

Landholding and Fertility Relationship: A Review of the Empirical Evidence

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The recent availability of empirical evidence gathered from a number of demographic surveys in agrarian societies has led to a debate on the nature and extent of relationship between landholding and fertility. The discussions have yielded plausible ways in which access to land influences fertility behaviour. The main focus of this paper is on an examination of theories relating to the land-fertility relationship and a review of empirical studies on the topic. The results of the empirical studies are presented in a tabular form. The available evidence at the micro and macro levels confirms the existence of a positive relationship between land and fertility. The theoretical arguments on the relationship are reviewed and the suggested land-fertility linkages then examined in the light of the available evidence. Finally, prospects for further research are discussed.

The recent availability of empirical evidence gathered from a number of demographic surveys in agrarian societies has led to a debate on the nature and extent of relationship between landholding and fertility behaviour (Stokes and Schutjer, 1984; Cain, 1985, 1986; Stokes, et al., 1986; Thomas, 1991; Clay and Johnson, 1992). The main disagreement is about the causal direction of the relationship. The debate has yielded several plausible ways in which land operates on fertility, viz., (1) large landholding may raise households' need for labour and consequently fertility, i.e., there is a positive relationship between landholding and fertility (land-labour demand hypothesis); (2) land is adjusted to accommodate changes in the labour force of the household i.e., landholding being influenced by fertility (reverse causation hypothesis); (3) landholding increases fertility not by increasing demand for children but by increasing supply of children or natural fertility (supply effect); (4) ownership of land reduces the importance of children as a source of old age security and thus, fertility (land-security hypothesis); and (5) extent of land-fertility relationship depends on institutions like market for land, labour and produce. The relationship is certainly quite complex and includes a number of direct and indirect linkages. These theoretical issues on the cause effect mechanism of the relationship and empirical evidence need closer look separately on each of these dimensions.

The main focus of this paper is on an examination of theories relating to access to land and fertility and a review of empirical studies on the topic in order to identify research gaps in this area. The first section of the paper presents the empirical evidence on the landholding-fertility relationship, primarily in a tabular form. The second section reviews the theoretical arguments and hypotheses on the causal nature of such relationships. The hypotheses are then examined against the evidence in the third section. The last section of the paper discusses the issues for further research in the area.

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