[**From food surplus to famine?**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1633869/from-food-surplus-to-famine)

[Zeba Sathar](https://www.dawn.com/authors/4558/zeba-sathar)Published July 8, 2021 - Updated a day ago

The writer is country director, Population Council, Islamabad.

ON July 1, Prime Minister Imran Khan absented himself from a high-level [national security briefing](https://www.dawn.com/news/1632586) to [address an even more crucial threat](https://www.dawn.com/news/1632577) facing Pakistan — food insecurity. On some level, it was heartening to see the prime minister focusing on a looming national concern. While focusing on how to improve agricultural yields, he also raised the challenge of providing food to our large population. Disappointingly, however, he did not follow through to talk about population itself, such as the numbers of people without education and paid work, the rapid rate at which people are outstripping natural resources and work opportunities, and urbanisation.

I would like to ask all those who have held the reins of power in this country for the last 20 years a question: why have the links between a large and rapidly growing population and all our present crises (excepting governance) remained unmentioned, unrecognised and therefore unaddressed? There is an obvious link between population growth and per capita availability of both food and water — the latter was highlighted at the Islamabad Security Dialogue and is of critical importance in dealing with climate change. Child malnutrition, a national and international community priority, is also linked to inadequate birth spacing. We see increased land and housing shortages, displacement and above all the lack of jobs, all linked to the numbers of people chasing opportunities which remain static.

It’s simple: population increases geometrically, and unless supply does the same, demand will outstrip it.

Pakistan produced excess wheat and other food products in the 1980s and 1990s. We could export wheat and were major exporters of basmati rice. And now we are importing these staple foods. How did we go from relative advantage to the brink?

How did we go from relative advantage in food to the brink?

Let me simplify. Pakistan’s current per capita caloric availability is 2,300 kilocalories per day; 20 years ago, it was 2,400. Current figures for Nepal and Bangladesh are 2,800 and 2,500, respectively. Our annual population growth rate is over two per cent, compared to 1.2pc in the region. Continued rapid growth means huge additional pressure on food in an already over-extended and vulnerable agricultural system. If we seriously intend to meet the 2018 Council of Common Interests’ (CCI) population growth goal of 1.1pc by 2030, we could at least aim to retain food and water security at more acceptable levels.

The prime minister [lauds China](https://www.dawn.com/news/1632539) and its model of development while talking about food security and development. China’s route to development was prompted 100 years ago by famines, poverty and wretched future prospects. It adopted the one-child policy which curbed population growth and stabilised numbers. Pakistan need not take such drastic steps — we are late but not altogether lost. Our population problem is not insurmountable but does require a stronger and openly supported and popularised response based on voluntary and rights-based interventions.

As China celebrates another milestone this week, we should learn a lesson: leaders need to take decisions to change the future, not just the present. Pakistan should not follow the Chinese route, but must demonstrate a similar intent to reduce the population burden and secure a better future for the next generations.

Not too long ago, Bangladesh was considered a basket case by the international community. With a population density of 900 per square kilometre, it seemed overwhelmed by food insecurity and overpopulation. But the country and all its organs and political leadership were on the same page. They made deliberate efforts with unchanging policies and unstinting political commitment to support human development. Family planning services took centre stage in their development plans.

Pakistan remains preoccupied with international events and regional security, with some justification, especially considering the expected fallout from Afghanistan. But unless we prioritise internal threats, they will weaken us. By not focusing on human development and population planning, we are not only overlooking the basic needs and rights of a growing segment of the population but also fostering alienation and making way for implosion by failing to ensure minimum hope, quality of life, health, education and opportunities.

**Read:** [*Population and the pandemic*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1568271)

If the government truly seeks transformative change that benefits not just the present but also future generations, as in China, we recommend a wholehearted commitment to CCI policy decisions, especially regarding family planning financing, which asked for a Rs10 billion annual population fund for supporting the provinces. Above all, accelerated efforts to ensure access to reproductive health services, especially family planning, are urgently required. Rural health services have not grown significantly in the past 20 years; this must change, especially through the expansion of the once highly effective Lady Health Workers initiative.

The financing required is not formidable nor out of reach. We need to spend at least Rs200 per person on family planning compared to the Rs50 we are estimated to be spending today. This is a fraction of what we spend on nutritional supplements, poverty alleviation and infrastructure to cope with increases in population numbers.

At the same time, the government should provide open support for a mindset change that favours birth spacing and investment, employing effective public health messaging — as in the case of challenging issues like HIV/AIDS, Covid and polio. It is also the government’s responsibility to finance public education, especially when literacy is low.

This year’s World Population Day (July 11) theme — ‘Rights and choices are the answer: whether baby boom or bust, the solution to shifting fertility rates lies in prioritising the reproductive health and rights of all people’ — echoes Pakistan’s own population narrative, which calls for fulfilment of rights and responsibilities by both parents and the state. In discussions about Pakistan’s population issues with media heads, religious leaders, and private-sector associations, it is abundantly clear that they believe this is a national issue of utmost importance. But they all emphasise that the government needs to set the tone through enunciated policy. Only the government has the moral authority to lead and enable these stakeholders to fulfil their responsibility. Otherwise, we will all have to face the fallout of such cruel neglect.

*The writer is country director, Population Council, Islamabad.*

*Published in Dawn, July 8th, 2021*