

## Demographic change in rural areas

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Demographic characteristics play an important role in rural livelihood system in terms of earning members or dependency ratio. A society might be poor in terms of endowments of natural resources but given appropriate policies and their proper implementation, a developed human resource base could show the path to overcome poverty. Taiwan has set an example where its richness sprang out of poor natural resource base only due to strong human capital.

It is assumed that the welfare of a household depends, with other things remaining the same, on the number of members it has to feed. A reduction in household size signals a rise in living standard of its members. A panel data shows that although the number of households in rural Bangladesh has increased over time because of family split and migration, the number of members per household (household size) drastically declined from 6.15 in 1988 to 4.24 in 2013. Without going into hair-scratching calculus, we can possibly argue that such a reduction in household size would mean a reduction of rice consumption by 1.0 kg per day per household (of course, in association with a reduction in rice consumption that follows from decreased income elasticity of rice called Engel's Law). At household level, the money so saved on account of rice could be put to education or health. At national level, policy-makers could heave a sigh of relief as far as rice is concerned and possibly ponder over emphasising on cultivation of non-rice crops.

We observe that the proportion of infants (aged 0-5) has been gradually declining over time and so is the case with children aged 6-10. In other words, as per panel data from a sample of rural households, the proportion of population aged up to 10 years significantly fell from about 40 per cent to about 27 per cent between 1988 and 2013. This implies that the base of the population pyramid has substantially shrunk over time. Suffice it to say here that from policy point of view, we should now be less concerned with construction of more primary schools as the primary school-age population has been going down. Rather, it would be effective to divert the resources for the improvement of quality of primary education.

However, there has been a rise in the ratio of 61 plus population, thanks to improved life expectancy following improved health care. The most important piece of good news is related to a fall in total dependency, thus, seemingly enabling households to divert resources to productive pursuits. Finally, the rise in working age population from 49 per cent to 58 per cent during the comparable periods points to the much-talked-about demographic dividend that Bangladesh is now enjoying. The working age group has been constantly entering the labour market to strengthen the economic base. Thus, the fall in proportion of people at the lower end of the population pyramid is a sort of relief as the dependency rate has been reducing. But, at the same time, increased working-age population carries a tension for policymakers as jobs need to be created for the expanding labour force.

The child-woman ratio, a reflection of the current fertility level, has gone down from 67 per 1000 in 1988 to 36 which shows a success in population control. However, there is very little room for complacency as fertility rate is still high in the absolute term. This could be due to the roles played by NGOs and government agencies which target the poor segment in terms of education and extension. With economic growth and transformation, societies tend to witness break-up of families. Engagements of household members in different economic occupations apparently work behind it. Bangladesh is no exception to this historic truth - not even in its rural areas. The incidence of joint families has been declining with migration of young adults to urban areas and formation of separate families. Large families comprising 6-7 members or more are now seen in TV serials - possibly as a reminder of the past. However, with the break-up of joint families, the proportion of single and two-member families has increased (36 per cent single and 41 per cent two members). Disconcertingly, the data show that about 3 in 100 households are now single households compared to less than 1 in 1988. Most of the single-member families are extremely poor with very low land and non-land asset base. This has big ramifications for social safety nets.

There are two more important transformations that need a mention. First, a survey in 62 villages shows that roughly one-fifths of girls aged 15-17 (child marriage) get married and there is no deviation in the trend over time. There are regional variations with Kurigram, Bogra, Thakurgaon, etc., which witness child marriages to the extent of 30-40 per cent. Secondly, the incidence of female-headed households in rural areas has increased substantially from 6.0 per cent to 15 per cent between 1988 and 2013. In Bangladesh context - and possibly everywhere too - female-headed households are generally considered as fragile in socio-economic indicators, and more so in terms of security. But the rise in the share of such households in the country warrants a different explanation. This could be the result of migration of male members to urban areas or overseas. We can also possibly presume that growing feminisation of agriculture has its roots in widespread migration of male members. Thus, it would be erroneous to conclude that female-headed households are necessarily fragile in terms of socio-economic indicators.

Modern technology and other contributory factors apart, the rural transformation owes immensely to the changing demographic dynamics. Data show that demography has been at the driving seat of rural transformation in Bangladesh and reinforces the observation of Michael Lipton that fertility is one of the three drivers of rural transformation.

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