

PS 2.5

DIVERSE VALUES AND ETHICS IN DESIGNING POPULATION POLICIES

| BACKGROUND

Demographic policies are among the most influential aspects of decision making in the health sector, but the values embodied in different choices are not commonly analysed.

Population policies or “demographic engineering”, as some advocates have called it, is contentious, shaped by values and ideologies. Defined as “a specific set of governmental objectives relative to the population magnitude and/or composition together with the instruments by which it may be possible to achieve them”, population policies related to increasing birthrates are typically categorised as being pro-natalist, and those intended to decrease birthrates are anti-natalist, although population policies also consider issues of migration and mortality. Countries use targets (eg a one-child policy) or a series of incentives (eg cash or kind subsidies) or disincentives (eg discontinuation of benefits for larger families) or legislative actions (eg limiting access to contraception). However, there has been an increasing acknowledgement that it is important to address the factors influencing the number of children people wish to have. The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), held in Cairo, Egypt in 1994 highlighted the importance of taking a rights approach to reproductive health⁷. While strides have been made in access to reproductive health, there are underserved communities (eg differently abled groups) and given the increase in mean age of the first birth, the need for alternative reproductive service support.

| OBJECTIVES

The overall objective of this session is to examine how values shape health policy using the case of population policies across different country contexts and:

- To learn about the intended and unintended consequences of values and ethics on health equity;
- To identify mechanisms to enable health systems to better respond to them to ensure equitable population policies;
- To equip participants on how to frame values and ethics in designing population policies.

Framework

Speakers will address issues such as equity, interventions, governance and political issues, as articulated in the framework by Velez et al. This framework identifies goal-related (eg equity), technical (eg efficiency), governance (eg authority), and situational (eg political system) values shape policies for health across the policy cycle⁸. The session will emphasise sharing experiences, encourage mutual learning and refine existing frameworks to enable applicability of lessons learned to diverse contexts.

Key issues

The session will focus on the issue of population policy through country case studies where pro-natalist and anti-natalist approaches are implemented and will also consider implications for underrepresented groups such as double-income no kids (DINKS) in these discussions. Indeed, one of the challenges of articulating policies is that some of the underlying values are hidden, impacting sub-sections of the population.



Speaker / Speaker

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(Former Minister of Health)

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Dasho Dechen Wangmo heads the PEMA Secretariat, Bhutan's national agency for mental health and child protection. She previously served as Bhutan's first female Minister for Health (2018-2023), leading major health reforms and the national COVID-19 response with distinction.

Before entering politics, Dasho Dechen worked as an international public health consultant, providing technical assistance on health systems strengthening, governance, and strategic planning across nine countries in the Southeast Asia region. She is the founder of the Bhutan Cancer Society and Lhaksam, Bhutan's network of people living with HIV, and has served as an Advisory Board Member of the Bhutan Foundation for nearly a decade.

Her contributions have been recognized with several national honors, including the Red Scarf in 2020, one of Bhutan's highest civilian distinctions and the National Order of Merit (Gold) in 2016 from His Majesty the King. Internationally, she has served as President of the 74th World Health Assembly (2021), Executive Board Member of WHO, Board Member of Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, and Member of the Global Leaders Group on Antimicrobial Resistance.

Dasho Dechen holds a Master of Public Health (Global Health Epidemiology) from the Yale School of Public Health and a Bachelor's in Cardiopulmonary Science (Magna Cum Laude) from Northeastern University, USA. She was also honored with Yale's Distinguished Alumni Award.