



The State of Thailand's Population 2015

Features of Thai Families in the Era of Low Fertility and Longevity





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This report was produced by the United Nations Population Fund Thailand Country Office and the Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board of Thailand. The team for the production of this report includes:

Authors

Caspar Peek, Wassana Im-em, Rattanaorn Tangthanaseth

Statistics and data analysis

Institute of Population and Social Research, Mahidol University; the National Economic and Social Development Board

Interviews

Thai Publica

Proofreading and editing (English version)

Sarah Lauren Harris

Layout and design

Thai Publica, Kullwadee Sumalnop

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Foreword from National Economic and Social Development Board



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Porametee Vimolsiri'.

Porametee Vimolsiri
Secretary General of the
National Economic and
Social Development Board

In the absence of any actions or measures to cope with challenges that may arise, the demographic shift of Thailand's population structure, a transition into an ageing society, with a steady decline in the number of children and the working-age population, and an increase in the number of aging and elderly, will contribute to a decrease in the national growth potential. However, the aged society can also provide a prime opportunity for Thailand to generate revenue through the development of innovation and industry associated with the elderly. This shift towards an aging population is, therefore, the significant development concern and the next phase for Thailand as a nation.

The challenges of our aging society have determined the direction of national development to focus on maximizing human capital development, enhancing the potential of people throughout their lives, from the point of conception and throughout the lifespan, to support the growth of the country. Families, of course, are the most important institution where a person's primary development occurs. Nevertheless, the emergence of more diverse family types, with individual and unique characteristics, has resulted in different problems and specific needs, especially for one-person households, skip-generation families, single-parent families, adolescent-parent families, and elderly-only households. New policy must, therefore, take into account these different contexts and the diversity of these challenges.

The National Economic and Social Development Board very much hopes that this report, which details the factors affecting Thai family dynamics, the family types of the present and the future using both provincial and national data, family policies and their implementation in Thailand, as well as showcasing international best practices, will provide helpful guidelines in support of the systematic development of policy and strategy involved in family development for both authorities and parties working with and for families to achieve practical results in the future.

Foreword from United Nations Population Fund



Caspar Peek
Representative for Thailand

Why this report?

The country of Thailand is in a state of flux – economically, as it seeks to transition from middle-income to high-income; politically, as it seeks to find its way towards a democratic society based on equality and participation; socially, as it seeks to adapt to the influx of millions of migrants, continued rural-to-urban exodus, and a rapidly connected population; and demographically, as it completes the transition from high fertility and short life expectancy to an ageing population with a low birth rate. All these transitions are interconnected, as are the tensions they generate, and at the centre of many of these tensions lies the family.

At its core, the family is a social unit, but to a large extent it is also an economic unit. And to complicate matters, decisions behind the economics that do or do not allow a family to operate as a social unit, such as fiscal, labour and credit policies, are often of a political nature. The demographic change from high birth/short lifespan in the 1970s to the low birth rate/ageing population today drives the economic, political and social transitions and vice versa. Family formation, in other words, and the changing forms of family that Thailand is currently witnessing, are based on individual decisions that are the result of economic, political and social drivers. Averting the negative consequences related to these changes, therefore, depends on these three types of decisions as manifested through policies, laws, budgets and mindsets.

Nowadays, there is no longer any “typical” Thai family. Years ago the “typical” family structure would include two parents, one or two grandparents, and two or three children. Today we are seeing a large variety of families, and the trend is towards more variety, not less: nuclear families of two parents and one or, less frequently, two children; couples – including same-sex couples, without children; single persons, both young and old; skipped-generation families with one or two grandparents and grandchildren. It is important to accept that this diversity is likely here to stay and indeed increase, the reasoning for which will be explained throughout this report. It is not realistic to assume that Thailand will return to having a majority of nuclear families, and much less to having such families with two or more children.

There has been much debate about the threat of low fertility, and the blame has often been put on women accused of not having (enough) children. Increasingly the varied

family structures are used as indication of a “refusal to procreate”. This report seeks to demonstrate that it is not women’s refusal or disinterest in childbearing that is leading to the variety of family formation, but rather the lack of incentives and policies that would allow women to reconcile their productive and reproductive lives. This report also makes the point that, ultimately, what determines whether a country becomes rich, democratic or socially cohesive is not its fertility rate, but the quality of support provided to children and their caretakers as they grow to become empowered members of society, equipped with the knowledge and skills to fully exercise their rights and contribute to the further development of the nation. In order to reach this point each child needs the best possible environment, which naturally includes the family.

With fewer numbers of children being born – an already irrefutable fact – Thailand cannot afford to lose the potential of a single one, be them rich, poor, urban, or rural. Each child, each young person must receive the best possible investments to ensure that he or she becomes an adult who will contribute his or her maximum potential to society. This would bring about lasting prosperity for Thailand as its population ages and the dependency ratio increases; it would bring political stability, as Thailand moves from middle-income to middle- class – a distinction often overlooked; it would help spread economic gains and create purchasing power; and it would help slow down the erosion of intergenerational solidarity that typically accompanies economic growth and smaller family size.

The next 20 years will be crucial to define and give shape to the aspirations of all people in Thailand, and the investments made in families are a crucial component of this. If families have the means to do so, all children – including orphaned and abandoned children, those left in the care of relatives, and even children born to migrant parents – will have access to good nutrition, schooling, health, protection, and a gender-neutral upbringing. If parents have the financial and logistical means to have careers AND have children, and if women are guaranteed that childbearing and childrearing does not mean the end of a career, fertility rates may not decline further. If incentives exist for boys to stay in school, and if programmes exist to dissolve gender biases built into social norms and practices of raising boys and girls, which often fuel gender-based violence, marriage rates might go up and divorce rates might go down.

The success of Thailand’s family planning campaigns 40 years ago was based on the idea that it was about planning your life, not just your family. Today we have come full circle: it is about planning your family, not just your life. In the end, it is individuals and their decisions about their productive and reproductive lives that shape families – whether to get married, whether to stay married, whether to have children and how many. It is the responsibility of all of society – government, politicians, employers, the media, community leaders and the guardians of social norms – to empower individuals to make these decisions fully exercising their human rights.

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