

# Analysing and debating the complex and contested questions raised by 21st century population change

Professor Sarah Harper<sup>1</sup>

DOI 10.1515/pophzn-2015-0001

Welcome to *Population Horizons* – the newly launched and renamed *Horizons* journal from the Institute of Population Ageing, University of Oxford. We have updated and redesigned the Journal to provide a respected interactive forum for analysis and debate on the many complex and contested policy questions that are raised by 21<sup>st</sup> century population change.

The significant increase in research into the implications of global fertility and mortality change, and the new sophisticated methodologies, which enable enhanced projection of current trends into the future, have been mirrored by a steady growth in the range of institutions and policies which pertain to population processes and change. Whether the stalling of the fertility transition in sub-Saharan Africa, the rapidly growing youth bulge in the MENA region, or the continual compression of late life mortality in Europe, it is now increasingly recognised as essential that evidence-based policy making must take an interconnected and interdisciplinary approach to addressing these challenges.

*Population Horizons* is aimed at researchers, policy makers and practitioners who wish to engage in identifying and analysing the challenges and opportunities that are likely to result from a permanent shift in the age structure of the population. We intend to bring high quality research essential to evidence-based policy making to the debate on how society should adapt to these many challenges.

As with earlier editions of the *Horizons* Journal, we shall consider the challenges which will emerge over the coming decades, and we shall ask what should be done now before these pressures and constraints

really make themselves felt. In particular, we wish to encourage open online debate – combining expert papers with the request for academic, policy and practitioner response. Again, although some of these unanswered questions and unresolved problems will turn on matters of fact requiring empirical enquiry, many of them will not. Differences of opinion about how society should adapt to the pressures and constraints of population ageing are bound to reflect different views about the preferred direction of social and political change. This is very clear in this issue, which tackles the question of the fertility transition.

The *Horizons* Journal was initially conceived and edited by Kenneth Howse. It is thus fitting that he should be our first guest editor for the relaunched journal. He has collected a multi-disciplinary set of authors to consider the question.

As Shapiro's paper points out, sub-Saharan Africa has been the global laggard with respect to falling fertility rates, the pace of decline has been slower than elsewhere, and total fertility rates – or crudely put childbearing rates per woman of reproductive age – are still high. Furthermore, the fertility transition in the region has seen stalling in a number of countries. Howse takes up this theme of fertility stalling, arguing that a significant deceleration in the rate of decline or a slowdown to the point of 'no significant progress' are phenomena of interest, in as much as they elucidate the *forces* that impede or promote fertility decline. Both authors turn to consider policy. But while Howse focuses on macro implications, Shapiro alerts us to specific effective policies, introducing a policy menu for governments seeking to lower fertility: reduce

---

\*Corresponding author: sarah.harper@ageing.ox.ac.uk

<sup>1</sup> Chair, Editorial Board, Population Horizons

the demand for numbers of children, increase the supply of children and lower the costs of fertility regulation. Most importantly, he emphasises the need to understand the specific *context*. For example, in a setting where there are substantial numbers of women who wish to limit their fertility and/or space their childbearing, investment in family planning and contraceptive delivery will pay off. However, in the context of very low levels of female education, putting resources into family planning is unlikely to be so effective, and investing in female schooling will be a more successful strategy.

Consideration of context is what shapes the following two papers. Channon's research in Nepal emphasises the continued importance of son-preference in decisions around fertility and contraceptive use in South Asia. While the high fertility levels in most of sub-Saharan Africa have been suggested as a reason why son-preference is not yet found to be a significant fertility factor here, future lessons can be extrapolated from other regions. While research drawing on the 1996 Nepal DHS found high levels of childbearing and the impact of son-preference to be moderate, now in the wake of fertility decline the impact of son-preference is substantial. Channon argues that attention needs to be paid in particular to the future trajectories taken by Pakistan and Afghanistan, and policies and programmes need to be put into place now to enshrine the importance and value of daughters in these societies. As she discusses, changing attitudes and improving the status of women will take time, but if family planning programmes fail to recognise the importance of son-preference in shaping behaviour, they will be substantially less effective.

The final paper, addressing pregnancy among adolescent and young women by Saldaña-Tejeda, an academic researcher from the Universidad de Guanajuato, León, México, and the response to her paper written by Díaz-Sánchez, the Director of Institutional Development at the International Planned Parenthood Federation, Mexico City, Mexico, both stress the importance of contextualising policy and illustrate together the aim of *Population Horizons* to establish a dialogue between research, policy and practice.

Saldaña-Tejeda argues that far from preventing unwanted pregnancies, the condemnation of young motherhood in Mexico combined with state policies that heavily criminalize abortion, may lead to high rates of unmet need for contraception and cases of obstetric violence. Rather than state and non-governmental

organisations promoting pregnancy prevention programmes, policies which support a greater work-life balance for all women, and, in particular, support young mothers, would lead to better outcomes for both the mothers and their children.

Díaz-Sánchez, who writes from his experience not only with IPPF but also as Deputy Director for Family Planning at the Ministry of Health in Mexico and as the Executive Director of one of Mexico's largest providers of sexual and reproductive health services, Fundación Mexicana para la Planeación Familiar, takes a slightly different view. He argues that for the first time unwanted teen pregnancy has been recognized by the Mexican government as a high priority for public policy, with the launch this year, 2015, of a National Strategy to prevent unwanted pregnancies in the adolescent population. This includes the development and expansion of work and education for adolescents (something that Saldaña-Tejeda argues for), an expansion of contraceptive services, and comprehensive sex education in schools.

While these two slightly contrasting views require longer consideration and a robust evaluation before coming to any firm conclusions, *Population Horizons* hosts a BLOG on its website and we encourage you to consider progressing the debate further.

As this 12<sup>th</sup> volume demonstrates, *Population Horizons* will continue to map out the main lines of controversy and disagreement about policy issues and the problems of policy making raised by population change. The journal will continue to publish themed issues containing a mix of submitted manuscripts and commissioned articles, with a strong emphasis on reviews, commentaries, analytical papers and 'think pieces'.

Our over-riding aims remain the same, namely to

- publish high quality evidence-based papers;
- inform policy makers and policy researchers of developments in the field;
- make a critical assessment of the contribution of current research to policy analysis;
- identify unanswered questions and unresolved problems and
- progress the debate around the drivers, context, and challenges arising from 21<sup>st</sup> century population change.

Indeed, a more fitting heading for this first editorial of the newly launched *Population Horizons* should surely be "*Still analysing and debating the complex and contested questions raised by 21st century population change*".