**Where are we on population?**

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Tuesday, Nov 14, 2023

The year 2018 saw a significant moment in the history of population discourse in the country when the then chief justice of Pakistan took suo-motu notice of the high population growth in the country. The outcome of this was a president’s ‘task force’ which together with the Council of Common Interests’ recommendations formulated a national action plan to devise strategies for controlling the rapidly growing population.

Six years down the road, today we stand at a much worse condition on the population front. Pakistan’s population was 207.68 million as per the Population Census of 2017 increasing at an annual growth rate of 2.4 per cent, today it has crossed the 240 million mark with a whopping 2.55 per cent growth rate according to the results of the census held earlier this year.

Keeping aside the concerns on the census results, let us recall for a moment that population projections for the country have been worrisome with experts warning of severe challenges ahead while the concerned stakeholders have been in deep slumber of ignorance around the matter. This begs the question: what then was the priority of the task force and the CCI approved national action plan when clearly population growth has remained unbridled and has only increased in these six years?

Pakistan is already among the top five most populous countries of the world with a barely staggering economy on the verge of default. With a total fertility rate of 3.6 and women aged 40 and above giving birth to at least five children on average according to the Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey 2017-2018, the growing pressure of an ever-increasing population only adds to the burden.

More specifically, a swelling population size acts as hindrance towards meeting several of our Sustainable Development Goals related to ending poverty (goal 1); ensuring food security (goal 2); reducing maternal, neonatal and under-5 mortality (goal 3); ensuring quality education (goal 4); achieving gender equality (goal 5); ensuring availability of water and sanitation (goal 7); promoting productive employment and decent work (goal 8); and finally it acts as a barrier in the efforts to combating climate change and its impacts (goal 13). Ultimately, the answer to perhaps all our development challenges lies in what is often discarded from the development debate as an exogenous factor – population – which is in reality at the heart of everything.

Population management then serves as the single most important and common area of consideration for the country’s progression towards achieving its development goals. With the ideal family size still hovering around 4 -3.9 for women and 4.3 among men, it becomes imperative that we understand the guiding motives behind such desires. It is perhaps time we started asking the right questions. To begin with, we must probe where this desire for additional births is coming from. In order to do this, an understanding of the fertility intentions, behaviours and preferences of individuals is required.

It is high time we think of fertility choices as not just a personal matter as it is indeed these actions by individuals which when looked at from a broader lens have created a cause for national concern. A preference for sons is something we see on a much regular basis with people continuing to have children until their wish to have a son is fulfilled. It is also not uncommon to see people with large family sizes having more daughters as they continue the childbearing process until their desire for a son is fulfilled.

In this context, son preference not only becomes a driver of fertility but also acts as a roadblock in the implementation of family planning programmes as people often oppose or delay the use of contraceptives as they are trying to fulfill the desire of having a certain number of sons. In light of this, fertility behaviours exhibited by individuals no longer remain just a personal matter when a culture of son preference exists such that the desire for sons is fulfilled at a cost of larger family size which consequently leads to high population growth.

Consequently, this disproportionate preference for boys over girls has a major role to play in our ever-increasing population which has now become a cause for concern at the national level. Therefore, discourses circling around population growth must pay due attention to this strong culture of son preference that exists in our country as it drastically reduces any efforts to slow down population growth. While investing in women’s education is of paramount importance as it is one of the golden tickets to almost all our development laggards, educating the male members of our society about the far-reaching impacts of son preferring behaviours is equally if not more important.

We must also realize that couples and individuals often pursue sons due to the economic benefits that are accrued with them in the form of having a breadwinner for the family and most importantly for their old age security. Here, the role of the state and its concerned authorities comes into play as it is indeed the responsibility of the state to provide security to its citizens. Investments in all these areas should therefore be a top priority of the state and all stakeholders involved in framing the population and health policies of the country.

The national task force on controlling population growth in 2018 set itself a target of lowering the total fertility rate (children born per woman) to 2.8 from 3.6 and population growth rate to 1.5 per cent from 2.4 per cent by the year 2024. While these seemed like a distant but achievable target at that time, with the census results claiming a growth rate of 2.55 per cent and the year 2024 looming around the corner this seems to be yet another instance of failure where our planning and implementation processes did not converge.

It is time the concerned stakeholders realized the implications such inaction and laidback approach towards population and health policies play in retarding the overall development prospects of the country. In a previous article I wrote for The News (‘Era of global boiling’, August 14, 2023), I explained how population management serves as a common denominator in almost all our development issues.

The recurrent climate challenges we are witnessing in the form of extreme temperatures and heat waves, urban and flash floods and the ongoing smog emergency all have their roots embedded in the population management of Pakistan. And just like managing any other problem in order to deal with it we ought to identify the root cause – in this case, the focus must be shifted towards where and why the demand for these additional births is coming? This I believe would not only help direct our efforts and resources towards the right areas of policy intervention but is also likely to bear fruitful results.

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