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Pakistan's Population Troubles

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1. Introduction

The population dynamic of Pakistan is complicated. Not only is the population expanding but it is expanding in a rather haphazard and disproportionate way which makes it hard for policy-makers to decipher a recognizable pattern and formulate policies and planning frameworks in line with it. The rural population, especially women remain poor, malnourished and marginalized for predominantly economic reasons but the situation in urban centers isn't much different. The growth in rural-urban migration has led to a meteoric rise in slums in the urban dwellings that have become epicenters of disease and environmental issues like food insecurity and lack of clean drinking water.

According to the preliminary results of the recent census, Pakistan's population has expanded enormously over estimates provided by the last census held in 1998. The current population is estimated at 207.8 billion raising serious concerns over the level and scale of urbanization happening in a rather subtle manner. It also brings to the fore environmental and food security concerns apart from those that this brief chronicles below.

The religious, social, ethnic, cultural and economic factors underlying the disproportionate increase in population within urban centers has caused many a development and administrative challenges for the government and renders the entire population dynamic of the country to be unique and thus, difficult to be encapsulated under one representative policy framework.

A manifestation of the religious and ethnic dimension leading to the uniqueness of Pakistan's population dynamic is the mass exodus of and decline in Hindu and Parsi population of Pakistan, especially in the province of Sindh that still hosts the largest Hindu population. While interior Sindh lags behind the rest of Pakistan, barring a few districts of Baluchistan (see UNDP's MPI report, 2016), and migration from the province could be a direct impact of the economic deprivations, the development deficits and poverty and human development-related disadvantages of residing in Sindh are exacerbated if one is a non-Muslim.

Addressing the need to advance the formulation process, this brief is meant to put forth analytical and methodological frameworks, ideas and recommendations that build the capacity of the government and relevant stakeholders involved with population research

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and implementation in Pakistan to formulate a population policy and be able to pre-empt structural changes that are expected to occur within the population paradigm in future.

In context, the absence of an effective and relevant federal population policy within Pakistan is bound to cause many programmatic, institutional and policy problems. The last population policy was formulated in the year 2010 which served to raise key issues regarding population in Pakistan while also identifying the following areas and recommendations for policy deliberation:

2. Problem Identification

Based on the policy experiences of other developing countries, the lessons learnt through implementation of policy options conceptualized in the population policy of 2010² and 2002² and demographic realities in Pakistan, an effective population policy for 2017/18 must be formulated that addresses the following foremost objectives:

- (a) Reduction in the rate and incidence of unwanted fertility;
- (b) Reduction in demand for large-size families, and;
- (c) Greater investment in adolescents to tackle the population momentum problem³.

A major hurdle toward formulation of an effective policy and realization of the objectives outlined above is the absence of true census estimates. Pakistan hasn't had a population census since 1998 which renders all analyses done regarding population to be based on assumptions, some of which maybe not be credible or too far-fetched. However, given the current population trends that are based on population estimates obtained from extrapolative analysis conducted on the 1998 data, the following broad areas, that are currently experiencing and advancing the population problem, are identified:

- Sexual and reproductive health
- Youth bulge, demographic dividend and concomitant economic and social opportunities and implications
- Urbanization including rural-urban migration, congestion forces and agglomeration economic potential.
- Family Planning - role of faith based organization.
- Fertility Rates

The deficits prevalent in sexual and reproductive health, the untapped potential of the youth bulge and the related loss of demographic dividend, rural-urban migration trends that are congesting cities while producing asymmetric development outcomes and

² The Government of Pakistan released its last population policy in 2010. The last population policy released before that was in the year 2002.

³ First three objectives adopted from "Siddiqui, F.A. The Pakistan Development Review 40: 4 Part I (Winter 2001) pp. 345–369."

challenges and the micro-level family planning issues are areas that need to be captured in the revised population policy for 2017.

3. Situation Analysis

I. Fertility Rates

Pakistan ranks as the sixth most populous country of the world with a population of 194 million in 2016 which is equivalent to 2.57% of the total world population. While the population growth rate is decelerating, the total fertility rate has levelled off at around four births per woman, with significant differentials among income groups. According to the Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey, 2006-2007 the total fertility rate of the lowest wealth quintile was 5.8 births, while that of the richest quintile was 3. Women in the youngest reproductive age group of 15-19 had a fertility rate of 51 births per 1,000 women, illustrating that early marriage and childbearing persist⁴.

According to United Nations Population Division, Pakistan will be ranked at number three among the largest countries according to population size by 2050. Pakistan's population is expected to grow from an estimated 181 million in 2009 to 335 million by 2050 unless fertility rates drop faster than currently projected. At present, women in Pakistan have an average of four children, the best strategy for achieving ambitious population targets are 2 births per woman in 2025.

II. Rural-Urban Migration

According to research conducted by the Ministry of Planning and Development, rural-urban migration is peaking in Pakistan even though rural population still exceeds that of the urban in absolute estimates. The awareness of rural peoples regarding issues like family planning and sexual and reproductive health is undermined by regressive traditions, customs and religious considerations.

Around 37% of Pakistan's population lives in urban areas, and growing urbanization is increasing pressure on the provision of quality services. Equitable access to high-quality basic social services – including health, reproductive health, nutrition, water and sanitation, hygiene promotion and education – is constrained by the multiple dimensions of disparities. For example, lack of investment in the health sector has caused gaps in access to primary health care services, especially in preventive health care.

III. Youth Bulge –Demographic Dividend

Pakistan has an ever-expanding youth bulge. This is an asset considering the declining fertility rates in the west, a major concern is the provision of employment opportunities to this vast group. With security concerns looming large in the country, population experts fear the loss of this asset to activities that can endanger peace, security and prosperity in a country which is already embattling severe extremism in all its forms and manifestations. Employment and business opportunities must grow at a rate which is at

⁴ BIPP Research Estimates. Data Obtained from PDHS 2006-2007.

least as big as the rate at which the youth bulge is expanding. The Prime Minister embarked on a novel youth employment program which has been functional since he came into power in 2013. The data on the outcomes and the number of people that have benefitted from the program needs to be looked into to gauge its effectiveness.

The Government re-emphasized the need to develop marketable skills among young people to increase their access to decent and productive employment in its Framework for Economic Growth. Investment in merit goods; health and education of the people under 21, which represent around half of the country's population can have significant labor market multiplier effects like improvement in productivity and skill set of the young individuals.

According to UNFPA estimates, 28 per cent of the country's population is between the age of 15 and 29 years. There is obviously a significant demographic dividend associated with this but the challenge is to translate this 'youth bulge' into an asset that is able to realize that dividend. The country's labor force is increasing at 3.2 per cent per annum and by 2030, the working-age population is expected to be around 67 per cent of the total, compared to the current 55 per cent, with corresponding demand for employment. However, 32 per cent of the youth are uneducated, and most of them lack vocational or life skills. According to a survey by the Centre for Poverty Reduction and Social Policy.

IV. Family Planning

Clearly, family planning issues were considered the primary area of engagement in the government's population policy of 2010. In the policy framework outlined above, three out of the eight broad policy areas discussed by the government were relevant to family planning issues. However, despite the increased focus of the government, family planning hasn't received much attention in terms of implementation projects that could focus on creating awareness and provision of solution to critical family issues that result in the population problem Pakistan faces today.

Siddiqui (2001) opines that family planning programmes (supply-side) would be effective only when the population at large has the desire or motivation for smaller families (demand-side). It is shown that the demand-side of the equation is influenced by a host of social, cultural, religious, educational, and other factors. Unless policy frameworks that address the social, cultural, religious and educational factors that create incentives for larger families are enacted, the probabilities of tackling the family planning problem are very low.

V. Sexual and Reproductive Health

The status of sexual and reproductive health is mirrored through the current situation of the Lady Health Worker Programme that continues to be the backbone of the community-based health care system. The programme lacks in capacity and is limited due to having insufficient human, financial and intellectual resources. The results are:

- The under-5 mortality rate in Pakistan is one of the highest in Asia. The rate drops from 102 per 1,000 live births for children whose mothers have no education to 59 per 1,000 for mothers with higher education.
- Among the lowest wealth quintile, the probability of a child dying under the age of 5 is 121 per 1,000 live births compared with 60 per 1,000 for the wealthiest quintile.
- The maternal mortality ratio, 276 deaths per 100,000 live births nationwide, ranges from 319 in rural areas to 175 in urban areas.
- The contraceptive prevalence rate has stagnated at 30 per cent over the last decade. With unmet needs at 25 per cent, the result is a high level of unplanned pregnancies, a major barrier to achieving the target for Millennium Development Goal 5 on maternal mortality.

4. Agenda Setting

Addressing these issues through strategic interventions, carefully considered policy adjustments and public-private collaborative efforts will be vital in improving the economic and social conditions of people trapped in the population problem. Clearly, households in terms of re-aligning their budgets to satisfy needs of the ever-increasing family size and the government in terms of providing basic necessities and employment to the expanding youth bulge are embattled by many a challenges and threats but also unrecognized opportunities and strengths that need to be identified and channelized to harness the true potential of the vast human resource of the country.

5. Policy Prescriptions

In light of the discussion on Pakistan's key policy issues, I propose the following policy and institutional measures to be adopted as part of the population policy enactment and the envisaged paradigmatic shift:

- Shadow National Population for Pakistan; this will create incentive for and build capacity of the federal government and relevant multilateral and bilateral development organizations to review and revise the population policy of 2010; identify areas where it lacked, some of which have been highlighted above, to enact a fresh policy for 2017.
- An implementation plan for the proposed policy – this is a major area of deficit vis-à-vis the public policy process in Pakistan. The policy process will remain incomplete and thus would not amount to any visible and significant outcomes if not supported by a plausible implementation plan.

References

Siddiqui, F.A. The Pakistan Development Review 40: 4 Part I (Winter 2001) pp. 345–369.

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