



# The Financial Express

---

## Demography-driven transformation

Abdul Bayes | Saturday, 4 April 2020

---

Other things remaining the same, it is assumed that the welfare of a household depends on the number of members it has to feed --- a reduction in the household size signals to a rise in living standard of the members. Although the number of households in rural Bangladesh has increased over time because of family split and migration, members per household have drastically declined from 6.15 in the 1980s to 4.24 in recent years as revealed by a representative rural survey. Without precise calculation, it can possibly be argued that such a reduction in household size would mean a reduction of rice consumption by 1.0 kg per day per household (reduction in rice consumption follows increased income). At household level, the money so saved on account of rice could be put to education or health. At the national level, policymakers could feel assured of rice stock and possibly focus on non-rice crops. Field-level information further reveals an increase in the proportion of spouses (a result of selective migration of household heads) and a reduction in the proportion of non-relatives living in a household. The latter could be adduced to a reduction in permanent labour used previously by households to supervise farm work -- now rarely in practice.

The proportion of infants (aged 0-5), as observed, has been gradually declining over time, and so is the case with children aged 6-10. In other words, the proportion of population aged up to 10 years has significantly fallen from about 40 to about 27 per cent between 1980s 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, the concern about construction of more primary schools may be put at rest as the primary school age population has been going down. It would be useful to divert the resources for improvement of the 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 development relates to a fall in dependency, thus, seemingly enabling households to divert resources to productive pursuits. How the coronavirus will affect the old age groups should be put under the scanner. Finally, the rise in working-age population from 49 to 58 per cent during the comparable periods points to a much talked-about demographic dividend that Bangladesh can reap. The working-age group has constantly been entering the labour market to strengthen the economic base. Thus, the fall in the proportion of people at the lower end of the population pyramid provides an opportunity as the dependency rate has been reducing. But, at the same time, increased working-age population causes policymakers anxiety 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 1,000 in 1980s to 36 which shows further success in population control. However, there is very little room for complacency as the fertility rate is still high in the absolute sense. The rate of reduction in fertility has been faster for the small land owning groups. The large difference between the fertility level of large and smaller ones that existed in 1980s narrowed down in 2013 quite substantially although the inverse relation still holds. This could be due to the roles played by NGOs and government agencies which



target the poor segment in terms of education and extension. Interestingly, education of husband and wife does not seem to have much effect on fertility control. For example, female education has improved between 1980s and 2013 but with no impact on fertility reduction. The rate is still higher for those with secondary education. The unexpected outcome could be due to the unfortunate fact that, in the patriarchal rural society, a decision about babies generally comes from the male side and women's views are rarely respected. It could also be due to the reason that fertility is mainly related to participation of women in income earning opportunities -- rather than education per se -- that raises costs of rearing children.

With economic growth and transformation, societies tend to witness break-up of families. Engagements of household members in different economic occupations apparently work behind the break-up. Bangladesh is no exception to this historic truth, not even in rural areas. The incidence of joint families has been going down with the migration of young adults to urban areas and formation of separate families. However, with break-up of families, the proportion of single and two-member families has increased. These may be old-age parents. Disconcertingly, the data show that about 3.0 in 100 households are now single households compared to less than 1.0 in 1988. Most of the single-member families are extreme poor (36 per cent single and 41 per cent two-member) with very low land and non-land asset base. This has immense ramifications for social safety nets.

There are transformations. First, the incidence of female-headed households in rural areas has increased substantially from 6 to 15 per cent between the comparable periods. In Bangladesh context -- and possibly everywhere too -- female-headed households are generally considered vulnerable in socio-economic indicators, and more so in terms of security. But a rise in the share of such households in Bangladesh 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 in Bangladesh 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. By and large, modern technology in agriculture and other contributory factors apart, the ongoing rural transformation owes immensely to the changing demographic dynamics in rural areas. Data show that demography has been in the driving seat of rural transformation in Bangladesh, and reinforcing the observation of an ace economist Michael Lipton that fertility is one of the three drivers of rural transformation in Bangladesh.

*The author is a former professor of Economics, Jahnagirnagar University, and currently an adjunct faculty, East West University:  
abdulbayes@yahoo.com*

---

### **Editor : Shah Husain Imam**

Published by Syed Manzur Elahi for International Publications Limited from Tropicana Tower (4th floor), 45, Topkhana Road, GPO Box : 2526 Dhaka- 1000 and printed by him from City Publishing House Ltd., 1 RK Mission Road, Dhaka-1000.

Telephone : PABX : 9553550 (Hunting), 9513814, 7172017 and 7172012 Fax : 880-2-9567049

Email : editor@thefinancialexpress.com.bd, fexpress68@gmail.com

Print