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Population Dynamics of Pakistan: Challenges and the Need for Policy Formulation¹

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Pakistan has a fairly young, large and expanding but unevenly-spread population; an untapped resource that can be converted into a sustainable-development asset if the facts about it are known and the government programmes and policies are harmonised with those facts to harness its true potential. This paper examines, by analysing the population dynamics of Pakistan, the impact that a young, large but untapped- and untrained-population can have on the country's chances of contributing to a peaceful, socio-economically developed and politically stable South Asia. The potential impact, though quite obvious, entails several challenges for the Pakistan government and private-sector organisations in promoting public-private partnerships.

¹ This paper was prepared prior to Pakistan's population census of April-May 2017. Though based largely on data from the 1998 census, the challenges, analyses and implications presented in this paper remain relevant to Pakistan at this point in time. For an analysis of the 2017 census, see "Pakistan's Population – A Ticking Time Bomb", Shahid Javed Burki and Riaz Hassan, ISAS Insights 464, 14 September 2017. <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/ISAS%20Reports/ISAS%20Insights%20No.%20464-%20Pakistan's%20Population-%20A%20Ticking%20Time%20Bomb.docx.pdf>. Accessed on 24 October 2017.

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Introduction

The population dynamics of Pakistan, despite its similarities with that of an archetypal developing nation in the Global South, is in many ways unique, and surprisingly reflects challenges different from those which most developing nations face today. The religious, social, ethnic, cultural and economic factors underlying the disproportionate increase in population in urban centres have caused many developmental and administrative challenges for the government. These factors account for the uniqueness of the population dynamic thereby rendering it difficult to encapsulate this 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 the Hindu and Parsi populations of Pakistan, especially in the province of Sindh that historically had the largest Hindu population. With interior Sindh lagging behind the rest of Pakistan except for a few districts in Baluchistan,³ migration from Sindh could, therefore, be a direct result of economic factors. However, the development deficits, as well as the poverty- and human-development-related disadvantages of residing in Sindh are indeed exacerbated if one is a non-Muslim.

This paper analyses Pakistan's population dynamics with a view to highlighting the importance of capturing its key elements. It also looks at the possible impact of ignoring the exacerbating population problem on the country's socio-economic and political landscapes as well as on its security. It concludes by making several recommendations to capture vital information on the population.

³ Refer to the United Nations Development Programme's Multidimensional Poverty Index report, 2016.

Identifying the Challenges

Based on the policy experiences of other developing countries, the lessons learnt through the implementation of the options conceptualised in the population policies of 2010⁴ and 2002, and taking into account the new demographic realities in Pakistan, an effective population policy for 2017/18 must be formulated that addresses the following foremost objectives:

- i. Reduction in the rate and incidence of unwanted fertility;
- ii. Reduction in demand for large-size families, and;
- iii. Greater investment in adolescents to tackle the population momentum problem.⁵

A major hurdle towards the formulation of an effective policy and realisation of these objectives is the absence of true census estimates. Till April-May 2017, Pakistan did not have a population census since 1998 which rendered all analyses to be based on assumptions, some of which might not be credible or might have been too far-fetched. However, given the population trends that are based on estimates obtained from extrapolative analysis of the 1998 data,⁶ the following broad areas, which define the population problem, are identified:

- i. Youth bulge, demographic dividend and concomitant economic and social opportunities and implications;
- ii. Urbanisation, including rural-urban migration, congestion forces and agglomeration economic potential;
- iii. Family planning;
- iv. Sexual and reproductive health; and
- v. Fertility rates.

⁴ The Government of Pakistan released its last population policy in 2010. The policy released before that was in 2002.

⁵ First three objectives adopted from Siddiqui, F A, *The Pakistan Development Review 40: 4 Part I*, (Winter 2001) pp 345-369.

⁶ The preliminary results from Pakistan's population census 2017 estimates the population to be 207.77 million – this represents a 56.99 per cent increase over the population estimate from 1998. In their paper, Burki and Hasan opined that, in the context of Pakistan's high population growth, the country's policy-makers need to recognise the various demographic transformations that are happening and follow-up the census data releases with studies and papers that can address the demographic surprises unfolded by the data. ISAS Insights 464, 14 September 2017, op. cit.

Pakistan's Population Analysis

Youth Bulge – Demographic Dividend

Pakistan has an ever-expanding youth bulge. This is an asset considering the declining fertility rates in the West. However, 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 least as big as the rate at which the youth bulge is expanding. Pakistan's recently-disqualified Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, had embarked on a youth employment programme which has been functional since he came to power in 2013. The data on the outcomes and the number of people that have benefitted from the programme needs to be looked into to gauge its effectiveness.

The government, in its Framework for Economic Growth, also re-emphasised the need to develop marketable skills among young people to increase their access to decent and productive employment. Investment in public goods – health and education of the people under 21 years of age, who represent around half of the country's population – can have significant labour-market multiplier effects like the improvement in productivity and the skill set of young individuals.

According to the United Nations Population Fund estimates, 28 per cent of Pakistan's population is between the ages 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. The country's labour 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.

Rural-Urban Migration

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

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

According to the United Nations Population Division, Pakistan will be ranked number three among the largest countries in terms of 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 those currently projected. At present, women in Pakistan have an average of four children – the best strategy for achieving ambitious population targets are two births per woman by 2025.

Family Planning

Clearly, family planning issues were considered the primary area of engagement in the government's population policy of 2010. In the Framework for Economic Growth, 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 has not received much attention in terms of implementation projects which could focus on creating awareness and providing solutions to critical family issues – this has resulted in the population problem Pakistan faces today.

F A 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).⁷ It is shown that the demand-side of the equation is influenced by a host of social, cultural, religious and educational factors, among others. Unless policy frameworks that mitigate the factors that create the incentives for larger families are enacted, the probability of tackling the family planning problem is very low.

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 healthcare system. The programme lacks in capacity and has a limited impact due to insufficient human, financial and intellectual resources. The results are:

- i. The under-five 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.
- ii. Among the lowest wealth quintile, the probability of a child dying under the age of five is 121 per 1,000 live births compared with 60 per 1,000 for the wealthiest quintile.
- iii. The maternal mortality ratio is 276 deaths per 100,000 live births nationwide – it ranges from 319 in rural areas to 175 in urban areas.
- iv. The contraceptive-use 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 the United Nations Millennium Development Goal 5 on maternal mortality.

Fertility Rates

Pakistan is the sixth-most-populous country in the world, with a population of 194 million in 2016 which is equivalent to 2.57 per cent of the total world population. While the population growth rate is decelerating, the total fertility rate has levelled off at around four births per

⁷ Siddiqui, F A, *The Pakistan Development Review 40: 4 Part I*, (Winter 2001) pp 345-369.

woman, with significant differentials among income groups. According to the Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey, 2006-07, the total fertility rate among the lowest wealth quintile was 5.8 births while that of the richest quintile was three. Women in the youngest reproductive age group of 15-19 years had a fertility rate of 51 births per 1,000 women, illustrating that early marriage and childbearing persist.⁸

Implications for Pakistan

With the Global North faced with an impending aging problem, a vast population base, which is also centred in the 15-24-year age cohort, is expected to become a highly sought-after resource that can be used by Pakistan and other human-resource-rich countries of the Global South to position and leverage themselves as suppliers of trained and educated personnel. Clearly, this requires a significant investment of intellectual and monetary resources by the Pakistan government, as well as the formulation of policies, planning frameworks and the establishment of efficient institutions that not only recognise population as a resource but also tap it effectively and efficiently. However, with the population spread unevenly across the country, partly through messy, hidden and haphazard urbanisation,⁹ the production systems in the cities, especially from a food security standpoint, will be severely strained in the years to come, and this resource will be considered a burden on the existing state apparatus.

The cities in Pakistan continue to experience a mushroom growth of slums that have a high incidence of disease and poverty. The labour market has been slow to react to the swiftly changing demographic realities. As a result, the increasing unemployment, combined with disease, and housing- and food-deficiencies, could result in a further rise in crime rates in the densely-populated cities.¹⁰

⁸ BIPP Research Estimates. Data Obtained from PDHS 2006-2007.

⁹ Refer to World Bank's Report, *Leveraging Urbanization for Prosperity and Livability*, 2015. The report terms Pakistan's urbanisation as "messy" and "hidden".

¹⁰ The government of the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) embarked on a youth engagement and employment programme called the Prime Ministers' Youth Programme in 2013. However, the details and outcomes of the programme that promised loans to the youth on easy instalments are not generally known. The unemployed youth is believed to be the largest driver of the rise in crime rates in the urban areas of Pakistan.

Addressing the Issues

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

It can be deduced that the programmatic, institutional and policy problems faced by Pakistan in relation to its population management are due to the absence of an effective and relevant federal population policy. The last population policy was formulated in 2010. It is, therefore, important for the Pakistan government and the relevant stakeholders to formulate a comprehensive population policy and be able to pre-empt structural changes that are expected to occur in the population paradigm in the future.

Conclusion

Ranked the sixth-most-populous country in the world, Pakistan's population challenges encompass all strata and sectors of the society. While such population dynamics can be beneficial to the country, there can also be serious religious, social, ethnic, cultural and economic consequences. As a result, the government and other relevant authorities need to devise mechanisms to better understand the changing population trends and formulate policy frameworks to address the demographic issues facing the country.

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