



AN APPRAISAL OF PAKISTAN'S BULGING POPULATION

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Edited by
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October 6, 2021

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



On September 24, 2021, Prime Minister Imran Khan while addressing Kissan Card distribution ceremony in Dera Ismail Khan stated that, "If population grows at the current pace, Pakistan may face issues of hunger and poverty."¹ He showed his serious concerns over the soaring population growth which can lead to challenges of food insecurity, urbanisation and water issues in the country. Pakistan is the fifth largest populated country in the world with more than 220 million inhabitants. The annual fertility rate of a family has reached 3.6 children in 2020.² According to UN's demographic projections for Pakistan, the country's current population will rise to 245 million by 2030. This coupled with high unemployment and low economic growth pose great risks for the country and many observers depict this situation as a ticking time bomb.

Over the years, successive governments have formulated a number of policies to control the high population growth in the country, however no significant results have achieved. During President Ayub's era in the 1960s, the government of Pakistan started family planning to control birth rates; unfortunately that policy was not implemented properly and failed to provide desired results. In 1995, the then Prime Minister of Pakistan Benazir Bhutto introduced initiatives to control population

¹ 'If population grows at current pace Pakistan may face issues of hunger, poverty': PM, *The News*, September 24, 2021

² Anwar Iqbal, Population in Pakistan continues to grow rapidly, *dawn News*, July 20, 2020.

by introducing reforms in the health sector by creating Lady Health Worker (LHW). The task assigned to LHW was to raise awareness among the people about the benefits of a small family. The new policy entailed the concept of two children per family, but it faced strong opposition from the religious community of the country including the top clerics. The Supreme Court of Pakistan even proposed a two-child limit on families, but the idea was met with strong opposition from the conservative majority.³ The Ministry of National Health Services, Regulation and Coordination in 2013 started an initiative to control the birth rates and reduce it from 3.6 percent to 2.2 by 2030.

One of the serious concerns for the policy makers is that overpopulation has led to food insecurity and rapid urbanisation in the country. At the time of inception of Pakistan, 15 percent of the population was living in the rural areas, which has now reached 37 percent in 2021. Moreover, approximately 60 percent of the population is already food insecure.⁴ As a result of existing food insecurity, malnutrition and stunting growth is already taking place in children under the age of five.⁵ The World Food Program has provided a specialized nutrition program targeting children and pregnant women in Sindh, Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.⁶ This effort was done to prevent stunting in children in the respective provinces. Along with stunting growth, water scarcity is another non traditional security threat, which has strong connections to over population.⁷

To deal with this pressing issue, different sections of the civil society, particularly the academia, religious scholars and health practitioners need to join hands with the government in formulating a sustainable policy to control the burgeoning population in the country. Pakistan can also replicate the experiences of the role of civil society of Bangladesh, where the religious clerics were brought on board by the government to raise awareness in the society about the negative impacts of high population growth rates, through religious sermons. This was the first example to control birth rates by taking help from religious scholars in the Muslim world. Along with this, Bangladesh also concentrated on women empowerment in order to curb the high fertility rate, which had a huge impact on controlling Bangladesh's population growth. Pakistan can learn from experiences of its neighboring countries to deal with overpopulation

³ "Pakistan should strive for two child per family norm to control population growth: SC, *The Times of India*, January 15, 2019

⁴ Food Assistance Fact Sheet- Pakistan, USAID, April 02, 2020. see <https://www.usaid.gov/pakistan/food-assistance>

⁵ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1299917>

⁶ Dr. Zeba Sathar, Meeting the Challenge of Population Growth in Pakistan, Seminar on Non traditional security challenges to Pakistan, Institute of strategic studies, Islamabad, 28 March 2018

⁷ "Top 10 facts about overpopulation," BORGEM, August 28, 2019, <https://www.borgenmagazine.com/top-10-facts-about-overpopulation-in-pakistan/>

Pakistan's large and growing population, if dealt wisely, can be an asset rather than a burden on the economy. The 'ticking time bomb' can be converted into a 'demographic dividend' if the country's young population are educated and are easily absorbed in the labor market.