

IS INTERGENERATIONAL SOLIDARITY REALLY ON THE DECLINE? CAUTIONARY EVIDENCE FROM THAILAND

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A common theme in much of the literature about ageing in developing countries is that the elderly fare poorly in the course of modern development as a result of the social, economic and demographic changes that are part and parcel of the process (Treas & Logue 1986). While the impact of development is likely to vary both across and within societies and over time, recent trends and current patterns in family support exchanges in Thailand provides cautionary evidence against assuming inevitability of declines in intergenerational solidarity. Fears that increased migration of children, urbanization, reduced fertility, ideational change and other features associated with development will broadly and seriously undermine the well being of the Thai older population so far appear unjustified. Family support networks involving Thai older age parents and their adult children remain intact along a number of important dimensions despite extensive social and economic development. Indeed, the economic growth that has led to improving standards of living for the population in general has benefited the material well-being of older persons as well. For example, compared to just over a decade or two ago, older Thais live in better constructed houses and their households have far more appliances and amenities to make daily life more convenient (Knodel & Chayovan 2008).

The vast majority of older Thais continue to receive material support from children and for over half (55%), children represent their main source of income, a pattern that has changed little over recent decades. Despite substantial and indeed increased migration of adult children, very few rural elderly appear to be deserted. A substantial majority (71%) still either live with or next to a child. In addition the vast majority of migrant children keep in contact with their parents through visits, by phone, or both. The advent and recent spread of cell phones, has provided a new and effective way for elderly parents and distant children to keep in touch. Migrant children also typically provide financial support. Although in some cases support is mainly of token value in others substantial amounts are provided. Many parents also report that major household appliances or home improvements were paid for by migrant children (Knodel et al. 2007).

Children who moved to urban areas, especially to Bangkok, are more likely to provide significant remittances than children who migrated to elsewhere in Thailand and are at least as likely to maintain social contact. A substantial share of older age parents take responsibility for grandchildren left in their care by migrant children thus facilitating their ability to take employment in settings in which providing childcare by themselves would be difficult. Many rural parents also provide migrant children with farm produce and occasional significant financial help in response to special circumstances. Thus assumptions that migration of children, especially to urban settings,

particularly erodes intergenerational solidarity seem unwarranted.

At the same time, living arrangements are clearly changing as shown below:

	% coresident with a child	% alone	% only with spouse	% alone or with spouse only
All elderly				
1986	76.9	4.3	6.7	11.1
1994	72.8	3.6	11.6	15.2
2002	65.7	6.5	14.0	20.6
2007	59.4	7.6	16.3	23.9

The proportion of older persons who co-reside with children has steadily declined over the last two decades while the percent that live alone or only with their spouse has increased. These changes reflect increased migration of adult children and the smaller family sizes of cohorts who recently reached older age. Living independently, however, is not necessarily viewed unfavorably by older Thais. Almost 90% of parents interviewed in the 2006 Migration Impact Survey agreed with the statement “If parents are old and in good health, it is not necessary for children to live with or nearby them as long as children visit and keep in contact”. The recent increased ability to keep in contact with migrant children by cell phones appears to be changing attitudes towards the need for children to be nearby as long parents do not need frequent personal care (Knodel & Saengtienchai 2007).

Family members, and particularly children, continue to be the main persons providing assistance to older persons who need help with the basic activities of daily life. Migrant children also sometimes return when an acute health problem arises and in some cases facilitate the parents’ ability to access superior health services in urban areas. Moreover, improved roads and means of transportation enable children living elsewhere to more rapidly reach parents to provide assistance and at least temporary care if needed.

In brief, recent Thai experience does not conform to many expectations that link modern development to the demise of family intergenerational solidarity. Instead, parents and adult children appear to exercise human agency to adapt to the changing social and economic environment brought about by development in ways that permit maintaining relationships and support exchanges. In this sense, the Thai experience seems far more consistent with expectations that social and economic change associated with development leads to the modification of extended family relations rather than their demise.

This ‘modified extended family’ perspective, initially proposed almost half a century ago to interpret family change in advanced industrial and post-industrial societies, appears quite relevant for interpreting shifts in the form of intergenerational solidarity in the context of today’s developing world (Litwak 1960). It implies that, although development involves structural changes in the

economy that lead to greater geographical dispersion of family members, those affected adapt in ways that modify the form of the family but that still permit extended family relations and many of their functions to be maintained (Litwak 1960; Litwak and Kulis 1987; Smith 1998). According to this view, greater spatial separation precludes neither financial assistance to members elsewhere nor the maintenance of emotional ties and social exchange. Instead, technological change, especially with respect to advances in transportation and communication, permit family members to sustain relationships and continue to fulfill some of the associated obligations that previously required geographical proximity.

Although intergenerational solidarity appears sustained in Thailand up to present, increasing proportions of older persons who are geographically separated from all their adult children and have only few children pose important challenges for the future, particularly concerning how needs for long term personal care of the elderly will be met. Can the pervasive pattern of family members, and especially children, as the primary caregivers be maintained? This is one of the most important challenges that Thai society faces in the future course of population ageing.

Many other changes will accompany the decline in numbers of living children, increased migration and other developments that potentially challenge family support networks. These include expansions and improvements in public and private health provision, social security and other forms of formal support, rapidly increasing computer literacy and associated means of communication, and improved educational composition of both adult children and their older age parents as better educated cohorts move up the age structure. Thus any modifications in intergenerational family forms will occur in a different social, economic, and technological context than has prevailed even in the recent past. The fact that the cultural roots of filial obligation still appear to be strong in Thailand suggests that accommodation to this changing situation may continue in ways that modify but still preserve family intergenerational solidarity. Continuing to monitor the situation of rural Thai elders in this changing environment is important not only for the theoretical and conceptual debates surrounding issues of ageing, family, and intergenerational relations but is also crucial for the development of informed policies and programs that can realistically address the needs of the rapidly increasing older population. Hopefully adaptations by family and state will complement each other and allow the quality of life for its older population to continue to improve.