through the fertility transition, with several defining unprecedented levels in the parameters of a post-fertility transition. These transitions chart a course of healthy reproduction, the experiences of which may be instructive for other developing regions and fundamental to Asia's sustainable development.

By healthy reproduction, we refer to the shift from high to low maternal and infant mortality and morbidity resulting from extended population coverage of primary health services, such as child immunization and rehydration therapy, maternal and child nutrition and micronutrient supplementation, contraception, antenatal care, and safe birthing by either a skilled attendant or at an institution. This cluster of primary health care, along with reliable access to potable water, adequate food, shelter and a hygienic environment and elimination of warfare, has enabled survival and quality of life for many Asian populations, despite significant segments relying on little or no monetary income. The cluster of services has not been perfectly implemented by any means, but over the course of three to four decades has covered the majority of many Asian populations and transcended more than one generation. The course of healthy reproduction offers a lesson on the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, where abject poverty and hunger can be dispelled by meeting basic human needs.

This paper puts forward and discusses four premises:

1. Asia's sustainable future in terms of population and development has been secured, to an important extent, by its historic course of healthy reproduction.
2. A high degree of heterogeneity in healthy reproductive behaviours within the Asia region will cloud the clarity of but not obstruct its sustainable future in the near term.
3. The future course of healthy reproduction will encounter second-order threats to reproductive health, including foregone childbearing due to late or no marriage, gender inequity, sustained reliance on induced abortion to address contraceptive failures, pathologically-induced infertility, obesity and rising rates of cervical and other reproductive organ cancers.
4. The sustainable future of Asia undergoing rapid economic expansion can not be considered in the absence of contemplating the population and development relationships in low-income areas such as rural China and India and low-income countries, particularly those in sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East.

The paper begins by reviewing trends in key reproductive and child health indicators for major Asian countries and declines in income inequity. Calculations of births averted by contraception give a sense of public sector savings that allowed greater savings and investments. The paper then discusses how current inequitable sharing in the healthy reproduction experience creates heterogeneity in some countries, presumably only in the short run. Then “modern” threats to reproductive health derived from lifestyle changes adopted by better resourced populations, such as late or no marriage, childlessness, early initiation of sexual activity, rising cancer incidence with sexually transmitted infections, HIV, physical inactivity, poor diets, and tobacco, alcohol and substance abuse are discussed to argue that healthy reproduction may be newly compromised. The growing divergence in the reproductive and child health situations for many impoverished populations and those well off in Asia is raised. Finally, the growing mobility of young Asian male and female adults, their rising exposure to international sources of media and entertainment, their employment seeking in or locating marital partners from other countries suggest that neither healthy reproduction nor Asia’s sustainable future will evolve in isolation from a globalizing environment.