

## **Introduction**

# **Demographic transformations and inequalities in Latin America**



# Demographic transformations and inequalities in Latin America

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The Latin American demographic dynamic has changed profoundly over recent decades. By looking at the trends and levels of some indicators we can predict more important shifts in the future. The consequences of these past and current changes will unquestionably affect Latin Americans' lives, all the more so now they are bonded to global transformations and facing harsh climate change. The region is recognized as the most unequal, economically speaking, and the differences in trends and levels of almost all demographic indicators closely reflect the enormous inequalities in scenarios of high rates of poverty. On the other hand, there has been a lot of progress in several areas and most of this progress has a direct or indirect effect, brought about by the demographic transformations. These demographic transformations and current inequalities offer major challenges to planners and policy makers and demographers have to be up-to-date to inform correctly about the trends, levels and relationships among all the socio-demographic issues. This book *Demographic transformations and inequalities in Latin America: Historical Trends and Recent Patterns* deals with some of these issues, analyzed by experts in each topic. But before proceeding any further, as everything else in life, it is crucial to share some stories behind the scenes that gave rise to this book.

The original idea of bringing these topics together in the book, as mentioned previously, came from discussions that took place following an invitation ALAP received from the Population Association of America (PAA) and the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population (IUSSP) to organize sessions at their conferences in 2009. For these sessions, we had a limitation on the number of subjects to bring to the discussion, but they were chosen based on certain premises. First and foremost, the topics were selected with the purpose of creating an opportunity for members of the associations to learn more or follow up on important demographic

changes happening in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). Additionally, and it comes as no surprise to many scholars, most LAC countries had received a seal of “graduation” for funding purposes and accordingly the support for research, for building capacity and for other programs of actions had almost evaporated in no time, hence we would like to illustrate with the current demographic situation why this loss of funding would pose a problem in the future, faced with the still frail and unconsolidated institutions we have in our member states. Moreover, if nothing else, LAC history and the path it has followed in its demographic dynamics, on the one hand, would show and serve as a good example of the considerations policy makers and others must take into account in order not to repeat the same mistakes in other regions. On the other hand, it would enable us to learn more about the policies and processes experienced in the region, looking mainly at the real needs of the population. With that in mind, we proceeded to organize these two sessions, for which we very much appreciated the insights and broad experience of Dora Celton, President of ALAP at the time.

Firstly, we realized that it was important to show the trends in fertility and contraceptive use in LAC, since it was commonly believed that fertility and contraception were no longer crucial issues for Latin American families. Nonetheless, it was important to stress, amongst other things, that although fertility was reaching replacement levels in several countries, some were still lagging behind; that even within low fertility countries there are large socio-economic and regional differences in the level of fertility; that the fertility schedule is very different when compared to developed countries’ fertility schedules and it poses enormous consequences and still needs to be explained; that the burden of regulating fertility still falls on the woman, even more so in contexts of very low fertility, also posing major gender issues; that access to contraception has not yet been adequately regulated and the consequences of misuse or lack of use has been devastating for women who wanted no more children, forcing major issues of public health due to unsafe pregnancy interruption. Moreover, the population was experiencing all these events at the same time as large sections of the population were already facing the demographic challenges of below replacement fertility. In order to discuss all these issues, we organized a session on *“Fertility, Contraception and Reproductive Health in Latin America”*, presented at the PAA Meeting in April 2009 in Detroit. All the papers presented at this session are in Part II of this book. The session was commented by Jose Miguel Guzmán, who made an excellent suggestion concerning the provision of information on family planning policies in different countries and compared it to the results in fertility level, fertility schedule and distribution of contraceptive use in these countries. Although this was a challenging suggestion, we carried out part of it for the publication of this book by

inviting reproductive health specialists from a large number of LAC countries, to write a brief account of the family planning laws and practices of the last 40 years in their respective countries. The results of this endeavor are shown in Part III of the book and raise very interesting issues. The relationship among each family planning context, the current context of fertility levels, schedules and use of contraception in each country is a major task that still needs to be addressed.

Secondly, we felt it to be commendable to put together a debate on some of the main demographic issues LAC is facing, mainly aimed at discussions on population policies and public policies to alleviate poverty and decrease inequality. Among these topics we selected urbanization and the rise of metropolises, international migration, fertility and reproductive behavior and aging to be discussed at the session organized at the IUSSP Conference in September 2009, in Marrakech. The session title was *"Demographic transformations, convergences and inequalities in Latin America: what the future holds?"* and boasted much respected specialists in the field. For the discussion of the papers, we invited an expert from outside the region, Ian Pool, from New Zealand, who has presented some very important points for discussion and has done us the honor of presenting his written comments in this book. As regards the organization of the book, we decided to present the papers from this session in Part I, although they were actually discussed later in the year, because they raise discussions on broader topics.

In brief, what are some of the points of common knowledge concerning the major demographic trends in LAC? Mainly that the demographic transition is underway and almost complete in every country. Life expectancy has increased almost to the same levels reached in developed countries. Fertility rates have declined from over six children per woman to around the replacement level in the last 40 years. At the same time, migration from rural to urban areas has created large cities with huge socio-economic heterogeneity. Changes in age structure and composition become visible very rapidly, and although there is convergence in all the demographic events in LAC at the average national level, there remain enormous inequalities. International migration is a major issue for some countries, but for most there is still only incipient movement. The papers presented in this book will emphasize some of these large demographic and urban transformations in all Latin American countries, beginning with the growing urbanization, which facilitated many other changes, and which we believe is one of the bigger challenges for the future of LA development. International migration was a second topic selected for discussion because it is an event currently experiencing profound change and may be a source of major confrontation in the future. The third topic explores the tendencies in terms of fertility rates and reproductive behavior, which

reveals the difficult road to lower fertility that women and couples have trodden to fulfill a basic right to access to reproductive health, which was so heavily stressed in the ICPD Programme of Action. This topic is analyzed in more depth in Part II and III of the book, showing some still unresolved issues. The fourth topic discussed is population aging which, in the absence of major economic transformations in the near future, has great potential to create major social problems within the current context of social inequality. We then summarize some of the issues discussed in the chapters in Part I and II and then proceed to discuss some of the main concerns unleashed by the reading of these short histories of family planning laws and practices in the 12 countries; these are concerns that must be addressed in order to achieve the full development of reproductive health in the future in the LAC region.

Part I of the book named *“Demographic transformations, convergences and inequalities in Latin America: what the future holds?”* starts with the topic of urban growth and urban mobility in the region, which confer major challenges for the future, in terms of reduction of poverty and inequality. In Chapter 1, **José Marcos P. da Cunha** and **Jorge Rodríguez Vignoli** present information and discuss issues that are related to the fact that LAC is the most urbanized among the developing regions and basically due to a large population concentration in very large cities. This fact confers some advantages all of which relate to the availability of urban services and goods, as long as we are not talking about the quality of these services, and several disadvantages, mainly related to a disorderly growth that has occurred on account of virtually non-existent expansion planning and due to migration from rural to urban areas, including massive sections of the poorer population, over the last few decades. The authors provide a diagnosis of major trends in urban growth in the region as a whole and, pointing to the cases of the larger cities, they draw attention to the need for specific public policies designed to tackle the obstacles that cause large sections of the population to be left out of full human development and proper access to basic human rights.

In Chapter 2, the paper by **Alejandro I. Canales** focuses on international migration in the region within a contemporary global context and suggests future important transformations in the region. The author identifies and analyzes two large flows of migrants from LA. The largest, most widely studied flow to the USA, and another which has become more prominent in recent years, to Spain. These flows originate in different countries and the migrants have different characteristics, as the author points out. Although still more economically and labour-driven, the migration from LA has become larger and more diverse. As the author states, international migration is not only intensifying but it is also becoming more extensive and the

analysis of these two flows reveals important new trends. Several other migrant destinations from LA can already be seen, but more importantly, some LA internal flows are also becoming visible and this points to future transformations that are knocking on LA's door and are the consequences of transformations in the region, but it is mainly due to the lack of economic transformations leading to development that does not accompany the demographic transformations. To follow these new transformations, though, we need to produce data which is adequate, reliable, and as accurate as possible, which is still a major challenge to data producers since it is a very complex event that needs international cooperation in order to produce comparable information.

In Chapter 3, **Laura Rodriguez Wong** revisits a well documented trend in Latin America, since it has been the center of demographic attention in recent decades, namely fertility rates. Rodriguez provides a very good summary of the different characteristics and trends in fertility decline in Latin America that have been attracting the attention of many scholars; these include the high rates of adolescent fertility, the socio-economic inequalities through to adequate contraceptive access, the high rates of unwanted fertility, and the high incidence of unsafe abortions. The author draws our attention to the different durations of demographic transition in some countries and to the importance of taking this into account in public policy implementation. The author anticipates an even steeper decline in fertility in the region, which will extend the duration of the relative demographic advantages, economically speaking, due to the age structure of the population, but warns that the burden of the aging process will be heavier if no economic measures are advanced. This leads us to consider that fertility decline imposes some challenges for the future due to age structure transformations, but it also brings with it some advantages such as having smaller cohorts of young population, and this has to be brought into the policy agenda. We would add that, if population age structures matters for policy implementations, the volume of population in each age group also matters, and in some local contexts it matters even more than the relative age distribution for specific policy design and implementation. As the author asserts *"having more time experiencing low TDR [total dependency ratio] due to the lessening in the volume of live births is an opportunity to optimize use of resources, whatever they may be"* (p. 126).

The process of population aging in LA is discussed in Chapter 4 by **Gilbert Brenes-Camacho**. This subject imposes major challenges for some LA countries in the future, due to the speed of the demography transition and, as a consequence, the short period of time in which the older population will grow in relative and absolute numbers. The author discusses these challenges, showing the differences between

countries and goes on to make some policy recommendations, mainly regarding social security coverage, where LA is facing serious problems at the present time due to its design and also to unusually large participation in the informal labour market, amongst other issues. Yet again, it is important to mention that the aging process in LA is not unique in the world, but what it is very specific is that aging is already happening, and will happen faster, in a context of a very unequal society, where access to education, health, job markets and many other social and cultural human rights are denied to large sections of the population.

In Part II of the book, the papers are mainly related to fertility and contraceptive use. This part was named after the PAA session "*Fertility, Contraception and Reproductive Health in Latin America*". Chapter 5, by **Suzana Cavenaghi** and **José Eustáquio Diniz Alves** show a panorama of fertility transition from the mid-1980's to the most recent data in the current decade and the method-mix of contraceptive use in several LA countries. The authors draw attention to the fact that fertility decline and the increased use of modern methods has occurred in diverse settings, or in their own words "*The desire for a smaller family was strong among all populations and people sought different ways to keep down the number of children born, although not without consequences, mainly in terms of unequal access to the best methods of fertility regulation and with high rates of unsafe interruption of unplanned pregnancies*" (p., 162). Additionally, the authors draw attention to the fact that the uncompleted implementation of comprehensive reproductive planning left out not only the poorest in the population but also young women. Although the current use of contraception is high in almost all countries, with some exceptions, first use mostly occurs after the first experience of sexual intercourse and most often after the first pregnancy or live birth, leading to a high prevalence of mistimed births, as well as the interruption of pregnancy, by unsafe or safe abortions. Another important trend observed, relating to the previous statement, is the occurrence of a very young pattern of fertility schedule even in countries that are well advanced in fertility transition.

An excellent picture of the rates of unwanted and wanted births is presented in Chapter 6 by **John B. Casterline** and **Jennifer A. Mendoza**, providing a variety of indicators with historical trends and the most recent patterns for all LA countries that have data available. The figures are shockingly high even for countries that have already arrived at lower fertility rates. The authors conclude that, overall, one third of births are unwanted although there is large variability amongst countries. The pattern in general shows that the unwanted rates are higher where total fertility rates are higher, corroborating the analysis presented in the paper by Cavenaghi and Alves that contraceptive use, mainly the modern and most effective ones, are not within the reach of all socio-economic classes and all age groups. Another important

feature discussed is that recent estimates of wanted total fertility rates are all below replacement level, without any exceptions in these countries, which amounts to more than 70% of the population in the region. Hence, it is not hard to conclude that, if reproductive rights were achieved for all groups, LA total fertility rates would already be below replacement level.

In Chapter 7, **Luis Rosero-Bixby**, **Teresa Castro Martin** and **Teresa Martin Garcia** show a new trend already observed amongst very educated women concerning fertility preferences. At first glance, the title of this chapter (Is Latin America starting to retreat from early and universal childbearing?) would seem to be somewhat incongruous when set against the reproductive picture portrayed in the previous chapter, because it looks for and finds patterns of women retreating from motherhood. However, it merely illustrates the variety of behaviors and different sets of issues in the demographic transformations in the region. While access to reproductive health is still not within the reach of women who want to have only a few children or who want space between births, already significant portions of the population do not want to have any children. As the authors discussed, there are a lot of constraints that may explain the tendency for women to retreat from motherhood amongst the very well educated (college educated or higher) and gender inequalities, at all levels, largely account for explanations for this behavior. This new transformation in the demographic arena, together with larger proportions of women desiring to have only one child poses major challenges for some LA countries in the future.

In Chapter 8, **Maren Andrea Jimenez** and **Jorge Rodriguez Vignoli** present a careful and outstanding exploration of the set of reproductive health indicators for monitoring the Millennium Development Goal for the universal access to reproductive health. The authors contend that, though including this target was a great improvement on the previous targets, the indicators used for monitoring reproductive health are still limited. The authors explore and propose some indicators that should be monitored but recognize that the challenges imposed by data limitations are serious and have to be overcome. Among many other very interesting analyses, the authors conclude that the social and economic inequalities in LA, the limited access of the young population to reproductive health and the omission of men in reproductive matters are barriers to achieving comprehensive access and the exercise of reproductive health in the region.

Part III of this book brings a very interesting set of short stories about family planning policies, legislation and practices, as told by specialists in reproductive health across the region. The stories include countries in different stages of fertility transition but most tell of a similar trajectory in the implementation of norms and laws that could guarantee full realization of reproductive rights. The first general

observation that may be made, concerning these 12 countries, is that the legal implementation of family planning is recent, although fertility transition started on average 40 years ago, and in most countries these laws are not fully implemented in practice or did not have an effective guarantee of reproductive rights, because among other reasons, the laws do not cover all segments of the population, or they omit some contraceptive methods, or do not include conception as well as contraception, or because it is very recent<sup>1</sup>, with less than 3 years of regulation, or a combination of these factors. The second, more generalized comment that may be made is that, in most countries, the State has not taken responsibility for offering contraception and conception methods (Costa Rica is a fine exception for contraceptive methods as is Cuba, due to the political regime), or limited the types of contraception offered, and instead, non-governmental organizations took the place of the State, at least at the beginning of fertility transition. The third comment and one that causes most concern is that, looking at the path that each country has followed, it becomes clear that national institutions or organizations responsible for the implementation, regulation and monitoring of the laws or norms are very weak and there is no assurance that it can endure economic or political crises.

A complete reading of these stories is worthwhile, hence we do not go into detail about specific aspects of the various countries here, only some general notes are required. Firstly, it is interesting to find out about the situation in Argentina and Uruguay, which at the beginning of the 1960's already had low rates of fertility compared to other countries in the region. It is remarkable to note that access to modern contraception in these two countries had been so strict and the biggest burden was on the population to regulate its own fertility, frequently having to resort to abortion. Moreover, in Argentina and Uruguay, the implementation of laws to regulate family planning access took a longer time than in the other countries that economically or politically were lagging behind in the 1970's and 1980's. Cuba is somewhat different, mainly due to the political regime and the fact that abortion was performed in government institutions, although it was not legally regulated for many years. There are only a handful of countries where the private sectors or NGOs can be identified as being the pioneers in family planning (Panama, Venezuela, Peru, Brazil, Paraguay, Colombia, Honduras), however they differ in terms of the path subsequently followed, where some saw the State taking a large part of the responsibility for providing family planning (as in the first three countries mentioned), others have relied on the private sectors, mainly pharmacies (Brazil and Paraguay), and others are still very dependent on the NGO's and other private

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<sup>1</sup> Or proper regulations are still lacking, as in the case of Haiti.

organizations (Colombia and Honduras). In Costa Rica, as mentioned previously, the government took action from the beginning of fertility transition not only to provide contraception, but also had norms and legislation regulating access. The case of Haiti is somewhat different, even recently the country has seen a very complicated situation regarding family planning programs, lacking State action and policies and enjoys scant participation by the NGOs, and only more recently has it invested more effectively in family planning. The common thread though is that the most needy population in these countries have an unfulfilled need for family planning that cannot be ignored in the future.

The richness of each chapter of the book will, at the same time, show very important aspects of demographic changes and some challenges to overcome in the region, and we expect that it will instill in the reader the desire to find out more about what will happen to our region in the future. As drawn to our attention by the comments of Ian Pool, the word transformation describes very well what has happened to Latin America in the last 40 years. Compared to the world's transformations in regard to population, we can add the adjective "rapid" to this. We believe that this fact makes LA demographic transformations an even bigger challenge for policy makers. To make it even more difficult, the different pace and timing of these transformations by socio-economic groups result in different responses government and institutions have to deal with in order to be more effective in diminishing the differences. Demographers are urged to collaborate and should be willing to participate more closely in public policy diagnoses and implementation and monitoring of programs that allow for human development in a fairer world.

