

Policy Perspectives on Pakistan's Population Explosion

Pakistan is grappling with a plethora of socioeconomic challenges. While the country is consistently making progress in resolving many such issues, some areas still suffer from policymaker's apathy and require due attention. Population explosion is one such issue.

Up until 2020, Pakistan currently had a birth rate of 2.2% or [3.6](#) children per woman, which is the second highest in South Asia; a region that is itself home to the fastest-growing population on earth. If left unchecked, this population will [double](#) in the next two decades, further exacerbating our existing socio-economic woes.

In fact, the prevalent trend in the labor market already highlights the grim situation created by the population explosion. A report prepared by the Ministry of Federal Education & Professional Training shows that at least [1.8 million](#) people enter the job market every year while the economy can absorb way less. If policymakers intend to eliminate the scourge of unemployment, then the gross domestic product (GDP) needs to grow by at least [6% to 7%](#) consistently over the coming years and decades.

These estimates not account for the damage done to the economy and labor market by the onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic! Even before the pandemic, Pakistan's GDP growth was a dismal 2%, with COVID-19 shock plunging it to [-0.4%](#). Future forecasts of economic growth are not encouraging either which will make employment generation even tougher in the years to come.

So, while job creation remains a pressing issue for most governments, unfortunately, the issue of population explosion—which directly feeds the unemployment scourge—has taken a back burner in the priority list of almost all regimes. However, in this case, the government's complacency is increasingly becoming unaffordable as Pakistan's demographic dividend threatens to turn into a demographic bomb.

In economics, the dire predictions vis-à-vis population explosion were first made by Thomas Malthus in his famous *An Essay on the Principle of Population* published in 1798. Malthus theorized that food production and population have different growth dynamics, such that population grows in 'geometric ratio' while the corresponding food sources grow in 'arithmetic proportion'. These divergent growth trends ultimately create a situation where there is too little food to feed too many mouths.

While many of Malthus' ominous prophecies didn't pan out—thanks to the improvements in food technology and rise in agricultural productivity—his insights into the pitfalls of unchecked population growth are still relevant, especially in the backdrop of tightening labor markets and shrinking job opportunities in the developing countries like Pakistan.

In Pakistan, poverty and lack of education are among many factors contributing directly to population explosion. Uneducated and lowly skilled people procreate in large numbers to maximize their incomes by having more working hands and, also to have more people look after their needs in old age, i.e., as a type of insurance.

Similarly, illiteracy and lack of awareness is another explanatory variable for population growth. In this context, the government is to be partly blamed for having ignored the population control program in the last few decades, which is indicated by the contraceptive prevalence rate (CPR) of [35%](#) in Pakistan—the lowest in the region. Clearly, this is attributable to the government's failure in raising awareness about population control via media campaigns, door-to-door engagement, and individual counselling.

The rise of right-wing religious extremism in the past few decades is another factor that is correlated with Pakistan's population explosion. The Islamists disparage population control as a foreign, Western agenda that is incompatible with Eastern values and antagonistic to the glory of Islam. This factor also partly explains the government's hesitancy in actively pursuing a population control program.

In this context, then, it becomes clear that government needs to craft a strategy to tackle both the supply-side (i.e., job creation) and demand-side (i.e., factors that lead to population growth) simultaneously. While the former is beyond the scope of this op-ed and warrants another opinion piece, I will briefly discuss certain policy proposals addressing the latter.

First, the government needs to address the issue of rampant poverty immediately. Since Pakistan is not a welfare state, and people lack social safety nets, therefore, they procreate excessively due to reasons discussed above. One way to resolve this challenge is to expand the *Ehsaas* program in every nook and corner of the country, so that poor people have an assurance that, at the very least, they will not starve and that their old-age needs will be met.

Second, the government needs to raise the CPR by at least 20% to bring it at par with the regional average. This can be achieved by a concerted nationwide campaign utilizing the media and the services of health workers such as the LHVs. Methods aimed at empowering women may also work in this regard.

Third, the government needs to mobilize moderate *ulema* to counter the extremist narrative against family planning and birth control. These *ulemas* need to spread the message that population control is in the best interest of Pakistan and that it is not against any religion if such methods are used to maximize the welfare of a country and its people.

Thus, to conclude, Pakistan needs to urgently address the issue of unfettered population growth before it turns into a Malthusian nightmare. The country must decide how it wants to utilize its surplus population: by converting it into a demographic dividend, like its Iron Brother, or allowing it to grow unabated, that will soon create a demographic bomb, just like its eastern neighbor.

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