

Completing population policy to meet the requirements of sustainable development in Vietnam

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- **Abstract:** Based on an interdisciplinary approach between public policy and population sociology, this article analyzes the current status of population work in Vietnam, the new requirements for population work in the context of sustainable development, thereby proposes directions for improving population policy to meet national sustainable development goals.
- **Keywords:** population policy; sustainable development.

1. Introduction

Population is a central factor in all development models; population is both the subject and the object of socio-economic policies. In Vietnam, after decades of implementing population policy - family planning, our country's population work has achieved many important achievements such as rapidly reducing the birth rate, improving reproductive health, and raising public awareness of population quality. However, new population issues in recent decades - from declining birth rate, rapid aging, gender imbalance at birth, to unreasonable population distribution and uneven population quality - are posing an urgent need to renovate thinking and policy approaches.

Implementing the sustainable development strategy with requirements on social equity, environmental protection, quality of life, and inclusiveness in enjoying development results, population work needs to be placed in an organic relationship with the pillars of sustainable development, integrated into the overall strategy, and highly adaptable to regional and group characteristics and social changes.

2. Content

2.1. Current population status of Vietnam

Outstanding achievements

Population work in Vietnam in recent times has achieved many comprehensive results, notably reflected in the scale, quality, and distribution of the population.

The total fertility rate (TFR) of our country dropped sharply from over 6 children/woman in the 1960s to 1.96 children/woman in 2023. In 2006, Vietnam reached the replacement

fertility level (2.09 children/woman)⁽¹⁾. The average population growth rate has decreased to less than 1%/year, supporting effective control of population size⁽²⁾.

Population quality has improved significantly: the infant mortality rate decreased from 44‰ in 1990 to 14‰ in 2022; the maternal mortality rate related to pregnancy decreased from 233/100,000 live births in 1990 to 46/100,000 live births in 2022⁽³⁾. The average life expectancy of the whole population reached 73.6 years, of which women reached 76.4 years, and men reached 70.8 years⁽⁴⁾.

The rate of modern contraceptive use remains high (66.7% in 2023)⁽⁵⁾, reflecting the effectiveness of communication programs and access to family planning services in the community.

The communication and education on reproductive health care and family planning has been implemented synchronously from the central to the grassroots level. The organizational system for population work from the central to the commune/ward level has been strengthened; the network of population collaborators in villages and hamlets has brought about positive results. Reproductive health care services, maternal and childcare services have been expanded in scale and improved in quality from the central to the grassroots level.

Vietnam has also initially built a specialized database system on population and reproductive health, serving the evidence-based policy making. A number of national programs have integrated population factors into development strategies, typically: the National Target Program for Sustainable Poverty Reduction, the New Rural Development Program, the Youth Development Strategy for the period 2021-2030⁽⁶⁾, and so on.

Population distribution has had positive changes, contributing to promoting socio-economic development in urban and coastal areas. Areas such as the Red River Delta and the Southeast currently account for more than 35% of the country's population but contribute nearly 60% of GDP, demonstrating their role as growth centers⁽⁷⁾. In addition, the urbanization process has contributed to the shift of labor from rural to urban areas, creating conditions for a large population to have better access to education, health care, and social services. This is an important foundation for promoting population advantages in sustainable development.

Limitations and shortcomings

Besides the above outstanding results, population work in recent times still has some limitations and shortcomings.

Firstly, there is a difference in birth rates between regions, especially some localities with persistently low birth rates

Currently, while many mountainous and rural areas still maintain high fertility rates, large cities and developed regions are facing a worryingly low fertility rate. According to the 2023 Report, some localities such as Ho Chi Minh City, Da Nang, and Ba Ria - Vung Tau have a total fertility rate (TFR) below 1.6 children/woman, lower than the replacement threshold of 2.1 children/woman - the minimum level to maintain a stable population size. In particular, Ho Chi Minh City recorded a TFR of only 1.39 in 2022 - among the lowest in the country. In contrast, many provinces in the Central Highlands and Northern mountainous areas such as Ha Giang, Son La, and Dak Lak have a TFR above 2.5, even above 3.0 - far exceeding the



Viet Running's "Vietnamese Youth Power" program provides opportunities for children to develop holistically_ Photo: vietrunning.vn

replacement level, creating a serious imbalance in population distribution by region⁽⁸⁾. This prolonged situation not only puts pressure on social security in places with high birth rates but also threatens the risk of early population aging and labor shortages in areas with low birth rates, especially large economic centers.

Secondly, the rate of population aging is increasing

By 2024, Vietnam will have more than 9.5 million people aged 65 and over, accounting for about 9.3% of the total population. It is forecasted that by 2040, this group will account for about 18%, which means that Vietnam is entering the aging population phase at a faster rate than many other countries in the region⁽⁹⁾. However, the current social security system, elderly care network, and geriatric health services in our country are still lacking in both quantity and quality, unable to keep up with the aging population, especially in rural and mountainous areas.

Thirdly, gender imbalance at birth persists

Vietnam's sex ratio at birth in 2023 is 111 boys/100 girls, significantly higher than the natural biological level of 104 to 106. The persistent sex imbalance at birth reflects gender bias in society, especially the persistent male preference and female devaluation in many rural and ethnic minority areas. The consequences may lead to a surplus of men in the future and many social and marital consequences⁽¹⁰⁾.

Fourthly, population distribution is not reasonable

By 2023, Vietnam's urban population ratio will reach 41.7%, still low compared to the average of ASEAN countries, many of which have reached over 50% of the population living

in urban areas⁽¹¹⁾. Meanwhile, in large cities such as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, technical and social infrastructure is seriously overloaded. On the contrary, rural and mountainous areas, especially the Northwest and Central Highlands, are facing labor migration, leading to a shortage of young, qualified, and skilled human resources.

Fifthly, population quality is uneven

Ethnic minorities and mountainous areas are still facing many problems in population quality, notably the existence of early marriage and consanguineous marriage. The rate of malnourished children, school dropouts, and lack of access to basic health services is still higher than the national average. Some indicators of human development such as life expectancy, education level, and living standards in this area are still at a low average level⁽¹²⁾.

Sixthly, lack of population integration into development strategy

Although Vietnam has shifted from a family planning population policy to a population and development policy, in reality, the integration of population factors into socio-economic development strategies is still limited. Current population policies still focus on birth control rather than comprehensive integration into education planning, human resource training, urban development, climate change response, or social security reform. This affects the effectiveness of mobilizing and promoting human resources for sustainable development⁽¹³⁾.

The above issues show the urgent need to develop a population policy that not only responds but also adapts, ensuring sustainability, fairness, and humanity in the development process.

2.2. Requirements for formulating population policy planning in the context of sustainable development

Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, based on three pillars: economic, social, and environmental aspects. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasize gender equality, universal health, quality education, reduced inequality, and sustainable cities. All of these goals are closely related to population issues. From a public policy approach, the policy cycle includes the following steps: problem identification, policy formulation, implementation, monitoring, and adjustment. In the context of sustainable development, population policy cannot be rigid but needs to be flexibly designed to adapt to regions, population groups, and changing trends. Population sociology approaches also require population research not only in terms of quantity but also in terms of social structure, reproductive behavior, cultural expectations, and social inequality.

In the context of implementing sustainable development goals, the requirements for population work are not only to manage the quantity and improve the quality of the population, but also to develop the population to meet the requirements of sustainable development - harmonious development between economic growth, social progress, and environmental protection. Population is not only the subject of policy adjustment but also the subject and driving force for sustainable national development. Planning and adjusting population policies are of special importance in population development to ensure humanity,

efficiency, and sustainability for the national development process in the new era. Accordingly, adjusting and improving population policies in the context of sustainable national development must meet the following requirements:

Firstly, restructuring population policy in a comprehensive and sustainable direction.

Population policy should not be limited at birth control or population size adjustment but should shift towards a comprehensive direction, focusing on quality, distribution, structure, and equity in access to development resources. Policy should be restructured to suit the three pillars of sustainable development: economic, social, and environmental aspects.

Secondly, ensuring policy adaptability and flexibility according to regions and population groups.

Vietnam is a country with uneven biological, social, and cultural population characteristics between regions. Population policies need to be designed flexibly, in accordance with local characteristics, especially in areas with low birth rates, ethnic minority areas, rapidly urbanizing areas, or areas with a rapidly aging population. Localities should be encouraged to develop action programs appropriate to specific development conditions and population situations.

Thirdly, integrating population into national development strategies and planning.

Population policy needs to be integrated into major strategies such as education development, universal health care, sustainable urbanization, labor market development, and climate change adaptation. It is necessary to develop a set of sustainable population indicators (Population-SDGs Indicators) as a basis for evaluating the effectiveness of policy integration.

Fourthly, focusing on sociological and humanistic factors in policy making. Population issues need to be viewed not as purely technical, but as the result of behavior, perception, social norms, and cultural interactions. Population policy needs to aim at changing behavior, promoting gender equality, eliminating gender stereotypes, enhancing individual and community capacity in birth control, reproductive health care, and preparing for population aging.

Fifthly, strengthening the capacity of population management and the national population data system.

Sustainable development requires an effective population management system, including human resources, institutions, finance, and technology. It is necessary to invest in building a comprehensive, updated, interconnected, and secure national population database, as a foundation for evidence-based policy making. At the same time, improve the analytical capacity and policy response of population teams at all levels.

Sixthly, innovating communication mechanisms and advocating population policies.

In the context of digital transformation and information society, population policy needs to be communicated in creative, accessible forms, targeting specific target groups. Policy advocacy at the central and local levels needs to be strengthened to raise awareness among leaders and the community about the strategic role of population in sustainable development.

The above requirements are not only placed on the specialized population agency but also require the active participation of the entire political system, sectors, levels and social

consensus to create a sustainable, humane population policy that effectively adapts to social development in the 21st century.

2.3. Adjusting and improving population policy to meet the requirements of national sustainable development

Firstly, shift from population control to sustainable population growth. Population policy needs to shift its focus from birth control to comprehensive population development, harmonizing population size, structure, distribution, and quality. Maintaining a reasonable birth rate, consistent with regional characteristics and long-term population change trends, is a key factor to ensure population stability, maintain the workforce, and promote sustainable growth.

Secondly, build population policies based on evidence and digital data. In the context of digital transformation, the collection, analysis, and utilization of accurate and up-to-date population data is the foundation for effective policy making. It is necessary to soon complete the national population database, integrate it with social security, education, health, and labor data systems to build forecasting models and assess policy impacts, thereby improving the responsiveness and flexibility of the population management system.

Thirdly, encourage childbirth in areas with low birth rates. Given the current low birth rate in many urban areas and developed regions, population policies need to have a financial support orientation, preferential childcare services, preschool education, social housing... to reduce the burden of childbearing and child-raising costs. The “friendly family” model needs to be replicated as a positive social message, contributing to encouraging responsible childbirth and improving population quality.

Fourthly, adapt to population aging and enhance social security for the elderly. Policies need to proactively adapt to the rapidly aging population. Health care programs for the elderly, development of geriatric medicine, flexible retirement, and synchronous implementation of the construction of an “elderly-friendly community” model. Raising the retirement age appropriately and supporting the elderly to participate in the labor market should also be considered as a sustainable solution.

Fifthly, narrow regional inequality and improve population quality. Population policies should focus on disadvantaged groups such as ethnic minorities, rural women, migrants, and vulnerable children. Universalizing reproductive health services, combating child marriage, and improving education and nutrition in disadvantaged areas are fundamental orientations to ensure equity in human development.

Sixthly, strengthen the inter-sectoral approach in policy formulation and implementation. Population policy is linked to other areas such as education, health, housing, employment, and environment. Therefore, there needs to be an effective coordination mechanism between ministries, sectors, and localities in policy formulation and implementation, ensuring integration and synchronization. Besides, encourage the participation of the private sector and social organizations in implementing national population targets.

Population policy must be strategic, adaptive, and interdisciplinary, ensuring that population development is the driving force and goal of sustainable national development.

This is a prerequisite for Vietnam to realize the goals in the Population Strategy to 2030 and the vision to 2045.

3. Conclusion

In the context of a global shift towards sustainable development, population policy in Vietnam needs to be restructured in an adaptive, integrated, and inter-sectoral manner. Practice shows that, although many achievements have been made in controlling population size and improving population quality, Vietnam is still facing many challenges such as low fertility, rapid population aging, gender imbalance at birth, and regional inequality in access to population services.

To address these issues, population policy needs to go beyond the traditional scope, aiming to promote the role of population as an endogenous factor, the foundation of sustainable development. Building an adaptive population policy is not only a practical requirement but also an inevitable strategic choice of Vietnam in the development process; therefore it is necessary to have strong political commitment, effective coordination at all levels, sectors, and social consensus to realize this goal ■

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● Endnotes:

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