**The population bomb**

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Unbridled population growth is one of the biggest challenges in today’s Pakistan. Yet, there are no credible attempts at any level in Pakistan to tackle the issues posed by a rising population. From an economic, environmental and development perspective, our population is growing at an untenable rate.

Successive governments in Pakistan never recognised the growing population as a serious question at all. The population crisis in our society is mostly viewed in a narrow sense even though the subject warrants a much broader understanding.

Let’s consider the following facts: the population growth rate of Pakistan stands at 2.4 percent annually, which is among the highest in the world. The population of Pakistan has now gone to 212.7 million from 33 million in 1951 – almost seven times increase in 66 years. The population of the size of Norway (5.3 million) is added to Pakistan annually.

Although there hasn’t been any serious debate over the rising population beyond mere rhetoric at the policymaking level, certain narratives inform official and academic discourses in Pakistan. As in the rest of the world, the liberals attribute the population explosion in Pakistan as the root cause of unemployment and poverty. The conservatives are against the very idea of population control and consider it to be purely Western – and, thereby, un-Islamic. The left disagrees with both views.

However, the fact is that the above assertions seem to be misplaced and a tad judgmental. We can partially agree with the leftist discourse that the growing population isn’t the sole cause of poverty. We must also remember that poverty has more to do with the type of development model and wealth distribution that is applied by a particular state.

China, for instance, is hugely populated. But poverty and inequality are less rampant in the country than they are in India. However, the mainstream leftist narratives that ignore the population crisis as a problem are also highly problematic from an ecological viewpoint and a planning perspective. Therefore, an unchecked population growth is economically unsustainable because it is environmentally unsustainable.

Let’s consider Pakistan’s water crisis in this context. This environmental catastrophe, which erupted out of the unsustainable population growth and a lack of corresponding planning/development, is beyond words. It is widely known that the water crisis, which has generated such vernacular terms as the ‘tankers mafia’ in the urban centres of Pakistan, is an even bigger threat to the agro-economy and the country’s political stability.

It is obvious that the demand for water is likely to grow with an increase in the population. The rivers in Pakistan are gradually drying up and the underground water level is going down drastically. Glaciers in the northern region of Pakistan have also started showing signs of regression due to ecological changes. The growing water crisis is not only taking its toll on the agro-economy and our climate, it is also a threat to political stability.

The often ill-informed debate on Kalabagh Dam is symptomatic of this threat to the cohesion of our federation. However, at the heart of this debate is a water crisis aggravated by population growth. Even if there is a popular, democratic, left-wing government in power, it cannot solve the water crisis.

Let’s consider the case of housing and mega-development projects. There is no doubt that mega development projects, particularly those that have been implemented by the Sharifs in Punjab, are problematic from a development viewpoint. Even beyond Punjab, many development projects have altered the ecological system in Pakistan. An ecological crisis has resulted in many species migrating to other regions. Furthermore, the existence of many species is constantly under threat. Meantime, millions of acre of fertile agricultural land in Punjab have been converted into planned and unplanned housing societies and slums.

Yet, many mega-projects are needed to provide a decent living standard to every citizen. Even if, theoretically, environmentally sustainable housing projects are launched, natural resources will be consumed. Technology can offer some tangible solutions. But how do we deal with waste?

Waste isn’t just produced by the urban population, but is also created through hospitals and industrial activities. According to an Al-Jazeera report from 2014, Pakistan produces 20 million tonnes of annual waste and it is growing at 2.4 percent annually. Karachi alone generates 9,000 tonnes of waste every day.

However, the climate question and population bulge should also be considered in a global context. According to a World Bank report, there are three billion urban residents globally and 1.2 kilogrammes of waste is produced per kilogrammes per day. It amounts to 1.3 billion tonnes worth of annual solid waste. By 2025, there will be 4.3 billion urban residents globally. Every person will be generating 1.42 kilogrammes/capita/day of waste. Annually, there will be 2.26 tonnes of solid waste. At some stage, the earth may also run out of its capacity to absorb the ever-increasing quantity of human as well as industrial waste.

The land consumption for accommodating housing projects, in turn, generates food insecurity. All the above aspects require us to take the population question into account, even if we have an economic system and development model that is based on social justice.

The population crisis can be addressed through either a coercive approach or a voluntary approach. China had successfully applied the coercive approach through its one-child policy. But this will neither work in Pakistan nor is it worth recommending from a humanist viewpoint. As far as the voluntary approach is concerned, the West, particularly Europe, has successfully managed the desired results through this strategy.

However, this approach has a great deal to do with women’s empowerment. The term ‘women’s empowerment’ implies at least an entitlement to education, access to jobs, and the right to decide one’s own fate. It is assumed that a literate and financially independent woman is less likely to have a large family. Although women’s empowerment in a country like Pakistan is a tall order, it is the way forward to stabilise the population. The mere education of women, let alone other rights, can contribute to a declining number of births in a country like Pakistan.

Syed Akbar Zaidi, a noted Pakistani economist, argues that women with no education have a fertility rate of 5.7 whereas women with secondary education have a fertility rate of only 3.6. In his book, ‘Issues in Pakistan’s Economy’, he further argues that the status of women is also linked to economic development. As growth and development take place, the contribution of women towards the economy increases and their status improves. The likely result is a fall in the population growth rate. However, women’s empowerment is not the only magic key. A welfare system offering universal pensions as well as other factors play an instrumental role in checking population growth.

Although population growth isn’t the only factor that contributes towards environmental and ecological changes, it does produce many pressures. Taking steps to guarantee women’s empowerment is the suitable way forward to address these issues. Let’s hope the next government does something meaningful to protect the environment and ensure women’s empowerment.

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