**Digital census and the scourge of overpopulation**

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The official results of Pakistan’s first-ever digital census have been revealed by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) and they were approved in the Council of Common Interest (CCI) meeting on August 5, 2023. According to the results, the country’s total population is 241.49 million in 2023, rising from 207.68 million in 2017. While the debate over the consequences of this census will be hijacked by the short-term effects of the exercise and legal ramifications over the election date and the necessity of a new delimitation process, it is the need of the hour to discuss the scourge of overpopulation in detail.
An intellectual discussion over structural and historical antecedent conditions impeding equitable growth might not gain too much currency in our current environment, but it is important, nevertheless. The burgeoning population is one of the biggest problems which is keeping the nation mired in the quicksand of socio-economic stagnation. Some scholars on the orthodox Left believe overpopulation is a blessing for the country, as Pakistan is a labor-intensive agrarian country. Unfortunately, this is far from the reality.
Being labor-intensive does not mean that a country should have millions of populations suffering due to inequitable resources. Rather, it gives rise to child labor, inter-generational pauperism, human trafficking, higher risk of disasters, unemployment, and lack of healthcare and educational resources, amongst a myriad of other socio-economic mutations.
Empirical evidence proves that Pakistan is one of the most overpopulated countries in the world. At the time of independence in 1947, Pakistan had a population of 32.5 million which drastically increased to 124.27 million by 2006-07 and to 241.49 million by 2023. According to the United Nations’ predictions, the country’s total population will rise to 262.96 million (2030) and 338.01 million (2050).
People living in the country themselves need to play their part by understanding the fact that the rapidly increasing population is a menace in the contextual realities of scarce resources. Even though the government and developmental sector agencies continue to assert that they are playing a key role in tackling the issues arising from overpopulation, the problems persist. Root causes need to be addressed, rather than toying with the symptoms.
While talking about the domestic governance structured, one cannot completely rest the blame upon the federal government, as the functions of the Population Welfare Ministry were devolved to the provincial governments after the 18th Amendment. After devolution, the first Provincial Population Policy was approved in 2017 in the Punjab. Other provinces followed suit. The policy’s vision was to have a healthy and prosperous society with planned and self-sustaining families. But no federating unit was ready to walk the talk. Provincial governments need to step forward. On a provincial level, the annual growth rate of the population of Punjab is 2.53% (2023) increasing from 2.13% (2017), 2.57% (2023) increasing from 2.41% (2017), 3.20% (2023) declining from 3.37% (2017) and 2.38% (2023) for KP declining from 2.82% (2017). It is interesting to note the decline in annual growth rate from 2017-2023 for Balochistan and KP. However, the taboo of overpopulation remains prevalent in Punjab and Sindh. What could be the factors of this significant rise in annual growth rate in the provinces?
The drastic growth of the population has been causing serious threats to mankind; pollution, lack of healthcare facilities, water scarcity, low infant and maternal mortality, and malnutrition (wasting/stunting) by the high fertility rate (3.6 births per woman, as of 2020). On the other hand, the causes of the increasing population might be the lack of family planning and awareness of using contraceptives. According to some experts, this lack of awareness exists more in rural areas than in urban areas. However, the census results show that the rural population has declined from 63.56% (2017) to 61.18% (2023) and the urban population has increased from 36.44% (2017) to 38.82% (2023). Again, what could be the reasons for this change in rural and urban sectors? Moreover, is this because of migration, disasters, fluctuating trends in mortality rates, lack of resources, family structure, or inconsistent government policies in rural areas than in urban areas?
Demographic and statistical experts have been analysing population statistics through surveys for decades. The real need is to examine the causes behind the drastic change in these statistics. There is a dire need to evaluate the implementation of population control policies. The provincial bodies; population welfare department(s) and national bodies; Ministry of National Health services and Population Council, Pakistan are working thoroughly on different family planning programs to increase contraceptive prevalence including a new in-line program called ‘Tawazun’ to create a balance between population and available resources.
But there are numerous challenges hampering a seamless transition which could be attributed to a lack of education. High population growth in Pakistan leads to illiteracy, poverty, lack of educational services, and low standards of living. The overall economic development is at stake due to the increasing population leading Pakistan to be far behind other countries.
The federal government needs to spend more on the social sector. The approved budget for FY 2023-24 showed the allocation of Rs.244 billion for the development of the social sector, out of which, Rs.82 billion for education and Rs.26 billion for the health sector were allocated. Considering the approved budget, is Rs.26 billion for the health sector enough for an over-populated country like Pakistan?
Strong public budgeting in the health sector is important to prepare, implement and maintain effective policies and programs. As the country’s healthcare system faces issues in providing adequate services to the increasing population, maternal and child health has become one of the prominent, yet woefully ignored issues which has had detrimental consequences.
Other than the health sector, investment could be made in the education sector by focusing on the quality and provision of education. International organisations like WHO, UNFPA and UNICEF, are helping the country through different programs and investments. However, there is a need for political stability in the country to stabilise the economy and social sectors as economic performances and political unrest are deeply interrelated.
There is a causal link and religious dispositions of the Pakistani populace. The beliefs of people living in a country affect family planning decisions as they leave it ‘up to God’ to provide basic subsistence, irrespective of being a Muslim or Christian. Depending wholeheartedly on this belief, without accurate knowledge or awareness of the consequences, leads to a more burdensome situation. The state ought to intervene in the form of awareness campaigns, on the ground or digitally. Family planning awareness programs should include proper and safe usage of contraceptives. Sex education needs to be made mandatory in schools. This is not an exhaustive list of policy prescriptions. Epistemic communities need to up their game and put pressure on the policymakers.