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The pressures and potential of a burgeoning population and recommendations to avert future crises

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Population in Pakistan: Holding the seams together

"The Millennium Development Goals, particularly the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger, cannot be achieved if questions of population and reproductive health are not squarely addressed."

- United Nations Secretary General, Kofi Annan, Bangkok, December 2003

The "population bomb" is no longer a leading cause for concern in the developed world, where falling overall birth rates and low average births per woman have changed the way planners think. Not so for many developing countries like Pakistan and India, which are projected to be among the nine countries which will account for half of the world's population of 7 billion, between 2005 and 2050. The following is an analysis of the consequences of rapid population growth in Pakistan, if it continues along its current trajectory.

The Current Demographic Crisis and the Millennium Development Goals

At present, Pakistan has a population of over 180 million, constantly growing at an estimated rate of 2.03% [1]. In the span of two decades, the population has risen by almost half - a pace that is double the world average. [2] At this rate, it is predicted that by 2050, Pakistan will be a nation of 335 million, making it the fourth most populous country in the world. These statistics cast a shadow over efforts to move towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in the country. The population explosion is placing an increasing strain on already scarce natural and economic resources, as well as social services. The issues of resource distribution among the population have been compounded by political volatility, conflict and natural disaster, with internal displacement of communities placing additional strain on the social fabric.

In a country where 43 per cent of people are currently living under the poverty line, the pressure of a burgeoning population on natural resources has particularly serious

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implications. Here, the greatest challenges can be seen in terms of food and energy security. The National Nutrition Survey 2011 indicates that about 60% of Pakistan's total population is facing food insecurity, with an alarming proportion of women and children suffering from malnutrition. Water, fuel, and electricity – essential resources that power the economy – are becoming increasingly difficult for ordinary people to access. The recurrence of power load-shedding not only hinders the operation of large-scale industries, but also smaller scale economic activities. The plethora of interlinked issues creates a poverty trap that makes MDG 1, “eradicating poverty and hunger”, an unrealistic target for 2015.

The average size of the Pakistani family is 6.8 individuals. At the household-level, the incidence of child labour is inextricably connected to the need to augment the family income in families with more mouths to feed. At the policy level, pressure on existing services constitutes a major obstacle to achieving the goals of universal primary education, reduction of child mortality and improvement of health, particularly maternal health. Apart from basic availability and access, ensuring quality and equity in services is becoming even more of a challenge. When it comes to schools, for instance, more children mean less educational resources per child, worse teacher-student ratios and compromised overall performance. The retention rates for girls also decrease as the size of the family increases, as female education is displaced by other priorities.

At present, Pakistan is the most urbanized nation in South Asia, with city dwellers making up 36% of its population, (2008). According to base case projections, the year 2030 will be a major landmark in Pakistan's demographics. For the first time in its history, the urban population in Pakistan will constitute 50% of the total. [3] Rapid urbanization and disturbance of ecosystems is one factor that makes achieving MDG 7, ensuring environmental sustainability, particularly difficult. Cities are choked with congestion, and the existing infrastructure and resource base are severely strained by demand. The expansion of urban slums in places like Karachi is associated with a host of issues, land and water pollution being the tip of the iceberg.

The Reality of Population Control

The population explosion is a root cause of the intergenerational poverty cycle, which in turn feeds both social and economic issues in developing countries. In spite of this, Pakistan has been found to have the lowest Contraceptive Prevalence Rate (CPR) in the South Asia region – just 30 per cent. [4]

Contrary to popular belief, awareness of contraceptive methods is no longer the greatest challenge for population control. The Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey (PDHS) of 2006-07 found that “nearly all Pakistani women knew of at least one method of contraception,” with a higher proportion of respondents knowing of modern as opposed

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to traditional methods. The real issue in a media-savvy world is access – only about half the demand for contraception among married woman is currently being met. This is not only because of a lack of available facilities, but also because of factors like a lack of female mobility. Inter spousal communication is an additional issue when it comes to the procurement and use of tools for contraception.

As far as expanding awareness is concerned, campaigns need to be tailored to address the specific social and cultural factors inhibiting success. The lowest income groups of society are the ones with the highest birth rates – in Pakistan, the difference between the poorest and richest women is nearly three children per woman. [5] To some extent, this can be attributed to limited knowledge of birth control among mothers with less education and exposure; while aware of its existence, they often demonstrate a strong fear of side effects.

The gender dimension is an important one when considering population control. It is a recognised fact that societies with more educated females who are integrated into the workforce have lower fertility rates. However, the patriarchal nature of Pakistani society means that women are a seriously undervalued human resource. This is reflected in fertility preferences, as the girl child is not afforded the same status as the boy. The Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey found that 65 per cent of women with three boys did not want any more children while only 14 per cent of women with three daughters said the same.

In a society where early marriage is a prevalent phenomenon, knowledge of the importance of birth spacing is essential. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that individuals and couples should wait for at least 2–3 years between births in order to reduce the risk of adverse maternal and child health outcomes. Recent studies supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) suggest that an interval of 3–5 years might help to reduce these risks even further. Mothers require sensitization to the advantages of fewer, more well-spaced births, while addressing their religious and cultural concerns.

Human Capital and the Demographic Dividend

One element of the demographic transition of the country is a changing age structure; since the 1990s, Pakistan has been experiencing a “youth bulge”. About half its citizens are currently under twenty, while nearly two-thirds are under thirty. Depending on the direction in which the young population is steered, this represents both an opportunity and a threat – a demographic dividend or demographic disaster.

The energy of a young, working age population, if properly harnessed, could power an

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economic rise akin to the miracle of the “East Asian Tigers” in the 1990s. The quality of human capital will be an essential factor in determining the course of the youth bulge.

Strategic investment in education and social services is crucial, in order for the “young” Pakistan to achieve its potential. Unless this happens, a demographic disaster is imminent, in which the economy cannot keep pace with the demands of the population. To avoid a crisis, the economy must grow by 6% a year to create 36 million jobs in the next decade - an enormous challenge in an economy that is growing by about a million jobs a year. Both tangible and intangible inputs are needed to ensure that the young generation has the opportunities to achieve its potential, and do not fall prey to the extremism that gaining ground in the country. [6]

Population Policy and the Way Forward

After the devolution of the Ministry of Population Welfare in the post-18th Amendment scenario, responsibilities for planning and coordination of national population policy have been transferred to the Planning and Development Division, along with the administration of research institutions. The Population Welfare Program has been devolved to the provinces, to perform tasks such as communication and advocacy, family planning service delivery and practical monitoring as well as inter-sector coordination. In-depth research is needed to identify the specific obstacles constraining progress in each province, in order to design effective programs at the local level. The issue of the population explosion is a cross-cutting one, relevant to diverse aspects of human development and economic policy.

Specific actionable steps in terms of population policy include the following:

Expanding access to and availability of contraceptives: There is a pressing need for a multi-pronged approach to meet the existing demand for contraception. The Planning and Development Division recognises that the current number of service delivery centres established by the Population Welfare Programme is insufficient to cater to the needs of the population and that an expansion of services is required. Door to door dissemination campaigns can help solve female mobility issues to some extent, but an effort is needed to find solutions that can be implemented on a sustained basis.

Advocacy for fewer, more well-spaced births: Concerted efforts to improve spacing would not only lead to a reduction in child and maternal morbidity and mortality, it would also mean a better distribution of resources across individuals. From the dependency ratio, to student-teacher ratios, to patient-doctor ratios, it

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would trigger an improvement in quality indicators across the services spectrum.

Upgradation of the status of women: The development cliché that the role of women is crucial in mitigating population challenges holds absolutely true today. Apart from expanding awareness and knowledge of where and how to obtain contraceptives, advocacy and awareness campaigns need to be strengthened with a view to upgrading the status of women. Efforts need to ensure that the status of the girl child is equal to that of the boy, in order to address skewed fertility preferences. Emphasis on female education would help reduce the problem of higher birth rates associated with early marriages, and also strengthen efforts to promote an understanding of the benefits of birth spacing. Finally, female economic empowerment and mobility would go a long way in resolving problems of access.

Engaging men in the discourse: It is an established fact that men have higher bargaining power in the Pakistani household. Having their buy-in when it comes to contraception and spacing of births should therefore be made an urgent priority to ensure the success of programs.

Cashing the demographic dividend: There is an immediate need for inter-sectoral coordination to protect and promote the interests of the young generation. Both tangible and intangible inputs are required for the enhancement of human capital, to ensure that Pakistan capitalises on its current demographic advantage.

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