

## Demographic Transition in Asia and Its Consequences

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### Summary

#### Introduction

There have been significant changes to the populations of Asian countries over the last five decades; these have implications for education provision, social security and the environment. The speed and the current phase of the transition vary greatly between and also within countries. East Asia, with its low population growth rate and fertility rate is in the final stages of the transition and South Asia the converse. This paper presents an overview of past and projected changes to population growth rates as well as to birth and death rates in Asia, and looks at some of the main consequences.

#### Main findings

The demographic shift in Asia varies greatly both between and within countries. In Asia as a whole, the population growth rate has been falling and is currently 1.1 per cent a year. The lowest population growth is in East Asia and the highest is in South Asia. Higher population growth rates and high fertility rates are generally associated with lower literacy levels, especially among girls, and lower life expectancy.

Over the last five decades, the mortality rate in most Asian countries has fallen sharply. Life expectancy at birth had risen from an average 41 years for the region as whole during the 1950s to an average 66 years by 2004. Infant mortality rates have been reduced by over two-thirds. Again, there are significant differences between countries. South Asian countries still have high death rates among children and the elderly.

The total fertility rate in Asia has fallen sharply, from about 6 children per woman in the 1950s to 2.4 in 2004. This is having a significant impact on the age structure of the population. The extent of decline varies greatly between regions and countries. Most South Asian countries still have fertility rates above the 2.1 required for the population to remain constant, whereas in East Asia only Mongolia does.

#### Key research findings

- By 2025 an extra 757 million people will be living in Asia, raising the total population to 4.3 billion.
- Despite China having a fertility rate below the replacement level, the population will continue to grow for several decades. But by 2050, India is likely to have taken over from China as the world's most populous country.
- For countries in Asia which have a high population growth rate and fertility rate (such as Afghanistan, Cambodia, Laos, Nepal and Pakistan), a main challenge over the coming years will be education provision.

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- For those countries with a low fertility rate and low population growth (such as China, the Republic of Korea, Singapore and Sri Lanka), providing financially for an aging population will become increasingly challenging.
- One of the main environmental problems facing Asian countries is pressure on water supplies. This is strongly linked to population growth. Achieving greater efficiency in water use, particularly in China, will require increased investment in waste water treatment as well as improvements to regulation.