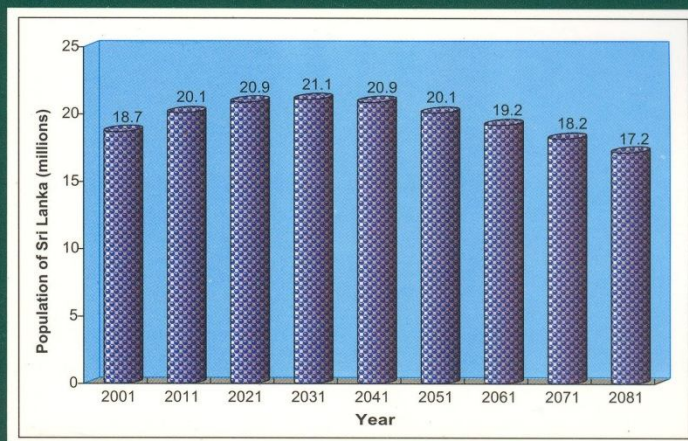


Beyond Twenty Million: Projecting the Population of Sri Lanka 2001-2081



W. Indralal De Silva



INSTITUTE OF POLICY STUDIES

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Abstract

In the past decades, Sri Lanka has been passing through the demographic transition shifting from high to lower level of fertility and mortality. Considerable progress in increasing the life expectancy over many decades has been noted. Between 1946 and 1991, the life expectancy at birth has increased by 24 years for men and by 30 years for women.

Alongside the declining trends in mortality, fertility decline has been evident since the early 1960s. Fertility declined from 5.3 live births per woman in 1953 to 1.9 in 1995-2000. Thus, Sri Lanka is one of the poorest countries in the world to have achieved below replacement level fertility, where replacement fertility has been defined as 2.1 children per woman. Once the fertility levels reach a downward trend, the forces which led to the initiation and continuation of that course will not cease to operate, even when the fertility reaches replacement level.

Besides mortality and fertility, international migration also plays an important role in deciding the total population of Sri Lanka. In Sri Lanka, the currently prevailing major migration flow is the streaming of semi and unskilled workers to the West Asian countries in large numbers for employment. The trend which began in late 1970s has increased significantly over the last two decades.

As a result of changes in fertility, mortality and migration components, the Sri Lankan population has changed significantly. It has grown almost eight times since the first national census of 1871, which recorded only 2.4 million people. The population size has increased from 14.8 million in 1981 to 18.7 million in 2001. The doubling of the population took place in 54 years between 1871 and 1925 and it doubled again in 35 years between 1925 and 1960.

According to the standard projection, the population would reach 20.1 million by 2011, and could attain its peak by 2031 with a size of 21.1 million. A near-zero population growth rate would be attained during 2021 to 2036 where the total size of the population could be around 21 million. However, beyond 2040s, primarily due to significantly low level of fertility, the total size of the Sri Lankan population would decline.

Taking 18.7 million as the population size in 2001, it is expected that an addition of 2.4 million in the next three decades could create a number of demographic, social, economical, environmental and cultural threats to Sri Lankan society. Alongside an increase in the total size, the Sri Lankan population will undergo major changes in its age-sex structure and distribution in the coming decades. The reversal of the gender balance favouring females is an important feature in the new millennium. Sri Lankan policy planners will have to confront many issues that are expected to emerge in the near future, from being one of the few developing countries to reach well below replacement fertility, and cope with the resulting ageing of the population.