

Population planning

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The study of human populations and the demographers — the people who perform it — have a common characteristic: population being the cause and the end of all occupations, figures in every discipline and the demographers are obliged to find the connection between human population and every development in society. This article has been impelled by the same tendency. The prevailing drought and serious shortage of water in most parts of the country are going to create serious problems. Since the dawn of history, droughts and excessive rains have played crucial roles in the distribution of population forcing populations to migrate.

We, in Pakistan, are still smarting under the affect of the recent drought in parts of Balochistan, Sindh and the Seraiki belt of the Punjab. The present situation may not be desperate but it, definitely, is critical. Apart from the shortage of water for human use, the short supply of irrigation water and the plummeting level of ground water will seriously jeopardise the prospects of agricultural crops, in turn affecting crucial agriculture-fed industries and exports of their products. The affectees on all counts would be the general population: Its contribution to the problem? Wastage, leakages, ignorance, neglect!

This raises a serious issue: To what extent have our plans and policies been taking into consideration the various factors which have a bearing on population?

A major demographic variable, migration, attracted attention after the expatriates emerged as a major support for our balance of payments. The crucial rural-urban migration, however, was completely ignored, except for the deafening rhetoric about making the rural areas socially more attractive and economically self-sustaining. The chain of rural development programmes to fulfil these promises, mostly culminated with mixed consequences. The advent of Afghan refugees spawned sort of a policy about international escapes; it went on changing according to the size of arrivals and the intensity of international pressures.

Destiny of all developing countries is the rapid rise in urban settlements. We have been getting our share of the trend. The 1981-98 inter-censal period experienced a growth of 4.2% in the urban centres as compared to 2.6% for the total population. Every government has declared its intentions to decrease urban growth (most of it due to migration from rural areas). The isolated industrial areas and zones did not show the results that had been promised, because there did not exist a uniform and comprehensive policy to boost rural industrialisation, nor a social infra-structure took roots to sustain population in the newly industrialised countryside.

The cities sprang up without much planning and sans physical and social infrastructure. Even the essentials like water, housing, roads, hospitals and schools fell short of the requirements of the fast expanding cities. This had led to serious congestion and crowding, resulting in deterioration of living conditions and chaos of the worst order. It is not a matter of pride that almost one-third of our population in the large cities lives in slums and *katchi abadies*. One only wishes that there were a policy about the squatter population in the 1950s when the immigration from India was swelling our numbers. The same has happened in case of illegal economic immigrants from the neighbouring countries who have not only added to the unemployment of our own youth but also drain on the economy because they repatriate

solute number of the would-be beneficiaries being denied the benefits of social services, have increased in spite of impressive expansion in services!

One has learnt that the government is in the process of formulating a new national population policy due to multiple facets being added to a rapidly growing population. This is a welcome move. There is no doubt that we have recorded a breakthrough in fertility decline. But we are still adding 3.2 million persons to our population every year. 40% of our population is still below the age of 15, so economically unproductive. The proportion of our aged population has started rising; it will continue to swell as health facilities and income levels rise. The most significant figure is that of women in the reproductive age group. Their proportion will increase to 53% of the female population by 2020, from 47% in 1998. This will enhance the potential fertility rate unless it has been intrinsically brought down. One can add to this list, the issues of adolescents, youth unemployment, child labour, international migration, and a host of problems related to population.

Knowing the life-long work of the Minister for Population, one considers the population programmes in safe hands. Yet a suggestion or two would not hurt. What we need in a new population policy is to lay down principles, give directions — and most of all, spell out clearly the measures for achieving objectives. For example, one is aware of standing instructions to all planners in every sector to work out the implications of a development project for manpower, population, environment. But how seriously this part of the exercise is undertaken is anybody's guess. Were the spirit of these directions understood, there would have been many more labour-intensive development projects in our plans. Likewise, there would have been greater coordination among departments instead of overlapping and conflicting developments: One can see on the streets, the electricity, telephone, gas, water supply and road makers undoing each other's work round the clock. There would be the conservatives who would insist that policies should be indicative rather than definitive. But in a milieu where the tendency is to take everything lightly and meet barely the official requirements, some teeth have to be provided to any national policy.

The initiatives in the field of family planning are now carrying blooms and bearing some fruit. Let us create a culture of promoting their growth, and making the provisions of a policy binding. One would stress that the Health, Education and other departments should concentrate on providing for the ever-increasing population and meeting the existing lag on war footings, utilising every bit of resources that they have.

A good population policy for a developing country has to articulate the truth that all development is for the population just as all population is a part of the development process. At our level of comprehension, it has to be elucidated concretely. Today you have the problem of water. Tomorrow it will be energy. Then it might be food. Add Health, Education and Housing to the list. We have to comprehend the future course of events resulting from rapid population growth. We have only three alternatives: Either raise the death rate to levels of yore, or reduce the birth rate or to increase the supply of goods and services for meeting the needs of a growing population, beside accommodating the much needed respite to the deprived. Since the question of a rise in mortality is absurd, and raising the stands of living will remain slow for some time to come, fertility decline is the only feasible alternative for a quick assuaging.

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The factors which did find place in population planning were the social sectors. This happened because a vocal and large group of national and international opinion-makers and social engineers asserted that no efforts at population control could be effective unless the social infrastructure were built, and health, education, housing, drinking water were provided adequately. But the call came rather late. As a result, the provision of social services remains far behind the increase in population with little hope of ever catching the ever-expanding demand. It is a matter of record, that the ab-

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But it is not an isolated phenomenon. The message to be conveyed to all sections of society and all sectors of the economy should be that they consolidate the gains made by the population programmes, and continue with efforts at stabilising population size. We are still not out of the zone of embarrassment as far as the population growth rate is concerned, in spite of the declining trend in the recent years. But we cannot afford to relax. There are instances where the fertility rates have started rising again after an initial decline. We better keep up the effort and watch out for reverses.

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