

Poverty alleviation and population growth

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For developing countries all over the world, efforts to alleviate poverty and raise the people's standard of living to a reasonably acceptable level are directly related to adoption of conscious measures for controlled growth of population. Perhaps it will not be an exaggeration to say that a self-inflicted population explosion has much more far reaching, long lasting and devastating effects than a nuclear explosion caused by enemy action. To elucidate further, let us have a close look at the situation prevailing in the country. At the time of independence, the population of the areas constituting the present day Pakistan was 32.5 million. In the span of half a century, it has grown to 131 million, a four fold increase, despite the sad fact that Pakistan's infant mortality rate at one thousand deaths a day is much higher than most other countries in the developing world, while more than 28000 women die every year of complications caused by pregnancy and childbirth, mainly due to malnutrition, insanitary conditions, lack of proper pre and post natal care and age factor as related to conception. Yet another deplorable statistic is that more than one-third population of the country is forced to live under the poverty line while more than half does not have access to safe drinking water or proper sanitation and sewerage facilities. Add to these lamentable conditions the facts that we have only one doctor for 1600, one nurse for 4000 and one hospital for 1500 of our countrymen. The astonishing part is that despite these myriad nega-

tive factors, we add on some 4.3 million hungry mouths to our half famished populace every year at the rate of eight new born babies each minute. All this should provide a fairly accurate though frightening picture of what devastation an unchecked population growth can cause in a resource starved, heavily indebted country like ours.

In the 7 point agenda announced by the Chief Executive shortly after taking over the reins of government, poverty alleviation programme had a fairly high priority. Since then, he and his team have devoted much time and effort for gradually making it possible to realise this cherished goal, by initiating certain desired corrective measures including devolution of power at the grassroot level and giving a direction to the hitherto rudderless economy,

despite serious resource constraint caused by unforeseen natural factors such as the near drought conditions and depleting water resources as well as conditionalities laid down by the loan giving agencies and the tense situation prevailing at the borders.

It has been established beyond doubt that the "sine qua non" for planned economic development and poverty alleviation is the universal principle of synchronisation of expansion in economic resources with the planned growth of population. Fortunately for us, we have

in the present policy making machinery internationally acclaimed experts in their respective fields such as Dr. Attiya Inayatullah in Population Welfare Planning on one hand and Mr. Shaukat Aziz, Mr. Razzaq Dawood and Dr. Attur-Rehman in development planning and finance, strengthening of the private sector and promotion of science and technology on the other. No one can appreciate better than these luminaries the urgency for adoption of a coordinated policy to achieve the Chief Executive's goal for poverty alleviation. It is

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encouraging to know that following upon its reform agenda and well knit course of action for economic recovery, the Government is hopeful of qualifying for Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility (PRGF) to the tune of \$2.5 billion spread over a period of three years. The Finance Minister has said after his recent negotiations with the World Bank and IMF that if Pakistan continued to pursue its reform agenda, it was certain to receive a high degree of understanding and support from these two agencies. He has also identified four major

challenges facing the economy, namely low economic growth, growing incidence of poverty, need for good governance and high burden of debt. He has further stated that the Government is fully aware of the importance of creating an investor friendly climate and measures to this effect will be incorporated in the forthcoming budget. Efforts are afoot to increase exports, limit imports of unnecessary items, encourage home remittances through banking channels and expedite privatisation of large holdings in the public sector as well as

to properly and fully exploit the country's mineral, oil, gas, water and power resources. Though there never is a magic wand available to do away with poverty, these and similar other efforts in the public and private sectors are likely to lead gradually to improvement in

the life standard of the common man.

It is estimated that more than half of the country's ever expanding population will be living in the urban areas by 2020. With cities like Karachi, Lahore, Hyderabad and Faisalabad already bursting at the seams, sewerage and sanitation facilities almost non-existent in over crowded localities, potable water becoming a rare commodity, health and education facilities in the public sector sub-standard and fast shrinking, ever expanding katchi abadies full of squalor and utter

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deprivation, air pollution making it almost impossible to breathe and an alarmingly increasing crime rate directly related to all these factors, immediate measures are needed to be adopted to check further hazardous urbanisation and to expand and strengthen the agricultural sector which is the mainstay of the country's economy as also the most important factor for poverty alleviation. At the same time stringent action is needed to check the increasing inflow of illegal migrants who now constitute an alarming percentage of our urban population and an unbearable burden on our already over stretched resources.

Keeping the above conditions in mind, it is encouraging to know that high priority is being accorded to the population planning and welfare programmes both by the Government and the related private sector organisations and that the all important linkage between population control and sustainable development planning has been fully recognised. A step in the right direction is that the network of family welfare centres spread all over the country have been revamped to function as reproductive health centres. Apart from increasing awareness of family planning measures, these centres are also providing quality reproductive health services. Another noteworthy development is that the overall rate of population growth has come down to 2.2 per cent from a massive 3 per cent plus a few years ago, as a direct result of spread of awareness among the population, especially the female segment.

(The Writer is a former Director Public Relations, Population Planning Punjab.)