

# The Demographics of a Village of Recently Settled Hunter-Gatherers in Thailand

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## Introduction

The Mla Bri are well-known in Thailand both for being the smallest of the northern Thai hill tribes, and the “last” of the hunter-gatherers. The Mla Bri speak a language which is of Mon-Khmer origin, and most similar to Tin (Rischel 1995, 2000, 2007). Endogamy is strongly encouraged by the Mla Bri themselves in a context of their status as a pariah group relative to neighboring groups of Hmong, northern Thai, and other groups (see e.g. Jansen and Sorenson 2006, and Weber 2015/1921: 51-2).

Numbering about 400 people in 2013, the known Thai Mla Bri are found today in three small settlements attached to villages of Hmong or northern Thai. A fourth group is assisted by a project of HRH Princess Sirindhorn in Nan Province and is independent of any village, although they maintain contact with the other three groups of Mla Bri. Until the 1990s though, all Mla Bri lived primarily in forest areas where they were known for their reclusiveness. Until that time, the Mla Bri moved frequently in order to hunt, gather, and occasionally hire themselves out as laborers on remote farms of Hmong, northern Thai, and others (see Siam Society 1963, Bernatzik 1938/1958). Since roughly 1993, and particularly since 2001 when the Mla Bri were provided formal recognition and citizenship papers by the Thai government, the Mla Bri adapted their lifestyle and became part of the broader world of Thailand. Mla Bri children began attending school, a successful malaria eradication program was completed, medical services (especially prenatal and infant care) were provided, roads and transportation services established, the electrical grid extended to the new Mla Bri houses, and systematic access to markets developed. Traditional hunting and gathering activities continue, but they are restricted by access to forest areas which, besides being over-hunted, also came under the control of the Thai central government (Nimonjiya 2013, and Long, Long, and Waters 2013).

The Mla Bri probably once existed over a much larger area and probably spoke various dialects (Rischel, 2007), and three extant, closely related dialects of the Mla Bri language have been identified. Styled as Mlabri “A,” “B,” and “C” (Rischel, 2007), the “A” variety is the most widespread, and is spoken at Ban Bunyuen and the other known settlements in Thailand. In contrast, both the “B” and “C” dialects are now reportedly represented by a small and diminishing number of speakers. For example, Mlabri B (also referred to as Minor Mlabri, Beta Mlabri and b-Mlabri) was spoken by eleven people in Santisuk District of Nan Province in 1995. The children of this group were not learning Mlabri at that time, as Hmong was becoming the vernacular (Rischel, 1995). Mlabri

C was spoken by less than thirty people in Xayaboury Province, Lao PDR, as recently as 2008. However, there is today no known contact between the Mlabri C speaking population in Laos and the much larger Mla Bri population in Thailand.

What is significant for this article is that Mlabri A is the first language of all children in Ban Bunyuen and is the primary means of communication used in the village. Inter-generational transmission of the Mla Bri language still occurs in the home in both Phrae and Nan provinces, and the overall demographic situation among this group, as will be described below, is compatible with survival of the Mla Bri people and language into the next generation and possibly beyond.



*The Mla Bri of Ban Bunyuen, Thailand*

Ban Bunyuen, the oldest of the three Mla Bri village settlements, is administratively part of a larger Hmong village, Ban Huay Hom, in Phrae Province. The Mla Bri population lives in a sub-village of Ban Huay Hom, Ban Bunyuen, in which all residents assert a Mla Bri identity. The Mla Bri language is spoken by children and adults, and continuing endogamous norms were still strong in 2016. Mla Bri is the first language (L1) for all Mla Bri residents of Ban Bunyuen.

Mla Bri still occasionally work in Hmong fields, though beginning about 2000, some Mla Bri began cultivating their own rice and corn fields. By 2004, all family units were planting highland rice. Although some family units still do not produce enough rice for their own needs, current total rice production by the Mla Bri in Ban Bunyuen

exceeds consumption, as evidenced by the fact that the Mla Bri sell surplus rice into the marketplace. Ironically, in recent years, Prai laborers (a linguistic branch of the Tin language, see Rischel 2007) from neighboring Nan Province began seeking seasonal employment in Hmong fields, filling the labor gap created when the Mla Bri started cultivating their own fields.

Mla Bri often speak Hmong and/or northern Thai; however Hmong do not speak Mla Bri.

This article is about the demographics of the now-settled Mla Bri in Ban Bunyuen, and is a result of a demographic survey undertaken in June 2013. The data collected included age, gender, household membership, school attendance, and address (See Table 1-3). At the time of this survey, there were 103 Mla Bri residents of Ban Bunyuen, with a median age of seventeen, and a mean age of 20.04 years. In the village there were fifty-three males, and fifty females enumerated.<sup>1</sup> Synthetic projections from the census data, along with mortality data backwards to 2003, and forwards to 2028, indicates that if all things are held constant with the 2013 census data, the population will more than double between 2003 and 2028.

There has been rapid growth in the population since about 2004 as the result of thirty-nine children born between 2004 and 2013 (including one neonatal and one infant death). In 2013, there were only two residents over age sixty, both women. However, as can be seen from the mortality data (Table 2), there have also been men over age sixty in the past.

In 2013, the residents lived in thirty households at thirteen addresses. Thirty of the children were enrolled in school in two preschool grades, six primary school grades, and three secondary school grades.

## Demographics

### *Settlement in Ban Bunyuen, 1990s–present*

In the early 1980s, the area of Ban Bunyuen was largely unsettled. There were a few remote swidden fields tended by Hmong growing highland rice, and occasionally opium, but there was no village from any ethnic group. As for the Mla Bri, they lived on the periphery of these fields, moving frequently in the higher elevations, typically every few weeks (see e.g. Nimmenhaemin 1963; Siam Society 1963; Long, Long and Waters 2013; and summary in Nimonjiya 2013: 164-7). Subsistence for the Mla Bri was by hunting, gathering, and barter with the Hmong for labor. The Mla Bri at that time did not engage in the cash economy.

The Longs are an American missionary family who established a house in 1982 in the area of what is now Ban Bunyuen (see Long, Long and Waters 2013, and Waters 2015). At about the same time, a group of Hmong also began to relocate and establish

<sup>1</sup> Nimonjiya (2013: 155) conservatively indicates that there was a total Mla Bri population in 2002 of 282 in four settlements. This estimate is consistent with what we observed in Ban Bunyuen in 2013 where there was a low mortality rate and high fertility rate between 2002 and 2013, and is consistent with the estimate of 400 Mla Bri across the four settlements.

a village in the general area where the Longs had recently moved. Population pressure in their previous home in Khun Sathan<sup>2</sup> in Nan Province had led the Hmong to settle just north of the Thai village of Ban Huai Oi in the early 1980s. Competition for land there resulted in their establishing swiddens approximately 5.5 kilometers southeast of Ban Huai Oi. But, access to their new village north of Ban Huai Oi was difficult, and, was a long distance from their swiddens. Hence, the establishment of the “new” Ban Huai Hom in its current location, using the same village name that it had when located further north. At the time the village moved to its current location, the Thai government established a primary school, and a village dispensary. A rudimentary road was also built in the early 1980s, and eventually paved by 2010. Electricity from the national grid arrived in 2003, and has been connected to the individual dwellings of the Mla Bri who use minimal amounts of electricity today, mainly to power lights and the occasional television. The amount of electricity that each household uses is so small that the Mla Bri are not charged by the electricity authority for what they use. Water is piped into the village via a pipeline installed by the Longs in the 1980s.

The establishment of village life and permanent dwellings by the Hmong restricted further the area over which the Mla Bri traditionally foraged. It was in this context that family groups of Mla Bri began to locate more permanently near Ban Huay Hom, and by the early 2000s were building permanent housing using money saved from weaving hammocks for the export market to buy cement blocks, corrugated iron, and other building materials. In 2001, the Mla Bri were also issued Thai national identification cards, which gave them routine access to health and nutrition services at Thai government dispensaries, provided a basis for political representation, and presented children with the requirements for mandatory education under Thai law (Nimonjiya 2013, and Long, Long, and Waters 2013).

The population of Ban Bunyuen reached a peak in 2009 of about 150, and then dropped when about sixty people were resettled in a remote area of Nan as part of an assistance project sponsored by HRH Princess Sirindhorn.

#### *Switching from a nomadic to sedentary life: demographic consequences*

Censuses and surveys typically assume that a population is attached to a particular location. This was not the case until recent years for the Mla Bri, who were all highly mobile. Not surprisingly, shifting from a nomadic to sedentary life has had many cultural, social, economic, and demographic consequences. In terms of demographics, it seems likely that there were potential changes in both fertility and mortality associated with the shift. In terms of mortality, based on oral tradition, it is believed that rates of accidental death, malaria, and infant mortality were very high, and associated with the mobile lifestyle of the hunter-gatherer. For example, based on the frequent visits by the Thai Malaria Service in the 1990s, it is known that malaria was endemic among the Mla Bri prior to that time. After the arrival of the Thai malaria service, and in the context of settlement by the Mla Bri, malaria was eventually eradicated from the Mla

<sup>2</sup> Nimmehaemin (1963) based his earlier writings on the Mla Bri he found near Khun Satan (see also Siam Society 1963).

Bri population. The last confirmed case of malaria in Ban Bunyuen was in 2003.

In terms of fertility, it is known that hunter-gatherer groups typically space births longer than do sedentary horticulturalists due to the nature of nomadism. Particularly important are the difficult conditions associated with frequent movement by foot, which increases infant mortality, and is associated with late weaning. Taboos with respect to sex and weaning are often associated with fertility control. In contrast, settlement and permanent housing can lead to both declining mortality and increased fertility. In the case of the Mla Bri, nutrition was also negatively impacted by dwindling resources of food as the jungles were exploited for swidden agriculture by other ethnic groups.

Although the Mla Bri value large families with many children, observations by the Longs prior to 2000 reveal that children were most generally spaced at two year intervals. Mla Bri mothers exhibit no urgency to wean their offspring, sometimes nursing their most recent child during a current pregnancy. The Longs have observed some Mla Bri mothers nursing their two youngest children. In cases where another child is not forthcoming, nursing can continue until the last child is two or three years old, five years old being the oldest example noted by the Longs.

## Methodology

In May, 2013, Eugene Long visited each of the fourteen addresses (and thirty households) to survey those present. The census results were reported to the Thai government. In conducting the survey, he checked the Thai National identity cards of the residents and/or the Thai government-issued household registration documents listing each person. The data collected and reported are analyzed here. The government identity cards include presumed birthdates for individuals born before 1998, and the actual registered birthdates for people born after 1998. For the more recent births, the birthdates reflect the systematic report of vital statistics. Eugene Long also collected data about school attendance at that time.

Mortality statistics from the period 2002 through 2013 specifically for Ban Bunyuen are also reported here (Table 4). This data was collected by Mary Long. During this period there were sixteen deaths in the village, over half (ten of sixteen) of which were neonatal/infant/child deaths, including one accidental drowning of a two-year-old child. Six of these deaths were in the two-year span covering 2002–2003. Four of the deaths were neonatal deaths. In the nine years from 2004 to 2013, there was also one neonatal death, plus two non-viable pregnancies terminated at the Phrae Provincial Hospital, both in 2007.

## Demographic survey 2013

The survey identified 103 individuals, as summarized in Table 1 (see Appendix for raw data). These individuals were enumerated by gender, age, household status, and address. This data is in turn organized into an age pyramid in 2013 (Figure 1) reflecting observed community composition in 2013. Synthetic community composition data retrospective for 2008 and 2003 are also organized into age pyramids (Figures 2 and 3, and Table 1) The mortality data reported by Mary Long is in Table 4.

### *Age and gender demographics*

The age pyramid for 2013 (see Figure 1) shows clearly a rapid growth of the younger Mla Bri population born after 1988. The first growth spurt occurred between about 1988 and 1998, coinciding with the first sustained contact between the Mla Bri population and the institutions of the broader world, including the Thai military, the public health service, and eventually the Thai school system. A second, larger “baby boom” is apparent between 2003 and 2013, reflecting an increasing number of women surviving to child-bearing age, and beginning after 2004, decreasing infant mortality.<sup>3</sup> Plausibly, it would reflect a higher fertility rate, though as described below, this is not the case. However, given the larger number of females entering the fertile years of fifteen to forty-four years after 2013, growth can be expected to continue into the future, if the Mla Bri women continue to have children at the same rate, and all else is held constant (see Table 1 and Table 2).

### *Fertility and mortality*

Judging from the age pyramid, population growth among the Mla Bri has been particularly steady since the 1990s, resulting presumably from increased survival among infants and small children. Overall population growth from births may have dropped beginning about 2008, as a result of a declining birth rate, though the data is still too limited to reach a conclusion.

Fertility data is inferred from the age of the people living in Ban Bunyuen in 2013, combined with mortality data for children. One thing that is significant is that the Mla Bri living at Ban Bunyuen do not seem to have increased the ratio of fertile women to children since the 1980s, as might be expected for a population which is becoming sedentary (see Table 3). Thus, in each of the five-year cohorts, there is a ratio of 0.79-1.11 children surviving per five-year period. The average ratio of 0.965 children per woman, is equivalent to a total fertility rate of 5.8 surviving children per woman which is substantially higher than that of Thailand as a whole, where the total fertility rate in 2012 was reported as 1.41 children per woman. There does not seem to be a stable increase or decrease in this trend (see Table 2).

### *Residential patterns and family demographics*

The 103 people in Ban Bunyuen lived at fourteen addresses, and in thirty-one households. One man lived alone, and two married couples lived at their own address. Twenty-eight people lived at a single address, which included two families. Notably, they considered themselves separate households.

A total of eighty-one out of 103 people lived in what might be called a “nuclear family” of a married mother and father, and children. Each family considered itself a household, even while sharing an address with others (see Table 3).

<sup>3</sup> The following definitions are used in this article: neonatal refers to a live birth up to one month old; infant mortality refers to deaths from birth through one year old; child mortality refers to live births up to five years old; still births and medically non-viable pregnancies reflect deaths before birth.

### *School attendance*

There were thirty children enrolled in school at the time of the survey in 2014, and all were in the age-appropriate grade. The school in the village starts at age four, and includes two years of preschool, six years of primary school, and three years of secondary school.

Four children of school age did not attend school. All four were male; one was not attending the sixth year of primary school, and the other three did not attend secondary school. No males from the village attended secondary school, but four females did.

Truancy was an intractable problem in 2016. Children of all ages, both boys and girls, were regularly absent from school, sometimes to help their parents with field work, sometimes to seek day wage employment with Thai or Hmong farmers, and often just to hunt, gather, fish and otherwise amuse themselves in the jungle.

### *Neonatal deaths and child mortality*

Death of neonatal infants was very high in 2002–2003, but such deaths declined after that date, which is roughly coincident with the award of Thai citizenship, and rights to access prenatal and neonatal care at the local health clinic (see Table 5). Ten of sixteen deaths between 2002 and 2013 were children under five years of age and, as mentioned, five of these were neonatal deaths, of which only one occurred since 2003. Death from tuberculosis, a disease of crowding accounted for three adult deaths, and there were two deaths from suicide. Tuberculosis rates before settlement are not known, but as we discussed elsewhere (Long, Long and Waters 2013), suicide is associated with settlement. Absent from the mortality statistics are the more common causes of death in modernity, including cardio-vascular diseases, and cancers.

## Settlement of the Mla Bri and demographic change

Previously, we wrote about the disconcerting nature of settlement among the Mla Bri that resulted in suicide and suicide attempts among the recently settled adults in Ban Bunyuen, and the other Mla Bri settlements (Long, Long and Waters 2013). The current study of the demographics of just one Mla Bri village though, reveals another demographic dimension of the Mla Bri's "settling down process" which is a rapid growth in the younger parts of the population as a result of declining infant and child mortality, and a continued high rate of fertility. In 2002-2003 (the earliest date for which data can be inferred), four out of fourteen births seem to have resulted in a neonatal death. With settling down and the provision of health and nutrition services though, neonatal deaths almost disappeared; until 2013 when there was one neonatal death. This resulted in a rapid rise in the number of surviving small children in the population as children who would have otherwise died, survived, and have gone on to attend the new village school.

One result of settling down is that more children are surviving in Ban Bunyuen, as well as presumably the other Mla Bri villages. Notably, this increase is probably the result of decreased mortality; the data also indicate that the ratio of fifteen to forty-five-year-old women to children born is about the same in the 1980s and 2000s (See Table 2). This is surprising since it might be expected that fertility would rise in the context of

settlement, presumably reflecting a weakening of the taboos inherited from the recent hunter-gatherer lifestyle. Judging from the ratios of fertile women to children, this has not yet been the case.

Mla Bri residential patterns are also notable. Hunter-gatherer groups, including the Mla Bri are known for the fluidity of their living arrangements, with frequent fission and fusion of small bands, a function of ecological conditions, social conflict,

and kinship (see discussion in Long, Long, and Waters 2013). The permanence of the housing established since 2002 means that grouping and re-grouping has slowed down. How long this will last though, is not yet known—movement for unexpected reasons is still possible, and perhaps even likely. Indeed, in 2009, a substantial portion of the village relocated to the project established by HRH Princess Sirindhorn in a remote area of Nan province. Just because the Mla Bri do not move every few weeks as they did as hunter-gatherers, it does not mean they will not move again.

But, assuming that another major relocation does not happen, and the fertility and mortality rates remain steady, the population is expected to grow as the girls born during the last twenty years continue to enter the child-bearing years.

However, there is a broader question about whether Mla Bri girls entering their child-bearing years will have the same fertility rates as their mothers, and also, whether the Mla Bri will sustain the strong norms guaranteeing endogamy. Mla Bri girls are attending primary school in the local village and are beginning to attend secondary school. Secondary school attendance by females is one of the best predictors of fertility decline. But it remains to be seen if this will be the case with the Mla Bri. Anecdotal observations by the Longs as recently as 2016 indicate that Mla Bri girls continue to marry in their early teenage years, and begin child-bearing shortly thereafter.

Overall the Mla Bri population is healthier, seemingly a result of a settled lifestyle. Life expectancy is increasing, while infant and child mortality are rapidly declining. Who knows, the ravages of civilization may soon present the Mla Bri with the “luxury” of dying from “diseases of civilization” like cardio-vascular disease or cancer!

At the same time, both Mla Bri males and females are less likely to acquire the forest lore which sustained Mla Bri in the recent past, as they become dependent on labor and market activity for sustenance, and schools and television become the day care providers for children, just as it is in the nearby Hmong and Thai villages. Sustaining endogamous traditions in such a context will be difficult.



## Conclusions

The story of the Mla Bri is highly unusual because it involves a rapid transition from a largely hunter-gatherer lifestyle, to a settled one across a period of a few decades. It is possible that the Mla Bri have begun the early stages of a demographic transition as signaled by a decline in infant mortality and a rise in overall population growth. A decline in fertility has yet to occur, though, with the result that there will likely be rapid population growth in coming decades.

The Mla Bri in a period of twenty years have undergone a shift from hunter-gatherers to confrontation with the modern, differentiated world. People who in the 1980s lived in the forest in lean-tos, are now living in electrified, cinder block houses, send their children to modern Thai schools, and the population is growing at a robust rate. This shift from hunter-gatherers to the modern Thai world is of course very unusual; indeed it is unlikely to be replicated in many places, if ever again. Nevertheless what the Mla Bri have experienced is instructive with respect to understanding both the resilience and fragility of cultural traditions among hunter-gatherers.

Table 1: Population estimates, population of Ban Bunyuen.

	Popu- lation	Data and Calculation	Min. Age	Max. Age	Mean Age	Median Age	Std. Dev.
2003	82	Retrospective Synthetic based on 2013	0	65	20.04	15	15.74
2008	93	Retrospective Synthetic based on 2013	0	70	19.11	15	16.07
2013	103	Census	0	75	19.22	17	16.26
2018	120	Synthetic Prediction Based on 2013	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
2023	144	Synthetic Prediction Based on 2013	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
2028	175	Synthetic Prediction Based on 2013	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA

Note. The data for 2013 reflect the census taken by Eugene Long in May 2013. Synthetic backwards projects to 2013 are based on the census data and mortality data, and assume no immigration or emigration. Forward projects reflect expected births (see Table 3), and seven, five, and five deaths in the age cohorts ending in 2018, 2023, and 2028 respectively. These forward projections are a synthetic number based on past fertility behavior, and past mortality behavior in a population which is getting larger and in which there is expected to be no more child mortality.

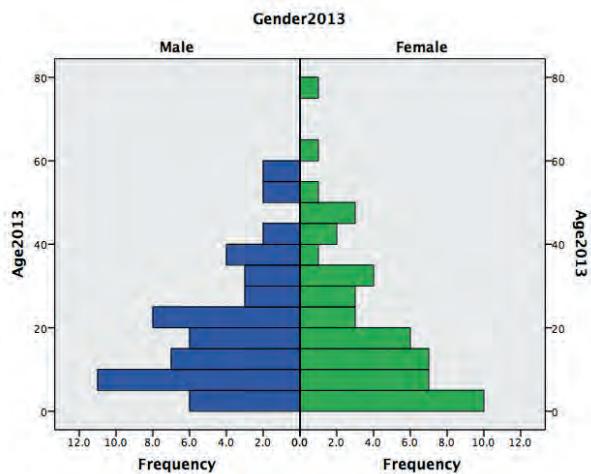


Figure 1. Age Pyramid of the Mla Bri settlement, Ban Bunyuen, on 1 June 2013. The total population was 103 people.

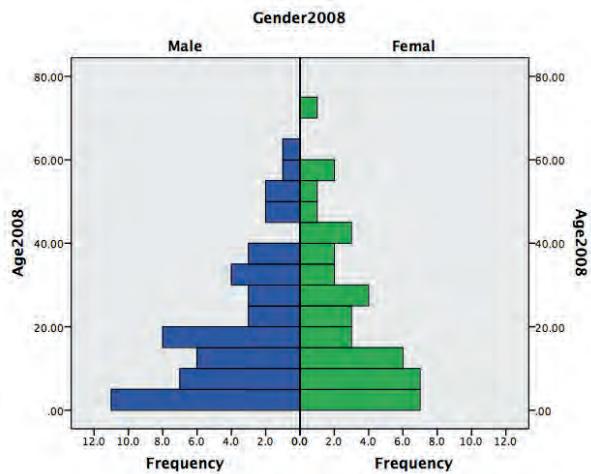


Figure 2. Retrospective age pyramid for Mla Bri settlement at Ban Bunyuen for 2008. This is based on the age pyramid data collected in 2013, and the death register collected by Mary Long. Births for 2009–2013 are subtracted, and deaths during the period added back in. The pyramid assumes no immigration or emigration. The emigration of approximately sixty people from Ban Bunyuen to the Princess Sirindhorn Project in Nan Province in 2009 is not featured in this synthesis.

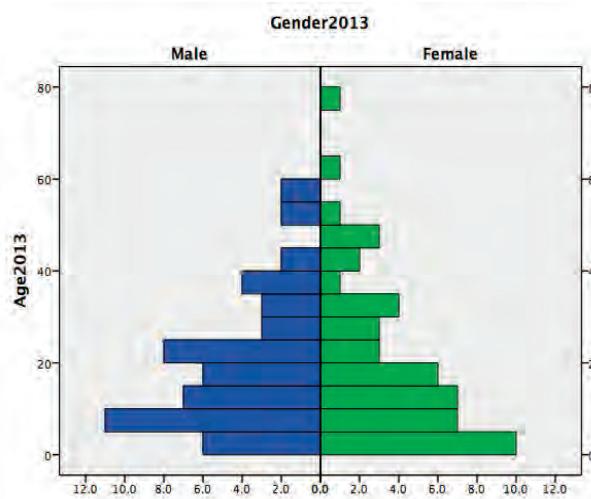


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Table 2: Mortality in Ban Bunyuen, 2002-2013.

Date	Case	Sex	Age	Location	Notes
27 May 2002	1	M	0	BBY	Deformed (?)
31 May 2002	2	M	2	BBY	Drowning (about 2 years old)
23 October 2002	3	F	0	BBY	
13 May 2003	4	F	0	BBY	
July 2003	5	M	66	BBY	Old age
October 2003	6	X	0	BBY	Still born?
31 January 2004	7	M	63	BBY	TB
22 October 2004	8	F	3 mo.	BBY	cleft palate
1 March 2005	9	M	7 mo.	BBY	Birth Defects
17 October 2006	10	F	32	BBY	Suicide
19 October 2006	11	M	24	BBY	Suicide
April 2008	12	F	58	BBY	TB
21 April 2009	13	M	64	BBY	Old age
25 October 2011	14	F	56	BBY	Pancytopenia
24 July 2012	15	F	0	BBY	Lived only a few hours
November 2013	16	M	43	BBY	TB (after 2013 census—not included)

Table 3. Cohort analysis of fertile aged females, and births in the population of Ban Bunyuen.

Cohort (June 1 date)	Females 15-45 (2013)	Surviving Births	Ratio, females to surviving births
1984-1988	7	6	1.16
1989-1993	8	10	0.80
1994-1998	11	13	0.84
1999-2003	12	11	1.09
2004-2008	15	19	0.79
2009-2013	20	18	1.11
2014-2018 (projection)	25	(24.125)	(0.965)
2019-2023 (projection)	30	(28.95)	(0.965)
2024-2028 (projection)	37	(35.705)	(0.965)

Note: Calculations were undertaken by evaluating the age pyramid (Figure 1). Note, past and future calculations are a synthetic statistic which assumes no migration. The average ratio of fertile females to birth is 0.965.

Table 4: Household Units in Ban Bunyuen on 1 June 2013.

Household Unit	Number of units	Number of people
Single	2	2
Single mother with children	1	3
Couple without children	5	9*
Couples with children gone	3	6
Couples with children	15	81
Missing Data		2
Total	31	103

\* one person missing data

Table 5: Births and Neonatal / Infant Deaths

Year	Male Births	Female Births	Total Births	Infant Deaths
2013 (6 months)	0	1	1	0
2012	3	2	5	1
2011	1	4	5	0
2010	0	3	3	0
2009	2	0	2	0
2008	1	2	3	0
2007	2	2	6	2
2006	0	1	1	0
2005	4	3	7	1
2004	5	1	6	1
2003	1	6	7	2
2002	2	5	7	2

Note: "Infant deaths" include neonates, infants, children to five years old, still born and medically terminated non-viable pregnancies. See n. 3.

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