Growing Population: A Time Bomb

Increasing population is a never-ending debate that creates conflicts amongst humans. In 1968, a professor from Stanford and his wife wrote a book warning about overpopulation. The book has repetition of the Malthusian theory due to which it is rightly criticized. Since the book has been published, world’s population has doubled, and food productivity has increased. Numbers confirm that the world produces enough calories; they are just not equally distributed.

However, developed and developing countries often face different challenges regarding population. For instance, many third-world, lower-middle and lower-income countries struggle to control their populations, the developed world is now concerned with the decreasing fertility. A 2019 book *Empty Planet* documents the concerns about falling fertility rates in the rich world.

Pakistan was and remains stuck in its overpopulation crisis. By 2050, it is predicted to have 338m people and is expected to be fourth out of the nine countries that are set to account for half the world’s projected population. While official documents repeatedly view the youth bulge as an economic dividend, it is often forgotten that Pakistan is practically last in all development and social indicators.

Pakistan has not only avoided its population debate but also indirectly incentivized population growth. Before restructuring the National Financial Commission. 2009, the division of the resource pool was solely based on population numbers. The recklessness in not recognizing population growth as a security threat, which is also reflected in the National Security Policy. The latter recognizes migration, health, climate, and food as threats to human security but misses population growth, except for a mere reference.

It took Britain 130 years to reduce its fertility rate from five to two and India 25 years to bring it down from six to five. Reducing fertility rates is particularly difficult in places which are poor because without safety nets, having more children means investment and insurance. As the proverb goes: “A Child comes with two hands and only one mouth.”

Secondly, in places where women are celebrated for their biological rules, childbearing brings more value. As families without children are seen as incomplete and childless women are subjected to social stigma, having children means higher acceptability in society.

In its tiny facial space and limited economic crisis, Pakistan has no future if it continues to grow at the same pace. There is a need to learn from countries where fertility rates drop much faster. For instance, it took Britain 130 years, but Iran 22 and South Korea 20 to reduce fertility rate. Even if one account for cultural differences, Pakistan can take at its once poor part, Bangladesh. According to the 1951 census, West Pakistan had a population 33.7m while East Pakistan had 42m people. Today, Bangladesh is a country of 164m, and Pakistan of 220m. India has grown at a slower pace than both Pakistan and Bangladesh despite being the second-most populous country. Pakistan’s population rate has declined but more due to natural reason and less due to the success of the population policy.

Nature has endowed childbearing abilities only to women, but the decision to bear a child if often not her own. Decreasing fertility will not only mean less stress on scarce resources such as, land and water but will also have a positive spillover a fact on democracy and growth. The solution lies in directing education, jobs, and credit to women. For instance, Iranian women went from having seven children in 1980 to less than two in 2006 when a big rise in female education was noted. Advice can help to. For example, in Bangladesh, from the early days BRAC and Government jointly distributed advice and contraceptives. This was one reason why Bangladesh was able to bring down its fertility rate from 6.1 in 1980 to 2.3 in 2010.

Secondly, for families to be smaller, they will need to be healthy. Pakistan has one of the highest infant mortality rates (Higher than sub-Saharan Africa). Unless services such as pre-and-post natal care, portable water, health care and nutrition for mother and child, and disease control get better, survival rates for children will not improve.

Thirdly, there is a need to implement laws on child labor and early marriages. The recent turmoil when a father pleaded that his daughter was a minor and therefor unfit for marriage is an example of how non-seriously the legal age of marriage is taken. For a long-term change in attitudes, the curriculum needs to be designed to address the obsession with male children.

Lastly, Pakistan as a nation needs to acknowledge women outside their biological rules and as human resources. While the nation is obsessed with discussing IMF plans, early elections, corruption, etc, it is time to remind the policymakers that there are several issues of grave importance needing immediate attention --- and that the population clock is still ticking.