**Legitimate concerns and actions: Population in Pakistan**

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Since my arrival in Pakistan in early October this year, in almost all meetings, interactions, and engagements I kept hearing concerns from leaders and the elite about population size and the need to control population growth; the latest by the State Bank of Pakistan, which warned that the country might face a risk to food security in the wake of a growing population and global warming. All these concerns are legitimate, but I am afraid that the narrative about “population control” will neither address the root causes of fast population growth nor bring sustainable development; instead, it might increase the likelihood of social and cultural tension and confrontations. In fact, the world departed the narrative of “population control” almost thirty years ago when the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD1994) articulated a bold vision about the relationship between population, development, and individual well-being. Recent empirical research indicates that focusing on population size will not prevent poverty. While Pakistan stands as the 55th on the list of poorest countries globally, its population size counterpart, Brazil, stands at 101st, and China is ranked 117th. Therefore, apparently population size is not the main reason for being a poor nation. The poorest countries globally are mainly of medium or small population size. But they are either countries passing through protracted crises or violent conflicts, such as Syria, Somalia, Yemen, and Sudan. Pakistan, luckily, is not. The second category of poor countries are countries with severe depletion of natural resources like Congo and Guinea, Pakistan is ranked 78th out of 158, therefore depletion of natural resources is not also a reason for Pakistan to become poor.

[55 dead bodies recovered, 5 rescued alive from Tanda Dam in Kohat district](https://www.nation.com.pk/01-Feb-2023/55-dead-bodies-recovered-5-rescued-alive-from-tanda-dam-in-kohat-district)

Poor nations suffer from poor governance; Pakistan is ranked 140th out of 180 according to the corruption perception index, which ranks the poorest countries like South Sudan, Afghanistan, Syria, and Somalia among the highest on the list. Therefore, there is room in Pakistan for improvement on this front. Poor countries do not perform well in human development measured by the human development index (HDI). Pakistan stands at 161st out of 191; there is also room for improvement. Poor countries comprise the least performing on gender equality measured by the gender equality index (GEI) including Afghanistan and Yemen. Pakistan, unfortunately, is among the least five performing countries globally; here, there is a big room for improvement. In my view, women are considered a missed opportunity for Pakistan’s development. Most poor countries have the least participation of female labour force as a percentage of the total economically active which is the least in Yemen ranking at 181st, while Pakistan is ranked at 168th. Therefore, alleviating poverty does not go through population control, but through gender equality, investment in women’s rights including the right to choose regarding their reproduction, skills, and opportunities, investment in their human capital, and good governance.

[PM Shehbaz lauds security officials for thwarting terrorist attack on Mianwali police station](https://www.nation.com.pk/01-Feb-2023/pm-shehbaz-lauds-security-officials-for-thwarting-terrorist-attack-on-mianwali-police-station)

Global anthropological research reveals that people decide to have fewer children when they are sure their children will survive, and they are sure they will not starve when they become too old. This effect is pronounced when women have access to good education and are valued for their human capital rather than their reproduction capacity. Therefore, investment in basic social services to improve human capital and infrastructure to promote economic development are steps in the right direction. There are two important human-rights-friendly and easy entry points to reduce population growth in line with the free choices of people. The first is to reach zero unintended pregnancies which were estimated to be 37 percent of all pregnancies in Pakistan in 2019. The second is to reach zero unmet family planning needs which were estimated to be 17 percent of married women have an unmet need for family planning, 10 percent want to delay childbearing and 8 percent want to stop childbearing. Family planning is key to promoting a balance between population and economic growth in Pakistan, but family planning should be human rights-based. No one has the right to impose on families how many children they should have. Still, it is everybody’s business to equip women and families with information, knowledge, and contraception to make informed decisions about their childbearing. The global experiences reveal that any imposed policy to control the population will not bring better welfare but will only bring distortion in the population pyramid and bring difficulties for future generations. The power of choice for women produces balanced demographic indicators accompanied by steady improvement in fertility levels and population growth. Only effective, sustainable, and efficient family planning on a large scale and across sectoral programmes can make a difference in Pakistan. A surgical reform for family planning public management, including modernising management information systems and contraception warehousing in the context of effective and efficient supply chain management for commodity security, accompanied by an efficient health care system along with an effective reach-out advocacy campaign. This requires high political commitment and readiness to make difficult decisions translated into financial actions. UNFPA is committed, along with other development actors, to support modernizing family planning programming whenever such a political commitment and readiness are made available. Pakistan needs champions and national heroes who can raise the flag for enforced social and population policies and efficient family planning management; the field is calling, any response!