

Below Replacement-Level Fertility: The Global and Local Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

The rapid and continuous decline of fertility in many parts of the world, in both developed and less-developed countries, has never ever been found in human history. Causes, patterns and consequences of such decline are different in each spatial location as well as social settings. However, little research has been done on the overall picture of the world fertility. Therefore, the aims of this study are: firstly, to analyse the global fertility distribution; and secondly, to investigate the change of the Thai fertility, and Chiang Mai in particular, in order to provide a better understanding on the ongoing process of population change at the local level. This qualitative and quantitative study has been done by using aggregate data from several official sources as well as books, journals, articles and websites involved. This study uses the total fertility rate (TFR) which is divided into three categories: above the replacement level (>2.1); at the replacement level (2.1); and below the replacement level (<2.1). Results show that 69 of the 205 studied countries have TFRs below the replacement level, and 8 countries have TFRs at the replacement level. Among these countries, the lowest TFR (1.2) are found in 14 countries. However, if these two special administrative regions have not been considered as parts of Mainland China, Hong Kong and Macao would have been the lowest TFR regions, with the TFRs of 0.9 and 0.8 respectively. Globally, below replacement-level fertility is found in every developed country, except Albania in Europe that has TFR at the replacement level. About 15 per cent of the less-developed countries has TFRs below the replacement level, including Thailand. The Thai total fertility rate has not just declined to below replacement level recently but had reached such level since the late 1980s. For almost two decades since then, the Thai TFR has slowly declined to the current level of 1.7. Moreover, Thailand is one of the very few countries that have the shortest period of fertility transition. It took less than three decades for the TFR to decline to the replacement level. Even in an age of rapid fertility transitions, as Hirschman et al. (1994) argued, the Thai case is exceptional as the country remained overwhelmingly poor, agricultural and rural. However, the decline of fertility in Chiang Mai was even more dramatic and took place before any province in the country, apart from Bangkok. Between 1960 and 1975, the Chiang Mai TFR declined by almost 50 per cent, and reached the replacement level by 1980 (Pardthaisong, 1994). Such rapid decline of fertility has affected the population momentum and the age structure of the population which have led to several socio-economic and political consequences.

Key words: Below-replacement fertility, Total fertility rate, Thai population, Chiang Mai population