

THE AGE AND SEX STRUCTURE OF VIET NAM'S POPULATION: EVIDENCE FROM THE 2009 CENSUS

Based on the analysis of the sample data of the 2009 Census on Population and Housing in Viet Nam – this factsheet presents key information on the age and sex structure in Viet Nam. It also analyzes some policy implications and includes recommendations on how Viet Nam can take advantage of the opportunities and overcome the constraints of its demographic dynamics in the country's socio-economic and human development planning.

ISSUE

The age structure of a population reflects the proportion of labourers compared to the dependent population, and represents both opportunities and challenges for the country's socio-economic development.

A high labour force proportion is considered to be an advantage because a relatively large working population can contribute to improve the country's economic growth and human development. However, a high labour force ratio also creates challenges, such as the increased need, both quantity and quality, for education and technical training required to meet the needs of the labour market as well as to create more job opportunities for young people.

The sex structure of a population, representing the proportion of men compared to women, reflects a country's history. Viet Nam's higher proportion of women compared to men among the elderly population, for example, reflects higher male mortality during the recent wars. On the other hand, the current imbalanced sex ratios will lead to the growing surplus number of men among adults of marriageable ages in the future, which may lead to social instability and changes in family composition and social structures.

Changes in the age and sex structure of a country's population have significant impacts on its social, cultural and economic development. An understanding of current and future demographic trends is crucial for leaders and staff of all ministries and agencies including health, education, insurance, employment, social affairs, public finances and business sector, as they will need to develop or adjust sectoral strategies, programmes, policies and budgets to reflect current and future population structures, at national and provincial levels.

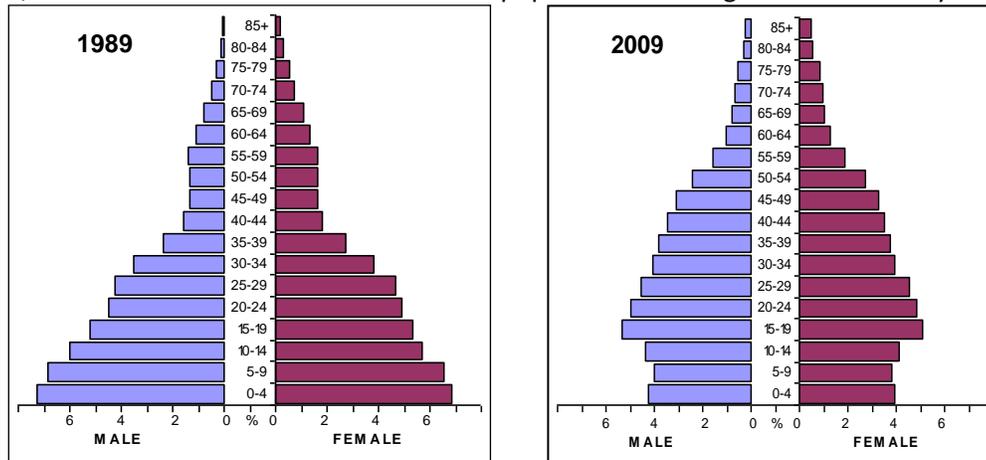
FACT AND FIGURES

- By reaching a total dependency ratio below 50, Viet Nam has now entered the period known as the *"Golden Population Structure"*.
- If the total fertility rate (TFR) remains at its current low level of 2.03, the total number of females aged 15-49 will continue to increase until the year 2028 due to the population momentum created from past decades of high fertility.
- The proportion of single households with old-age people (65+) has increased significantly, from 1.8% in 1999 to 2.6% in 2009.
- The proportion of households with children under 15 decreased from 53.9% in 1989 to 27.5% in 2009, while the proportion of households without dependent members has more than doubled: from 14.3% in 1989 to 30.8% in 2009.

MAIN FINDINGS

1. The demographic structure of Viet Nam provides a positive basis for continued socio-economic development

The 1989 and 2009 population pyramids for Viet Nam (Graph 1) illustrate the trend of the population age and sex structure over time, and reveal the transition of Viet Nam's population from high to low mortality and fertility rates.



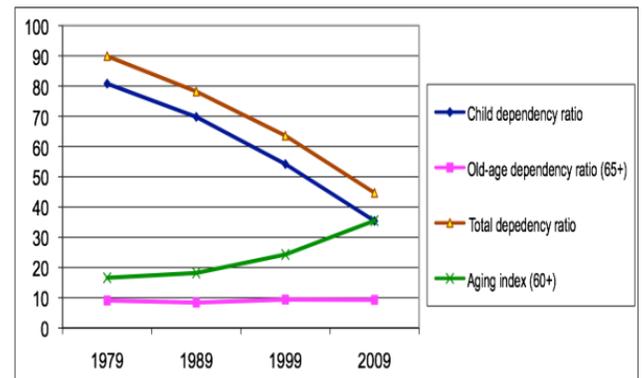
Graph 1: Viet Nam's population pyramids in 1989 and 2009

During the last three decades, because of declining fertility, the proportion of the under-15 years population has declined dramatically from 43% to under 25% of the entire population, while the working-age population aged 15-64 years has increased from 53% to 69%.

Due to these trends, the *total dependency ratio*¹ has declined considerably, from nearly 90 in 1979 to less than 45 in 2009. The decrease of the *child dependency ratio*² is the main cause for this decline since the *old-age dependency ratio*³ only increased slightly (Graph 2).

With a *total dependency ratio* below 50, Viet Nam has now entered the period known as the '*golden population structure*,⁴ which means that there is only one dependent person for every two or more working-age persons aged 15-64 years. This 'golden' period started in 2007 and is estimated to end in about 2041. The minimum *total dependency ratio* of 42 is estimated to occur in 2015.

The aging index which represents the proportion of persons aged 60 years and over to every 100 persons under 15 years of age increased from 16.6 in 1979 to 35.5 in 2009. It is projected that this index will rapidly increase over the next several decades and will reach 100 at which point there will be one child per old person in 2033. By the 2060s, the size of the old-age population will be double the size of the under 15 population.



Graph 2. Dependency ratio and aging index from 1979 to 2009

In 2009, the overall sex ratio of the population in Viet Nam was 97.6 males per 100 females. While the sex ratio of the old-age population (60+) is relatively low (67.8) due to higher male mortality as a legacy of war, the sex ratio among

¹ The *total dependency ratio* is the sum of the *young dependency ratio* (proportion of children aged 0-14 years to total population) and the *old-age dependency ratio* (proportion of population aged 65 years and over to the total population).

² The *young dependency ratio* is the average number of people aged under 15 per 100 people aged between 15 and 64.

³ The *old-age dependency ratio* is the average number of people aged 65+ per 100 people aged between 15 and 64.

⁴ Other descriptions of this phenomenon include the "demographic dividend", "demographic bonus", and "population bonus". For further information, please see UNFPA (2010) *Taking Advantage of the Demographic Bonus in Viet Nam; Opportunities, Challenges and Policy Recommendations*.

children under 15 is high (106.9). This recent demographic phenomenon is primarily caused by the imbalanced sex ratio at birth (more boys born than girls) and will translate into a sex imbalance of adult generations in the future. A deficit of adult women in a society may lead to severe social, cultural, economic and gender discrimination problems. Indeed, already by 2009 Viet Nam's population under 20 years old exhibited a surplus of 900,000 males over females.

Even if the TFR remains at its current low level of 2.03, the total number of females aged 15-49 years will continue to increase until the year 2028 due to the population momentum created from past decades of high fertility. The annual number of births will therefore also continue to increase slightly in the next 10 to 15 years. Policymakers should take note that if fertility keeps on declining, Viet Nam will face a situation of a rapidly aging population, leading to numerous problems such as a reduced labour force and possibly lower economic productivity and inadequate funding from the working-age population to maintain the social protection system.

2. The population age-sex structures vary by region

In Viet Nam, the age and sex structure of the population varies by region, by province, and by urban/rural setting. The main reasons for this phenomenon are not only the geographical differences in fertility and mortality rates, but also significant impacts from internal migration.

Populations in the Northern Midlands and Mountains and the Central Highlands regions are characterized by relatively high fertility and mortality rates and a low aging index.

Populations in the Red River Delta and the Mekong River Delta regions have low fertility and mortality rates, and therefore exhibit higher aging indices than other regions.

The North Central and Central Coast have high out-migration rates. On the contrary, the Southeast region experiences high in-migration. Migration flows have significantly influenced the proportions of the population aged 20-34 years in these two regions.

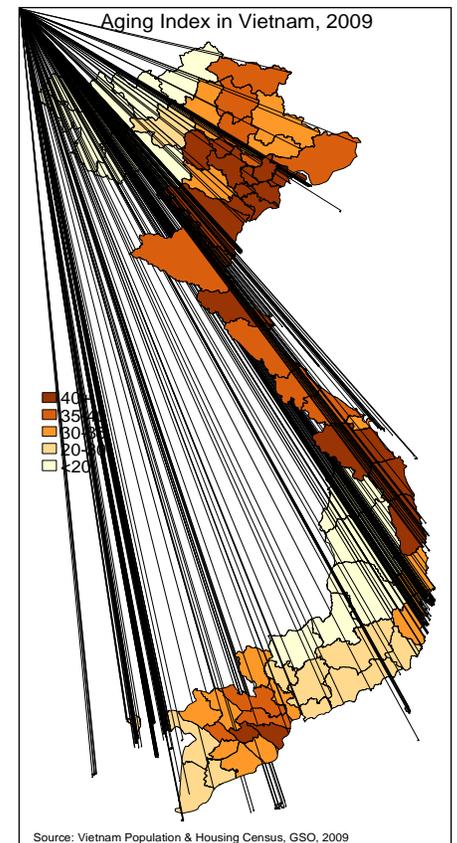
Apart from the Central Highlands, the other five regions have entered or are about to enter the period of the "golden population structure" in 2009. Out of the 63 provinces, 43 have already reached the "golden population structure" point.

The geographical distribution of the aging index levels by province also varies widely, ranging from a very low 7.9 in Dak Nong to a high of 47.4 in Thai Binh. As can be seen in Graph 3, the aging index is lowest in the provinces in the Northwest and the Central Highlands, and highest in the Red River Delta region.

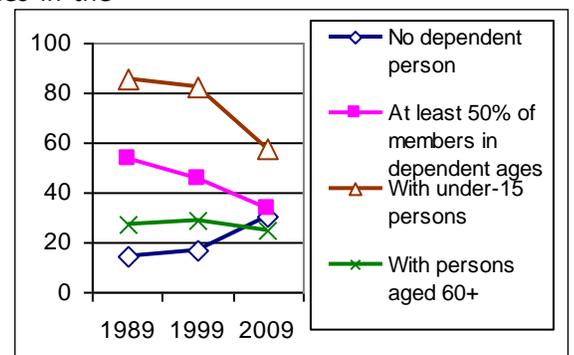
3. Viet Nam's household structure is changing, becoming smaller in size with a lower dependency rate

The average size of households in Viet Nam decreased during the last 20 years, from 4.8 persons per household in 1989 to 3.8 persons per household in 2009.

The proportion of single households with old-age people (65+) increased significantly, from 1.8 % in 1999 to 2.6 % in 2009. The majority of single households are female, especially those with women from the age of 45 or older.



Graph 3: Map of aging index by province



Graph 4: Proportion of households with dependent persons in Viet Nam 1989-2009

The composition of households with dependent members has changed substantially. Mainly due to decreasing fertility, the proportion of households with children under 15 decreased from 53.9 % in 1989 to 27.5 % in 2009, while the proportion of households without dependent members has more than doubled: from 14.3 % in 1989 to 30.8 % in 2009.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Due to major changes in the population structure, Viet Nam has now entered the era of “golden population structure”. This will provide Viet Nam with a unique opportunity to increase its saving and socio-economic development. In order to take full advantage of this demographic bonus it will be vital for policy makers to implement the correct strategies to create employment opportunities and develop a qualified and productive labour force. Increased investment in health, education and technical training skills is required, as well as an improved business investment environment that generates sufficient jobs for the many young labourers entering the market.

Although Viet Nam’s fertility rate has already fallen below replacement level, the population will still increase by an estimated 9 million people over the next 10 years. It is important, therefore, that suitable strategies are in place to accommodate this increase. At the same time, it is also imperative that the total fertility rate continues to decline and falls below 1.8 in the next 10 years, this could then result in rapid ageing. This may lead to a lack of labourers and an increased need for social security and health care services for the elderly.

It is projected that the number of women aged 15-49 years will continue to increase for at least another 15 years. Therefore, reproductive health and family planning programmes and services will be needed to meet the requirement of this population group. In addition, these programmes and services will also be needed to meet the needs of young people and adolescents.

Population aging and the change in household structure will have important social and economic implications for Viet Nam. The proportion of elderly people living alone is increasing over time, which requires more social services to accommodate the needs of this vulnerable group. Government organizations responsible for the social security, social insurance, retirement and health care systems, especially the programmes and policies of the Social Security Strategy 2011-2020, should already start adapting them to these demographic changes, which will only be amplified in the future. Specific programmes for the elderly should be developed, especially for old people that are poor and live in rural areas.

In addition, more work is needed to prevent an increase in the sex ratio at birth imbalance, such as campaigns focusing on the value of girls and women in society coupled with strengthening the law enforcement of sex identification and sex selection laws.

The changes in population structure vary remarkably across sub-population groups and geographical regions. Therefore, policy makers should utilise the population projections on age and sex structures and other relevant research data when developing socio-economic policies and plans in order to estimate the needs of different population groups including migrants. Furthermore, policies on population, marriage, family and socio-economic development should be flexibly established and deployed to correspond to the diversified demographic, socio-economic and cultural features in different parts of Viet Nam.

MAIN REFERENCES:

1. GSO and UNFPA monograph 2011, “Age sex structure and marital status of the population in Viet Nam”.
2. GSO 2009, *Vietnam Population and Housing Census*.
3. UNFPA Viet Nam 2010, *Taking Advantage of the Demographic Bonus in Viet Nam: Opportunities, Challenges and Policy Recommendations*.