The role of local government in adjusting to population change in Thailand over the next decade

Suwanlee Piampiti, Professor, College of Local Administration, Khon Kaen University, Thailand

Abstract

The decline in fertility and mortality during the last three decades of the 20th century has caused significant structural changes in Thailand’s population. The proportion of children is decreasing, while the proportion of older persons is rapidly increasing. Data from population projections for the next two decades indicate that the number of elderly people will exceed the number of children by the year 2025. This striking change will have a significant impact on local government’s role in managing the needs of both children and the elderly, especially in rural areas. Regarding children, local governments should create policies and planning that improve the quality of education. Planning should focus on the development of learning and teaching methodologies, educational media, information technology, and personnel management. As for older persons, effective policies should focus on three areas: 1) allocation of monthly welfare allowances, especially for the needy; 2) increasing various health care services; and 3) income and employment policies should focus on occupational promotion projects. Earning money by themselves would help the elderly to achieve a sense of self-dependency and dignity; this is especially true for women, because they live longer than men and outnumber them.

Key words: Local Government, Population change, Thailand.

Introduction

The decline in fertility and mortality during the last three decades of the 20th century has caused significant structural changes in Thailand’s population. In the past, the population consisted of a large proportion of children under the age of 15 and a very low proportion of elderly people (aged 60 and above). During the period 1970-1990 more than one-third of the population consisted of children and less than one-tenth were older people. After the success of the national family planning program throughout the country, the fertility rate decreased dramatically and continuously. At the same time, improvements in health care led to an
increase in longevity. Thus, by the year 2000, the proportion of children under the age of 15 had decreased to 25 percent, while the proportion of elderly people had reached nearly 10 percent. It is estimated that this proportion will increase to 14 percent by the year 2015, and 19.8 percent by 2025. Between 2020 and 2025, the number of older persons will exceed the number of children for the first time in Thailand’s history (UNFPA: 2006, Prasartkul and Vapattanawong, 2006).

This striking change will have a significant impact on the role of local government in various ways. The Local Government Act of 1999 decrees that local administrative organizations have direct responsibility for the well-being of people in their locality, including promoting the quality of life. Any development plan must take the quality of life of these two cohorts into account.

The objectives of this paper are, first, to discuss the impact of population change on the role of local government and, second, to recommend policies and programs in development plans of local administrative organizations in response to the changes in the coming years. The study consists of three sections. The first shows the changing age structure of the population in Thailand; the second describes the impact of population change on the role of local government. The last section presents policies and programs on educational management for children and development plans for the well-being of the aged in the next decade, emphasizing health care, income, and employment.

Population change in Thailand

The changing age structure of population is apparent in the rapid increase in the proportion of older persons. This increase was caused mainly by a decline in fertility during the three decades following the 1960s and a decrease to below replacement level of fertility since the early 1990s. During the same period, life expectancy increased from 52 years in 1950-55 to nearly 71 years in 2000-2005 and is projected to increase to 76.8 years in 2025-2030. It is noted that population aging in Thailand is occurring faster than in other countries in Southeast Asia (UNFPA 2006).

The age structure pyramids in Figure 1 show the dramatic change in Thailand’s population in recent years. Between 1960 and 1980, the proportion of children under the age of 15 declined from 46 to 40 percent, while the proportion of older persons increased from 4.8 to 5.4 percent. By the year 2000, the proportion of children dropped to 25.2 percent and
the proportion of older people increased to 8.7 percent. It is projected that by 2010 the proportion of children will be 17.2 percent, while that of older persons will be 16.9 percent. The pyramids show that the features of population changes in developing countries are becoming like those of developed countries in the West. However, it took many decades for the developed countries to double the proportion of population aged 65 and over from 7 to 14 percent (UNFPA, 2011). By contrast, population projections in Thailand indicate that the proportion of aged people will double within two decades, i.e. increasing from 11.8 percent in the year 2010 to 22.6 percent in 2030, as shown in Table 1 (Prasartkul and Vapattanawong, 2006). Consequently, the local governments of Thailand must adapt to this transformation and the resulting economic impacts in various ways.

Figure 1. Age structure pyramids of Thailand.

![Age structure pyramids of Thailand](image)


Another important feature of population ageing in Thailand is the large proportion of older women relative to older men. In the year 2005, life expectancy at birth for males was 68 years and 75 for females. It is projected that in the next 50 years, life expectancy will increase to 75 years for males and 80 years for females (Prasartkul and Vapattanawong, 2006).
Moreover, in the future, a high proportion of older persons will consist of the oldest old (80 years or more), of whom the majority will be women.

### Table 1 Population projection for Thailand

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Elderly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>19.0</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>16.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2025</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>19.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2030</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>22.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Prasartkul and Vapattanawong, 2006

**Impact on the role of local government**

These prominent changes in the population structure will eventually have various impacts on the role of local government. Through the Local Administrative Organization Act, the organizations have direct responsibility for the well-being of women, children, the elderly and the disabled, in their respective localities. In terms of children, the decreasing number will have a significant impact on educational management by the local government. The 1997 the Constitution stipulated that school administration must be transferred from the Ministry of Education to the local administrative organizations. At present, many local administration organizations have full authority over school management. School administration should be conducted with an awareness of the currently declining number of children throughout the country. Local school management should emphasize quality and efficiency in the educational system. The population census in the year 2000 indicated that the population aged 15 and over had an average of only 7.2 years of educational attainment, and that 38.9 percent of the population aged 6-24 were not attending school (National Statistical Office,
This data is indicative of the problems of school enrollment and educational attainment of children during the past period. Local administrative organizations should take responsibility for improving educational management systems, along with the Ministry of Education. With decreasing number of children, school management should focus on the quality of education, by improving teachers’ qualifications and making teaching methodologies more effective.

The rapid increase in the proportion of the aged has had numerous socio-economic impacts on the country. The Thai government first formulated the National Long-term Plan of Action for the Elderly (1980-2001), which was followed by the Second National Plan for Older Persons (2002-2021). The plans focus on preparing for quality aging, well-being, health care schemes. As for local government, the basic problems concerning older persons in health care, financial support, and living conditions are among the responsibilities of the local administrative organizations. First of all, they must allocate monthly allowances, which are subsidized by the government, to the elderly in their areas. Provision of the allowance depends on the number of elderly registered in each household. However, there are many problems concerning distribution, because of the process of selection and classification of the target groups. In many areas, poor older persons who lack sources of support do not receive this monetary welfare. Thus, as the number of elderly is increasing, the local administrative organizations must concentrate on improving the process of allocating the monthly allowance to cover all those in need, especially in rural areas.

Health care for the aged is provided by various organizations in the community, but local agencies still have the largest role. The local administrative organizations provide health care services at all levels: provincial, district, and sub-district. The details vary, depending on the budget and the availability of qualified personnel. About 92 percent of the sub-district administrative organizations have a budget for older persons and 97 percent provide projects and activities for them in the community (Sririboon, 2010). At the sub-district level about 60.7 percent have mobile health services and 50.1 percent have home visiting services. Only 31.1 percent of the sub-districts have volunteers to take care of the aged and 29.3 percent provide training for volunteers. It should be noted that only 14.4 percent have multi-purpose senior centers and 6.2 percent have daycare centers (Prachuabmoh and others, 2009). This finding indicates that general health care services for the elderly should be further promoted throughout the country. Local governments need to have extensive plans for this group in the next decade.
Another important concern is financial support. Data from a 2007 survey of older people in Thailand shows that they have various sources of income. The most common sources are from their children (52.5 percent), other family members (8.4 percent), pensions (4.4 percent), and savings or rent (2.9 percent). Although 37.8 percent have some income from work, only 29 percent earned an amount sufficient to be the main source of income. On the whole, 57.2 percent of older people have an adequate income and are financially self-reliant (National Statistical Office 2007, UNFPA: 2011).

The above data reveals a potentially critical situation concerning the well-being of older persons that local governments need to respond to. One response that should be considered is increasing employment opportunities for the elderly. Although various local agencies have occupational promotion projects and training programs in many districts and sub-districts, most of these projects do not focus on older persons. As this age group increases in number, local governments should plan various kinds of occupational promotion projects which are appropriate for older persons. In the years to come, not only will the number of elderly increase, they will live longer. Many older persons are still capable of working and some have special skills and experience which should be supported, to enable them to work and continue earning money.

**Policy and programs for the local government**

The changing age structure of Thailand’s population has two dimensional impacts on local government; one results from the decreasing number of children and the other from the increasing number of older persons. Regarding children, local governments should formulate policies and programs to vastly improve the quality of education. As the number of children decreases, the administration can put greater emphasis on the quality of educational attainment. In many rural areas, there are numerous problems in the teaching and learning systems, including lack of qualified teachers and insufficient learning tools, educational media, and information technology. These limitations can be improved by the development plans of local governments. Budgets can be planned by projecting the number of children, enrollment rates, and number of teachers. The planning of efficient educational management systems should cover development in three areas: 1) educational media, information technology and infrastructure; 2) quality of education; and 3) personnel management systems. By implementing these policies, local governments could play a significant role in improving the quality of educational systems in the future.
In terms of the rapidly increasing ageing population, planning for their well-being should be considered at both the national and local levels. Local governments, especially local administrative organizations, are the closest agencies to the communities. Local administrative organizations and sub-district municipalities can best respond to the problems and needs of people, within the local context. Thus, policies for older persons at the local level can be formulated to provide for their needs. Currently, the priority of the local government is providing welfare allowances for the elderly. With the continued growth of the aging population, there must be a concerted planning effort to allocate a sufficient budget for this allowance. Furthermore, the appropriate criteria for providing the monthly welfare allowance should be carefully formulated in order to cover poor and needy older persons, especially in rural areas.

As for health care, several policies and plans have been widely adopted, but are still inadequate at the local level. About half of the sub-districts throughout the country have limited home health care and multipurpose senior centers. Development plans of local organizations need to focus on the details needed for health care for the elderly in each area. Tackling this issue is an important policy for budget allocation. The shortage of qualified personnel is also a problem in health care programs. Planning should cover various necessary services, such as home care, residential centers and other assisted-living settings as much as possible in each community.

Finally, financial support and income earning are the most important factors for well-being. As older persons are growing in number and can live longer, local organizations should include occupational promotion programs for them in their development plans. Many older persons have skills, experience and wisdom in special areas and should be encouraged to continue to actively pursue them. Having their own income from employment will help them to retain a sense of independence and dignity. Thus policies and programs promoting employment should be among the strategies for improving older persons’ quality of life in the future.

**Conclusion**

Overall policies for local governments can be successfully implemented, depending on the top executives of the organizations. If they are aware of the impacts of population change on the community, take interest in educational management systems for children, and are concerned with the importance of the work of geriatrics, the policies and programs mentioned above can be implemented for the well-being of the local population. However, there are also weaknesses
and obstacles in the operations, especially inadequate budgets and a lack of qualified personnel to take responsibility for the policies and programs. Nevertheless, since the local administrative organizations are the agencies that are most closely connected to the community and understand the people’s problems and needs better than other organizations, they should make a concerted attempt to collaborate with other agencies on policy implementation for the betterment of the quality of life during the next decade.

References


