Population Growth in Viet Nam

WHAT THE DATA FROM 2006 CAN TELL US

With a focus on the 'Sex Ratio at Birth'

UNFPA Viet Nam
1st Floor, UN Apartment Building
2E Van Phuc, Ba Dinh, Hanoi, Viet Nam
Tel: +84 - 4 - 823 6632
Fax: +84 - 4 - 823 2822
Email: unfpa-fo@unfpa.org.vn
Website://vietnam.unfpa.org

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Executive Summary

This booklet summarizes the major results of the 2006 "Population Change Survey" in Viet Nam and is the third in an annual series. It is based on a longer report prepared between October and November 2006 by an independent consultant, Dr. Gigi Santow. Plus other information now made available by the General Statistics Office (GSO). Dr. Santow is a demographer with considerable international experience including twenty year's expertise in analyzing data on the Vietnamese population.

This booklet is intended to inform non-specialist readers about major recent demographic findings. Like earlier publications, it is *dedicated to those readers*, the intention being that unless census and survey results are disseminated to people who formulate policy, who implement policy, who assess the effects of policy and who report on population matters to the general public, such data collection and analysis will be severely limited in its impact.

Key findings from the 2006 survey show that fertility continues to decline. The total fertility rate (TFR) now stands at 2.09 children per woman, which is just below the level of replacement. A major contributor to this achievement is the use of contraception, especially, modern methods. *Mortality*, meanwhile, appears to have been constant over recent years. But because the crude death rate (CDR) has been under-estimated, the *population growth rate* has been 'over-estimated'. Adjusting for this lower CDR estimate gives a true annual growth rate below 1 per cent.

There is also growing concern that *the sex ratio at birth* (i.e. the number of boys born to every 100 girls) *is becoming unbalanced in Viet Nam. Reasons for this include pressure to adhere to the two-child policy* coupled with a preference for sons and the ready availability of ultrasound and abortion. The national sex ratio at birth as reported in the 2006 survey was 110 boys to every 100 girls, which slightly exceeds the expected ratio of 105-107 boys to every 100 girls. Although these estimates are based on sampling rather than a complete enumeration, graphical analysis of the sex ratios at birth in the urban and rural sectors of each province show considerable variation, with some sectors having very low ratios and others very high. When inferential analysis (i.e. conclusions deduced from sample data) is added, along with information on the number of deliveries in 2006 coming from health facilities, *it can now be confidently stated that the sex ratio of births at the national level is slightly skewed toward boys*. However, provinces/cities with high SRB (above 110) need close monitoring and immediate attention.

Population Dynamics in Viet Nam

Data and Methods

Although a national population census is conducted in Viet Nam every 10 years, continuous monitoring of population trends, most importantly fertility rates, mortality rates and the population growth rate, is essential. To meet this requirement and in the absence of a comprehensive national system of vital registration, such as exists in more developed countries, the GSO has conducted annual population change surveys since 2000.

The GSO repeats certain questions in these surveys from year to year in order to derive crucial parameters relating to fertility, mortality and population growth. These yearly surveys seek to discover the number of births over a recent period through questions directed at each woman aged between 15 and 49 years in a sample household. The surveys ask women to report the total number of children they have delivered and the number who are still surviving.

The surveys also seek to discover the number of deaths of household members over the previous twelve months. Questions are directed to the heads of households. Rates are then derived directly by relating counts of recent births or recent deaths to the population enumerated in the survey. Rates are also derived indirectly by applying so-called indirect methods of demographic estimation to larger, or different, data sets. These indirect estimates are particularly valuable when direct estimates suffer from

reporting problems. Direct estimates can be revised on the basis of indirect estimates.

In addition to addressing these key questions, the surveys provide an opportunity to respond swiftly to topical issues by incorporating new, specially designed questions. In 2006, the GSO added a new question to the survey based on its concern that the sex ratio of births may have become skewed towards boys. Should such an imbalance be found to occurring, it was seen as having serious demographic, social and even political effects.

The additional questions asked in 2006 allowed survey takers to distinguish children according to whether they were male or female. In addition, if the most recent child was born after April, 2003, survey takers sought information on antenatal care, for example, whether the mother knew the child's sex before it was born and, if so, how she found out and when. The reasons for asking these questions are discussed later in this booklet.

Fertility Trends

The simplest measure of fertility is the *crude birth rate (CBR).* This is calculated by dividing the total number of births in a particular year by the total population in the middle of that year. It is expressed per 1,000 population. But, in the absence of a system of vital registration, the CBR cannot be measured directly and, therefore, it is estimated from age-specific fertility rates (which are obtained indirectly*:* see below) and the age structure of women.

A more complex measure, the *total fertility rate (TFR)*, gives the average number of children that a woman would bear over her lifetime if she bore them according to the age-specific fertility rates observed in a particular year. Thus, TFR is a 'synthetic' measure: it does not say that *women will have this number of children*, only that they *would* if they followed current patterns of childbearing. The TFR is a useful measure because it is easy to interpret and it refers to family size (even if that size is hypothetical) rather than to the ratio of births to population.

Very sensibly, GSO uses a combination of *direct* and *indirect* methods to estimate age-specific fertility rates from survey data on births over the previous twelve months. They then use these rates to estimate both TFR and CBR. By this means they have concluded that *fertility has been falling in Viet Nam for many years*. For example, the 1994 intercensal survey produced a TFR of 3.1 children per woman, whereas the 1999 census produced a TFR of 2.3[1]. Since then fertility has been monitored annually by the survey and the 2006 data continues to reveal a decline. *The TFR derived from the 2006 survey was 2.09, which means that fertility in Viet Nam has now fallen below the level of replacement*. The GSO also estimates that urban