

*Report on*  
**International Conference on  
Population and Development in Asia: Critical Issues for a Sustainable  
Future**

Banthai Beach Resort & Spa, Phuket, Thailand  
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***Organised by***

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On 26 December 2004, many Asian and African countries surrounding the Indian Ocean were hit by a devastating tsunami triggered by the high-intensity Sumatra-Andaman earthquake. The tsunami caused massive damages to the environment and economy as well as ruined the lives of many. Patong Beach in Phuket - the venue for the conference organized by the Asian MetaCentre for Population and Sustainable Development Analysis from 20 to 22 March 2006 - was one of the areas hit by the tsunami. After one year, the reconstruction of Patong Beach appears to be nearly completed. Normal activities can be observed along the coastline of the beach but participants of the conference were still able to derive a picture of how the tsunami had affected the area.

Apart from the tsunami, the Asian region has also experienced remarkable demographic, social, economic and political changes in the last decade. Progress has been made in lowering birth and death rates, raising education and income levels, and improving reproductive health care. However, continual efforts are required to sustain developmental advances in the region in order to alleviate poverty, increase gender equity, improve health, develop more efficient and equitable strategies of resource allocation, and give priority to stewardship of the environment. These issues were explored in the conference, especially in the context of Asia, through theoretical considerations and fresh case studies, and were aimed at highlighting, understanding and assessing critical population issues for sustainable development in the new millennium.

The conference, stretching over three days, brought together over 70 participants from 18 countries including China (includes Taiwan), India, Indonesia, Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam, Singapore, Philippines, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Japan, South Korea, Austria, USA, Australia, German, United Kingdom, and Argentina. The papers were organised into 10 panels with two parallel sessions running simultaneously. The panels were:

- **Marriage and Development** (Panel Organiser: Gavin W. Jones, National University of Singapore);
- **Ageing and Development** (Panel Organiser: Evi Nurvidya Arifin, Asian MetaCentre, National University of Singapore);
- **Migration and Development: Impacts at Origin** (Panel Organiser: Sara R. Curran, University of Washington);
- **Migration, Development and Difference** (Panel Organiser: Sara R. Curran, University of Washington);
- **Population and Development** (Panel Organiser: Asian MetaCentre for Population and Sustainable Development Analysis, Singapore);
- **Population and Sustainable Development Research Challenges After the Tsunami** (Panel Organisers: Wolfgang Lutz, Asian MetaCentre & International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis, Austria; and Vipin Prachuabmoh, Asian MetaCentre & Chulalongkorn University);
- **Population, Ethnicity and Violent Conflicts in Asia** (Panel Organiser: Aris Ananta, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore);
- **Reproductive Health for Sustainable Development** (Panel Organisers: Napoporn Chayovan & Vipin Prachuabmoh, Asian MetaCentre & Chulalongkorn University);
- **Skilled Diasporas and Development** (Panel Organiser: Binod Khadria, Jawaharlal Nehru University, and National University of Singapore);
- **The Globalisation of Households in Pacific Asia - Trends, Consequences and Responses** (Panel Organiser: Mike Douglass, University of Hawaii)

There were two keynote speakers in this conference. On the first day, Professor Geoffrey McNicoll (Senior Associate, Population Council, USA) spoke on “Population and Sustainability in Asia: Adjusting to a Post Transition Era”. He argued that Asia’s demographic transition is part of the region’s extraordinary social and economic transformation in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. In his speech, he mentioned that many countries in the region have completed or are reaching the end of demographic transition and moving to a modern demographic regime, having low fertility and mortality rates as well as high median age. Fast declining fertility and mortality rates in Asia have resulted in rapid population ageing. This is perhaps a quieter shift than the transition in vital rates. He highlighted that for middle-income Asian countries, the group of those aged 65 and above is projected to double in absolute size over the next 20 years and treble or more by 2050. Japan leads the way in becoming an aging society, followed by South Korea, lagging around 20 years behind, and subsequently China, Indonesia and India. His speech also paid the most attention to the intergenerational transfer problem under population ageing, implications of a large backlog of rural-urban migration and scale effects on environmental quality.

Professor Graeme Hugo (Federation Fellow and Professor of Geography, The University of Adelaide, Australia) kicked off the second day of the conference by touching on “Migration and Development in Asia”. His speech addressed issues of mobility as an option for most Asians. Population mobility between and within Asian nations, and to

countries outside Asia has increased greatly both in scale and diversity. These movements go beyond traditional definitions of permanent internal and international migrations. The non-permanent movements, both internal and international, have increased significantly and are even more important than permanent movements. This has been a result of the revolutions in transportation, information and communication technology. He further argued that in Asia, a complex web of mobility systems within and between Asian countries has emerged, involving both the rich and poor, skilled and unskilled, male and female, forced and unforced migrants as well as legal and illegal movers. Linkages and networks with origin areas have been strongly maintained by the mobile persons. This mobility offers real opportunities to create not only future flows of people but also flows of capital, trade, goods, ideas and information.

Linked to issues addressed by the two keynote speakers, other relevant and important issues were discussed in various panels of the conference. The panel on “The Globalisation of Households in Pacific Asia: Trends, Consequences and Responses” postulated that global population movement and transactions among people beyond national territorial boundaries have affected the formation and inter-generational continuity of household in the region. Householding within nations might have reached its limit in many countries in the region, hence turning to global householding. However, global householding can present fundamental challenges to every society and to the international political system based on the nation-state. The most prominent dimensions of global householding in the region are increasing transborder marriages, rising numbers of children schooling abroad, growing numbers of foreign workers caring for households and their members, an enormous amount of remittances sent to home countries, and migration of retirees from higher to lower cost destinations in the Asia Pacific.

Apart from an increasing trend in transborder marriages, the panel on “Marriage and Development” brought together presenters discussing on notable features of a revolutionary change in marriage patterns in East and Southeast Asia such as issues on increasing trends of delayed marriage and non-marriage, increasing divorce rate and emerging cohabitation among those who are not formally married. However, in some areas, early marriage remains common. All these trends have implications for welfare and development.

Issues on ageing were discussed in the panel on “Ageing and Development” where presenters examined cases from four big Asian countries such as China, India, Indonesia and Pakistan vis-à-vis Singapore, Korea and Thailand. Changing norms, increasing migration, smaller family size and the feminization of the labour market have decreased the level of social support for the elderly in many Asian countries. Meanwhile, economic resources and health status are also important determinants of elderly living arrangements. Also, there was still a lack of attention on elderly mental health in developing countries because of the stigma associated with it and the lack of data. Singapore’s experience reveals that the living arrangements of the elderly are important in determining poor mental health. Those living alone are most likely to report poor mental health.

The impacts of the tsunami were also discussed in the panel on “Population and Sustainable Development Research Challenges after the Tsunami”. The panel examined the vulnerability of human populations in Asia to catastrophic events, covering a broad spectrum of possible determinants of vulnerability ranging from education/human capital formation to changes in birth rate, indigenous cultural traditions and coastal resources management.

Asia, especially Southeast Asia, provides an excellent place to study the relationship between population, ethnicity and conflict - another issue that was discussed on the second day of the conference. The region is culturally diverse, characterised by movements within and between countries. Within a country in the region, for example, the Mindanao conflict in the southern part of the Philippines can be traced back to the significant migration from the predominantly non-Muslim areas of Luzon and the Visayas. Studying the relationship between population and conflicts is thus necessary in such a fluid environment where population mobility provides social spaces in which different values and norms are confronted.

The areas of outmigration often suffer from the loss of the brightest persons. The papers from the panel on “Skilled Diaspora and Development” addressed the ongoing theoretical debates of transforming “brain drain” into “brain gain”, and the role of skilled diaporas played or could play in it through “brain circulation” leading to physical and virtual networking. The panel discussed skilled diasporas from China, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Japan, in interrelated and comparative perspectives. Other impacts of migration in places of origin and destinations were discussed further in other panels.

Finally, the outcome of the conference is the submission of various proposals for special issues to internationally recognized journals. Several planned special issues include the proposed publication of papers on “Skilled Diaspora and Development” in *Asian Population Studies*, “Ageing and Development” in *Asia Pacific Population Journal*, “Population, Ethnicity and Violent Conflicts” in *Population Review* and papers from both “Migration and Development” panels in *Asian Pacific Migration Journal*.