

WORLD POPULATION DAY, 2026: HUMAN SECURITY, DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE AND DEVELOPMENT IN PAKISTAN

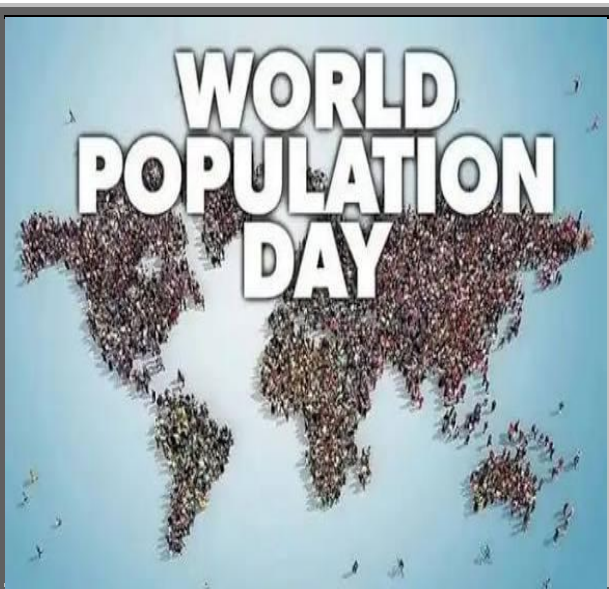
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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



Observed annually on 11 July, World Population Day provides an opportunity to examine how demographic change affects people's lives and a country's capacity to deliver development. Established by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 1989, the observance was inspired by the world population reaching five billion in 1987.¹ For Pakistan, the occasion is particularly relevant because population growth is increasingly shaping the country's economic choices, social pressures, environmental risks and national resilience.

According to Pakistan's Bureau of Statistics (PBS), Pakistan's population reached 241.49 million in the 2023 Population and Housing Census, with an average annual growth rate of 2.55 per cent between 2017 and 2023.² United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) projections indicate that Pakistan's population could reach approximately 403 million by 2050 if current demographic trends persist.³ These figures matter because every additional cohort requires schools, healthcare, jobs, housing, water, energy and transport. The central policy question is therefore not whether a large population is inherently a problem, but whether Pakistan's economy and public institutions can expand opportunities and services fast enough to keep pace with demographic change.

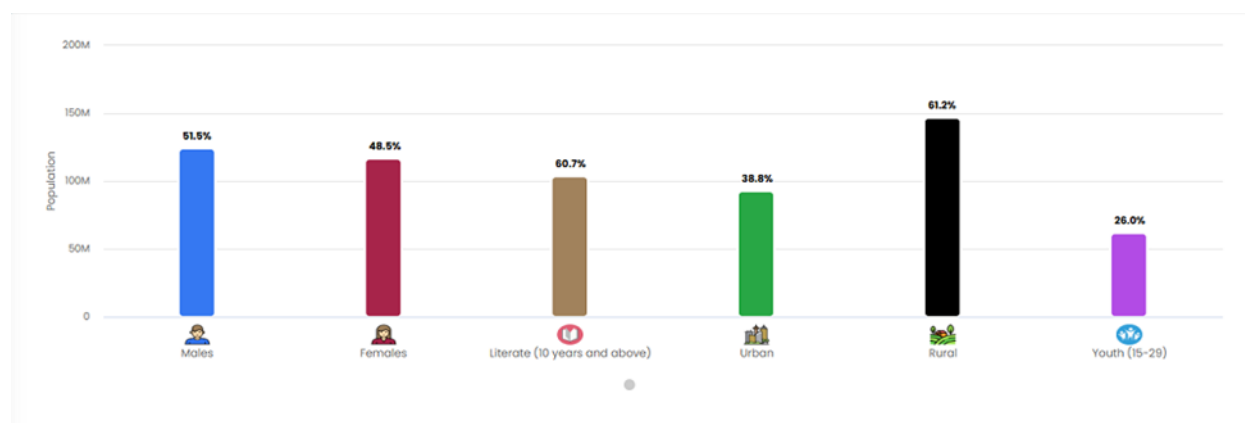
¹ World population day, United Nations, <https://www.un.org/en/observances/world-population-day/background>

² Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, Government of Pakistan <https://www.pbs.gov.pk/census/>

³ Pakistan@2050: Demographic change, future projections, and development opportunities https://pakistan.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/2025-03/Pakistan%402050_%20Demographic%20change%20future%20projections%20and%20develo.pdf?

Understanding Pakistan's Demographic Landscape

Pakistan has one of the youngest populations in the world, with almost one third of its population between 15 and 30. This is often described as a demographic dividend, but the dividend is not automatic. A young population becomes an economic advantage only when people acquire useful skills, find productive employment and have access to health and education. Otherwise, the same demographic structure can deepen unemployment, informality, inequality and social frustration.



Selected demographic indicators from Pakistan's 2023 Population and Housing Census

The challenge is best understood as a gap between demographic growth and institutional capacity. Adding 4-5 million people every year means that the state must continually expand public services simply to maintain existing levels of access. If economic growth, public investment and service delivery do not keep pace, pressure accumulates across several sectors at once. What begins as a demographic trend can consequently become a development constraint and, over time, a national-security concern.

Population Growth as a Human Security Multiplier

Pakistan's National Security Policy (2022–2026) places human security at the foundation of national security.⁴ This provides a useful lens for population growth because demographic pressures rarely operate in isolation. They amplify weaknesses in employment, education, healthcare, food security, gender equality, urban governance and environmental management. The result is a chain reaction: when more people compete for limited opportunities and services, economic insecurity can become social and political insecurity.

⁴ "National Security Policy of Pakistan 2022-26", National Security Division, Govt. of Pakistan, Accessed on 11th August, 2026
<https://nsd.gov.pk/PublicationDetail/NGE2ZDY0Y2UtODM4Yy00YWE5LTg0NTMtYzQ4OGY2OTkOTBi>

National Finance Commission (NFC) and Fiscal Incentives

The National Finance Commission (NFC) distribution formula places considerable weight on population, making population size a major determinant of the share of federal resources allocated to each province. While this approach reflects the need to finance public services for larger populations, it can also create an unintended fiscal incentive: provinces may have limited financial motivation to address rapid population growth because a larger population ultimately translates into a larger share of federal transfers.

The formula also does not sufficiently reflect the different levels of poverty, deprivation, geographic size, population density and development need across provinces. This is particularly significant for Balochistan, where a small and widely dispersed population faces high costs of delivering education, healthcare, infrastructure and other public services across a vast territory. A more equitable NFC formula should therefore place greater weight on poverty, deprivation, area, inverse population density and service-delivery costs, rather than relying predominantly on population. Such reform would better align fiscal transfers with development needs and reduce the unintended incentive for provinces to view population growth as a source of additional federal revenue.

Development and Climate Resilience

Pakistan's demographic trajectory is unfolding in an increasingly difficult environmental context. The country is facing severe floods, droughts, heatwaves, glacial melting, declining agricultural output and growing water stress. Population size, composition and spatial distribution influence how these shocks are experienced. As populations grow, demand for land, energy and water rises; when that demand is met through inefficient resource use and poorly planned expansion, environmental pressures can intensify.

Water illustrates the problem particularly well. Domestic demand is rising while agriculture and industry already place heavy demands on limited supplies. Groundwater depletion, inefficient irrigation and diminishing per-capita availability are narrowing the room for maneuver. Water scarcity is consequently not only an environmental issue; it is becoming a question of food security, livelihoods and inter-provincial stability. If competition for water increases without better governance, conservation and efficiency, resource pressures could contribute to migration, displacement and social tensions.

Urbanisation adds another layer. Cities are expanding faster than planning capacity, increasing demand for housing, electricity, transport, waste management, water and health services. When

formal infrastructure cannot keep pace, informal settlements and poorly serviced urban areas expand. This raises the cost of providing services later and increases exposure to floods, heat and other climate hazards. Demographic planning and climate planning therefore cannot remain separate exercises.

These pressures are compounded by limited fiscal space, inflation, external shocks and wider economic uncertainty. Low-income households are particularly vulnerable because they have fewer resources to absorb rising food, housing, healthcare and education costs. At the same time, limited access to voluntary family planning and reproductive healthcare contributes to persistently high fertility. Expanding these services, alongside girls' education and women's economic empowerment, is therefore both a demographic intervention and a strategy for strengthening household resilience.

Where Demographic Pressure Is Felt Most Directly

Education: A growing school age population requires continual expansion of classrooms, teachers and learning facilities. If capacity falls behind demand, overcrowding and weak learning outcomes become harder to address, while girls in rural and low-income communities face greater risks of dropping out. The long-term cost is a larger population without the skills needed to support higher productivity.

Healthcare: More people mean greater demand for primary care, maternal and child health services, vaccination, medicines and emergency treatment. Where facilities are already overstretched, population growth can produce longer waiting times, staff shortages and reduced quality of care. Expanding voluntary family planning and reproductive healthcare is particularly important because it can reduce unmet need while improving maternal and child health.

Employment: A growing working age population can raise output only when people have productive jobs. If job creation falls behind labour market entry, unemployment, underemployment and informal work increase. Pakistan's demographic dividend therefore depends on sustained economic growth, skills development, entrepreneurship and private sector investment.

Housing and infrastructure: More households require more affordable housing, roads, public transport, electricity, sanitation, water systems and waste management. When investment lags behind demand, congestion, informal settlements, unreliable utilities and inadequate municipal services become normal features of urban life. Government then spends scarce resources managing deficits that could have been reduced through earlier planning.

Food security: A larger population requires more food at a time when agriculture faces water scarcity, climate shocks, limited arable land and declining soil productivity. Without productivity gains, better water management and climate resilient farming, increased demand can feed into higher prices and greater nutritional insecurity, especially for low income households.

Environmental sustainability: Population growth increases the scale of demand for land, energy, water and other natural resources. It should not be treated as the sole cause of environmental degradation or climate change; consumption patterns, technology, governance and resource efficiency also matter. For Pakistan, the immediate concern is that environmental stress and demographic vulnerability reinforce one another, making climate shocks harder for communities and institutions to absorb.

Policy Priorities

1. Reform the NFC Award's population incentive

The current NFC Award gives population the largest weight in the distribution of federal transfers. This can unintentionally create an incentive for provinces to favour population size over improvements in human development. A revised formula should give greater weight to geographical area, poverty incidence and development disparities. Such a change would make transfers more closely reflect need and reduce the fiscal value attached to population growth.

2. Link federal support to measurable demographic outcomes

Since population is a provincial subject after the 18th Constitutional Amendment, the federal government has limited direct authority over fertility related policy. It can, however, use financing to create stronger incentives for results. Federal grants could reward measurable improvements in contraceptive prevalence, birth spacing, female education and reductions in unmet need for family planning. In districts with persistently high fertility, conditional cash transfers could be piloted around girls' secondary school completion, delayed marriage, maternal-health utilisation and birth spacing.

3. Make family planning part of routine primary healthcare

Family planning should be treated as a public-health and household-resilience measure rather than a stand-alone population programme. Reliable access to voluntary contraception, counselling and reproductive healthcare allows families to decide the timing and spacing of births. Its effectiveness

will be greater when combined with girls' education, women's economic participation and improved maternal and child healthcare.

4. Turn the youth bulge into an employment strategy

Pakistan cannot realise a demographic dividend simply by having a young population. Skills development, technical and vocational education, entrepreneurship and private-sector job creation need to be planned around the size and composition of the future workforce. The benchmark should be productive employment and rising labour productivity, not merely the number of young people passing through training programmes.

5. Integrate population projections into urban, water and climate planning

Population projections should be built into decisions about schools, hospitals, housing, transport, water supply and climate-resilient infrastructure. Urban growth, water demand and climate exposure need to be assessed together so that infrastructure is built before systems become overloaded. This would shift policy from repeated crisis management toward anticipatory planning.

6. Invest in women's education and economic agency

Girls' education, reproductive healthcare and women's access to economic opportunities influence both household welfare and demographic outcomes. Keeping girls in secondary education, improving maternal healthcare and expanding women's participation in the economy can reduce household vulnerability while strengthening Pakistan's productive capacity. These are not peripheral social policies; they are central to managing demographic change.

Pakistan does not need a population policy that treats people as a problem to be controlled. It needs a development strategy that recognises demographic change as a force that can either magnify existing vulnerabilities or expand national capacity. The decisive question is whether Pakistan can build the institutions, economy and human capital needed to give a rapidly growing population a productive and secure future.

Conclusion

Pakistan's demographic challenge is ultimately a question of capacity. Population growth becomes a human security risk when the expansion of education, healthcare, employment, infrastructure and resource systems fails to keep pace with demographic change. Conversely, if Pakistan can invest in human capital, productive employment, reproductive choice and anticipatory planning, demographic growth can contribute to rather than constrain economic development.