**Pakistan’s population challenge**

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A mere glance at population statistics shows that Pakistan is not headed in the right direction. While the country stands at the sixth spot in the list of most populous countries, it is all set to move up by two notches by 2030 if no measures are taken to bring down the annual growth rate of 1.43 percent.

Experts at a recent conference held at Dow University in Karachi have stressed the need for urgent measures, and with good reason since all five countries with populations greater than Pakistan’s have brought down their growth rates. The population is growing in China, United States, Brazil and Indonesia at a rate less than a percent. Though India’s growth rate is higher than a percent, it is still lower than ours.

Since the federal government has yet to announce any specific measures to bring down the growth rate, now is an appropriate time to remind Prime Minister Imran Khan of the resolve expressed in his party’s election manifesto to tackle the population challenge. The PTI manifesto has acknowledged that Pakistan has one of the lowest contraceptive prevalence rates in the world. This, coupled with poor maternal and neonatal health facilities, needlessly puts the lives of many young women in harm’s way.

While a concerted effort is needed to make contraceptives and reproductive healthcare more accessible, the state also needs to instill in medical professionals a progressive approach. Those serving in the public sector must have no business asking couples or young women who approach them for a range of medical needs about their marital status. Abortion is a disputed issue and a controversial component of Pakistani state – the Council of Islamic Ideology – permits it within the first 120 days of pregnancy. However, it needs to be said that this is a regressive provision endorsed by a body that is quite needless in the first place. Since women carry the brunt of a pregnancy, it has to be their decision to keep it or abort it. The state must uphold this principle in its legal codes to give respect and dignity to its women citizens.

While these changes will be helpful, the country urgently needs a comprehensive family planning programme. The state will have to take the lead, but efforts will need to be coordinated not just with civil society actors but also economic actors. This point is crucial because family planning can simply not go about successfully if it doesn’t take place alongside prudent management of the economy. This means that state institutions must recognise that social and economic background of a household plays a very significant role in people’s decision to have children. In economic terms, the elites and the upwardly mobile middle classes can afford to invest in their children’s education and upbringing. However, for many a household living below or around the poverty line in the country, children are potential bread-earners who are sent to the labour market in a very early age to add on to the family meagre earnings. The purpose of highlighting these class differences is not to reinforce them through state policy. On the contrary, the point is that the family planning policy must be integrated with the economic policy to eradicate poverty and promote equity in terms of opportunities for socio-economic advancement. We will only need to lift all the households in the country to a certain income level where they don’t think of newborns as potential bread-earners. Once that is done, we would have tackled much of our population challenge. \*

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