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**The population bomb**

Pakistan is facing a huge problem of population explosion, destroying almost all sorts of economic planning. No government has taken this issue seriously despite the negative consequences.

This exponential population growth is multiplying our social woes and badly affecting our economy but the most worrisome factor is that literally there is no population planning at any level. In fact, people have been left to ponder on their own.

The Malthusian theory of exponential growth of population with arithmetic growth of food supply is working perfectly in Pakistan but what is not working here is adopting preventive measures to control population to achieve balanced growth and a comfortable food supply chain. The economy in Pakistan is always facing inflationary pressures, especially food inflation. The most disastrous concept of Malthus was that exponential population growth with scarcity of feeding resources or limited food supply or production is ultimately balanced by intervention by nature mostly in the form of floods, famine, earthquakes, disasters and pandemics like the one we are facing right now.

Population growth has a multiplier effect and it can make and break the country. The situation in Pakistan is fast transforming, taking a sharp turn from bad to worse and worse to worst. What is needed is an intervention by the government to control population growth, since our resources are scarce. There is an urgent need to put in place a population planning policy at the federal level instead of leaving it to the provinces.

It is ironic that after Ayub Khan’s government, population planning has been missing in Pakistan. If we count down the reasons, General Zia was the worst regime for this; apparently, the thinking was that a large illiterate population would fuel the jihad against what was then the USSR. Since then, no government has taken the issue seriously, most of them worried any step may create a furore that would label population planning as un-Islamic by the clerics. Uneducated and unaware people have been misled by the religious right, especially clerics, in the name of Islam not to adopt birth control measures. Apparently, the leadership in Pakistan is scared of such clerics. To my mind, it is the failure of leadership to not take decisions in the best interest of the nation despite the fact that they do understand that population planning is absolutely necessary and is not un-Islamic.

Pakistan is the fifth largest country of the world and its population must be touching the figure of around 230 million people by now if calculated with birth rate of 2.2 percent. The population is almost doubling every thirty years as compared to other South Asian countries it doubles every sixty years. Pakistan’s population would be touching around 403 million by the year 2050, which is a disastrous thought. The last census was conducted in 2017, showing a population of 208 million while the figures of the 1998 Census stood at 132 million.

The government of Sindh has its own point of view on the official results of Census 2017 and has been raising questions regarding it. But the point that remains is that, with such pace of population growth, can we achieve balanced socioeconomic development necessary for the welfare of the people. Is it possible for Pakistan to grow and develop with such an exponential population growth bomb ready to explode any time?

This is the time for the government to make decisions. Wisdom demands that it’s never too late to take the right decision for the betterment and welfare of the people. Time and tide wait for none. If other Muslim countries like Malaysia, Turkey and Bangladesh could convince clerics and the religious right in their countries that adopting preventive measures to control population is not un-Islamic; the government of Pakistan can also do so through our religious scholars and convince people that such preventive measures are absolutely necessary to help avoid disasters and famine. The institution of mosque and madrassahs, besides other institutional mechanisms, should be utilised for this noble cause to convey an effective message regarding family planning to the people of Pakistan who are largely uneducated.

The government needs to – without any waste of time – focus on population planning and must put in place a policy immediately, as a delay in this regard would be a criminal act. A long-term birth control policy should be devised and effectively implemented by extending incentives for those who have one or two children while discouraging those who have more than three children. These incentives could be in the form of tax relief or concessional tickets through the Ehsaas programme. Empowerment of women and education is the first step to control the birth rate, as reproductive healthcare education for mothers is absolutely necessary for an effective population control policy.

There is a serious need of a large-scale awareness campaign through all sorts of media including but not limited to print, electronic and social media. The social media campaign would be very effective if utilised along with a campaign through traditional institutions like mosques and madaaris to control population. Pakistan needs it more than any other country in the world. Sooner, the better!!

The writer is an economist.