**We and they**

BY Z U B E I D A M US T A FA 2021-08-13

TWITTER has emerged as the new platform for announcing public policies to ensure maximum publicity. But a tweet without action on the ground has no credibility.

Hence, Minister of Planning Asad Umar`s recent tweet calling for Pakistan to prioritise population growth reduction will raise expectations of plausible official measures.

A sound population programme alone can make an impact on development. If Mr Umar is serious about his tweet, as one would assume he is, he could certainly help by throwing some light on his analysis of why we have so badly failed to curb the population explosion that is undermining Pakistan`s progress. He should also elucidate the strategy his government will adopt to avert an inevitable catastrophe if four million new mouths have to be fed every year.

Little awareness exists about the gravity of overpopulation in the country. Known for their culture of prudery, our people regard the option of having one offspring or six to be a private matter that cannot be discussed openly. But this is not an issue of personal choice or divine will as many believe. It is a national issue because the personal decisions of uninformed parents add up to a high population growth rate the third highest in the world. This has negative implications for all sectors such as health, education and employment.

It is necessary to make population the subject of our national discourse to draw people`s attention to their own role in reinforcing the massive needs that are not easy to fulfil by any government. But that doesn`t absolve the government of its responsibility in the matter.

Since the planning minister mentioned Bangladesh that has managed to cut down its own population growth rate and prosper as a result, I give some data from World Bank sources that should be an eye..opener. West Pakistan`s derogatory attitude towards East Pakistan notwithstanding, the so-called junior partner has outperformed us after it threw off Islamabad`s yoke. In 1971, Bangladesh had a bigger population (65.5m) than the western wing, with a count of 59.7m.

In 2020, the picture had reversed with Bangladesh standing at 164.6m and Pakistanis numbering 220.8m.

I wouldn`t like to burden readers with seemingly dull data. But it is too important to be shoved under the rug: the population growth rate for Pakistan is two per cent, for Bangladesh it is 1pc; TFR (children per woman)is3.5inPakistanand2inBangladesh; the contraceptive prevalence rate (which includes unreliable conventional methods) is 34pc in Pakistan and 65pc in Bangladesh.

There is more data which has a direct bearing on the economy: GDP for Pakistan in 2020was $263.6 billion and $324.2bn for Bangladesh.

Bangladesh has achieved this miracle by investing in its human resources, especially women, who are potential agents of change in family matters. The difference between Pal(istan and Bangladesh in gender parity in the social sectors is staggering. Likewise their female literacy rates are 46pc and 72pc respectively. The female labour participation rates are 20.1pc and 38.5pc respectively.

The planning minister can always point to the 17pc growth in the population budget under the PTI government in the last three years. The sad part is that this increase was not reflected in demographic achievements.

Lack of transparency and wasteful spending is the usual story of all government departments. The little progress recorded was neutralised by the ballooning defence spending.

Pakistan`s defence budget was 3pc of GDP.

Bangladesh spent only 1.3pc of GDP.

The failure of family planning in Pakistan is mainly due to the government`s neglect of women whose socioeconomic status remainsappalling. Unlike Bangladesh, our rulers have never seized the initiative in espousing women`s causes.

The high rate of crimes against women, widespread domestic violence and the neglect of theireducation has robbed women of their mobility and self-esteem that has in turn proved to be major barriers to their empowerment.

This means they have no role in family decision-making. All these factors are linked in a vicious cycle.

There is an additional reason the absence of any sustained and dynamic counselling and awareness-raising programme sponsored by the government which alone has national reach. When this exercise was undertaken in the 1970s by the PPP government it had begun to make a difference. Then silence descended on the nation with Ziaul Haq`s military coup in 1977. The Hudood laws and a misogynist ideology ushered in the dark ages for women in Pakistan. Thereafter a vacuum was created that has been filled by ritualistic religiosity and obscurantism.

This silence has to be broken. Let Mr Umar and other party leaders come forward and offer some explanation of what happened and thus break the silence so that family planning enters the public narrative bringing with it enlightened and progressive thinking. m www.zubeidamustafa.com