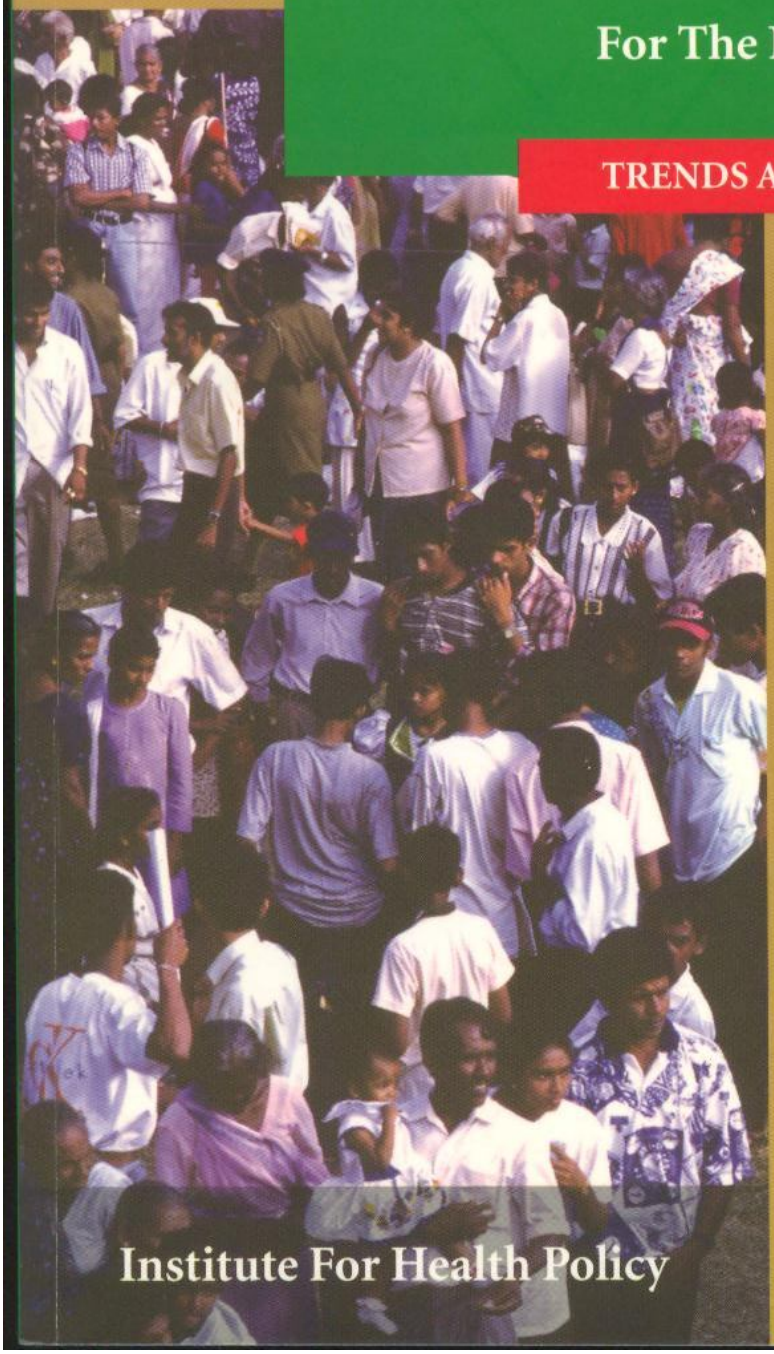
A Population Projection of Sri Lanka

For The New Millennium 2001-2101:

TRENDS AND IMPLICATIONS



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A Population Projection of Sri Lanka For The New Millennium, 2001-2101: Trends And Implications

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1. Population

Executive Summary

The population projection developed for the period 2001 to 2101, using standard, high and low assumptions of fertility, mortality and international migration components, demonstrate important changes in size and structure of the future Sri Lankan population. As observed in the standard projection the total population, which amounted to 19.7 million in 2006, will reach its peak of 21.9 million in 2031, adding approximately 2.2 million to the present population. In preparation for this change the focus should be on the possible drain in the limited natural resource base, the many socio-economic and cultural implications related to these changes, and the necessary policy planning. The current population spread shows a skewed distribution favouring the Western Province, which has a population density which is approximately ten times higher than the Sri Lankan average. Much of the future addition to the total population of Sri Lanka is expected from the Western Province, which would aggravate the existing urban population problems and consequences, particularly in the unplanned urban environments.

It is important to note the implications of achieving below replacement level fertility, which will result in a decline of the total population, as well as a change in the structure of the total population. All three trajectories of the projections show a peaking in the population and a subsequent decline, thereafter, which will result in an increase in the demand for basic amenities in the near future and a decline in that demand thereafter. This fluctuation in demand should be taken into consideration when allocating resources for long term investments in the fields of health, education and housing, etc.

The reversal of the gender balance, favouring females, is another feature demanding policy focus, as this implies significant socio-economic and cultural consequences. This change will generate a significant difference in the participation of females in the labour force and in the occupational structure, which will be supported by the fertility decline towards below replacement level, as females will then have more time for such activity. Therefore, the creation of suitable job opportunities for the added labour force participants, especially for educated young women will be a challenge for the policy makers and planners.

Building up necessary infrastructure and institutional requirements to fulfill the demands of the rapidly growing elderly population, related to their health, economic and psychological requirements is another challenge. In addition, in relation to the labour force, the important factor to take note of will be the ageing and shrinkage of the labour force, and not ageing per se, as the changes occurring will result in an increase in the number of older workers, relative to the number of youth, and the slowdown in the labour force due to reduced supply of prime age workers.

The observed dramatic decline of the child population will reduce the commitment on financial resources to provide food, clothing, education and health for this group, which should be diverted to enhance the quality of their necessities, especially with respect to educational requirements, without releasing additional resources. In contrast to the child population the working age population (15-59 years) will grow in numbers until 2026, beyond that a decrease is projected.

Changes in the age structure will ultimately result in the change of dependency ratio with the child dependency decreasing, while the old age dependency increases. The projected changes in these two segments of dependency in the Sri Lankan population show a reduction in the total dependency ratio from 55.0 in 2001 to its lowest of 53.6 dependent persons in 2006 after which it will increase, and as a result of the rapid increase in the old age dependency, the total dependency will increase significantly after 2041. The changes in the dependency ratios as projected will result in Sri Lanka having the best demographic environment or "window of opportunity" that is conducive for rapid economic development in the five year period around 2006. Since this opportunity will not last long, Sri Lankan planners should not miss out on the demographic bonus and should work to gainfully utilize this opportunity, which would create a positive socio–economic and political environment in Sri Lanka.

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About the Author

W. Indralal De Silva is Professor of Demography (Chair) and Head of the Department of Demography, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka where he has served since 1979. In addition, he has extended his services to several government institutions, NGOs and private sector organizations during the past decades. He has published a number of books and monographs and presented over 30 research papers at international conferences and has also published over 40 research articles in reputed local and international journals. His research interests have been on fertility, mortality, migration, ageing, population and labour force projections, and reproductive health in developing counties with special emphasis on Sri Lanka.

Professor De Silva obtained his Bachelor's degree in Development Studies from the University of Colombo in 1977 and his Masters and Doctoral degrees in Demography from the Australian National University in 1985 and 1990, respectively. He was a Visiting Professor at the National University of Singapore in 2004, Harvard School of Public Health during 1996-98 and a Visiting Fellow at the Australian National University in 1990-91.

About the Book

This publication, *A Population Projection of Sri Lanka: 2001-2101*, is both timely and important. It provides long term projections of population showing the changing age and sex structure of the population under three different scenarios. It is evident that from the current youthful population, Sri Lanka's population will swell in the middle age groups in about three decades from now, and thereafter would rapidly age beyond the second half of this century. These demographic changes will pose important short and long term opportunities and challenges for socio-economic development in Sri Lanka. The final outcome of these however, will depend on the effectiveness of strategies that will be adopted in the coming decades. I am pleased that Professor Indralal De Silva who was one of my students in population studies at the University of Colombo has undertaken this useful study.

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