

## **Population Growth - The Social Development and Poverty Dimension**

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The debate over the relationship of population and development is now more than 200 years old, starting with the treatise on population by Malthus, in 1798. The increase in population, ever since, has remained a matter of concern for economists and development planners. The most recent high point of the issue was witnessed at Cairo in September, 1994. The conference which was attended by more than 10,000 persons from all over the world ended with an agreement on the issues involved in the growth of population and the economy. The outcome was a Plan of Action for the next twenty years, which would concentrate on Reproductive Health in order to obtain, "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity in all matters relating to the reproductive system and its functions and process". This can be a turn-around in global efforts for human health and welfare, if properly implemented.

Malthus had made the prediction that the world will meet a disaster due to the geometrical progression of population which would outstrip the increase in food resources. During the two hundred years since Malthus published his famous essay, the world population has increased almost six times, reaching the figure of 5.5 billion in 1994 and 5.8 billion in 1997 - from less than 1 billion in the times of Malthus. But contrary to Malthus's apprehensions, food production per capita during the two centuries has risen rather than declined. Wherever the disasters have struck, they were more due to mal-distribution of resources rather than shortages at the global level. The famines in Africa, parts of China, or elsewhere have taken place in spite of surplus food lying in the industrial and advanced countries. The problem was that famine - stricken countries did not have the economic resources to buy food from hard currency nations. The argument thus can be that the real problem behind world hunger is the lack of economic resources rather than the global food production, just as economic backwardness is responsible for disease, pestilence, squalor, and lack of social and economic security. This inequality is still strongly present among the nations which leads to circumstances creating pockets of poverty.

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The falsehood or near falsehood of the Malthusian hypothesis can have many explanations. The most plausible reason for averting the Malthusian calamity caused by shortage of food versus galloping population growth is the fast progress of technology, rise in the standard of living promoted by industrialization, and most of all, a decline in birth rates in the industrial countries – now being followed by the developing nations. This gave birth to the slogan “development is the best contraceptive”. This is however, an over simplification of the process. Development does bring down the population growth rate but it also has led to serious distortions within the society through mal-distribution of incomes and services, both at the national and international level. This has resulted in high population growth rates in low income segments and lower growth in the high income areas. More than 70 per cent of the world population belongs to the former category - the same is true for Pakistan. Since bringing prosperity to low income groups is a slow process, the planners run to the adoption of family planning as a tool to contain population, applying it even through coercion, without paying attention to the socio-economic factors that bring about prosperity which would bring down population growth rates.

While the majority of thinkers and development practitioners would not have any quarrel with the adoption of family planning as a step towards economic development, there is no doubt that population cannot be controlled without social and economic development and the alleviation of poverty. Apart from other considerations, which poor family would like to limit its size, when there is a high probability of infant deaths and when there is a need for children to provide economic support to the family, starting from a young age?

In spite of divergent views, it remains a fact that a fast growing population retards economic and social development in a free economy. High population growth rates are not the result of high birth rates; birth rates have always been higher than what would be considered prudent. The difference has been made by a very fast decline in death rates. Until the nineteenth century, a large number of people, especially children used to die, thus the net increase in population was small. The times changed with the advancement of medical science and greater awareness of health problems which raised the expectancy of life. Modernisation of agriculture and technological break-through in the industrial countries decreased the need for manpower which, alongwith liberal values, brought down birth rates. The developing countries of today will go through the same phenomenon as they progress economically. The East Asian countries have proved that the whole process of transition from under-development to development can be squeezed into a fraction of the time taken by Europe or

North America. However, the problem of poverty remains acute and the incidence may be increasing.

The jargon of sustainable development is new but the idea is not. Had there not been sustainable development in the past centuries, the world would have collapsed long ago. The urgency has emerged due to the widening gap between the aspirations for better life, by larger population, and uneven development and mal-distribution of resources at the local and global level. The most important resource is food and agriculture. Agricultural production has increased fast but the price has been paid in the shape of serious toxicity caused by chemical pesticides and fertilizers, and similar other practices. In turn, the additional use of water has led to widespread salinity and water logging, especially in countries with canal irrigation systems. The green revolution and the magic seeds seem to be reaching their upper limit of production and there are visible signs of a decline in productivity - starting with the highly developed countries. It only means that we are fast reaching the limits of growth, at least in agriculture - though slightly slowly and differently - from that predicted by the Club of Rome.

The situation could improve appreciably, if there were better distribution of food resources. In 1994, about 25 per cent of the population of the world living in developed countries was consuming about 74 per cent of the food resources of the world. During 1980 and 1991, the index of food production per capita increased only by 18 per cent which is lower than the population growth during this period. This serious situation is not an easy one to combat. Disparities within the regions, and in many cases within the nations are glaring. Even within communities, the upper income groups flourish at the expense of the poor - just as in 1995, 20 per cent of the world population living in the richest countries, had 82 times the income of the poorest 20 per cent. In the developing countries, during the period 1984-94, 32.2 per cent of the population lived below the poverty line - naturally their share is eaten up by those at the upper rung of society. Even if the population is drastically reduced, the crunch of food shortages would continue due to mal-distribution, which is an economic and social problem, besides the vagaries of nature like droughts, floods, new pesticide-resistant pests, desertification and changes in the coastal regions.

However, a far more serious threat to food resources is due to the switch-over from food crops to cash crops which is also encouraged by some governments in order to earn foreign exchange and promote industry. It is another matter that the food grains have to be imported to compensate the local shortage at a cost higher than the foreign exchange earned through the export of cash crops. A second threat to agriculture is also economic but

with strong social overtones. The benefits of modern inputs generally flow in the direction of the large farmer who has the means to buy them and can also understand the intricacies of using chemicals without harm. He also has the resources and means to stock his product and dispense it at the right time. This pushes the small farmer to marginal lands. Since the small farmer cannot afford the expensive inputs any longer, he is liable to abandon or cheaply sell his land and change his occupation or move to the city. Most of this land is lost by agriculture as it could end up in the hands of the industrialist or housing hawks – if it is near an urban area exacerbated by low prices of agricultural products and high cost of inputs which leave a low margin of profit, coupled with the social pressure and influence of the big landlords.

The second major source of economic sustenance is industry. A growing number of developing countries receive a greater share of their GDP from the industrial sector. The growth of the industrial sector is invariably accompanied by an expanding services sector. Combined, they erode the importance of agriculture, and the level of exploitation of the rural areas and the rural population increases. The nature of agricultural produce changes in favour of the raw materials needed by industry both nationally and internationally. The out-bid small farmer and the younger rural population thus migrate to the urban areas where industry and the service sector have the jobs and there exists comparative respectability resulting from anonymity. However, the concentration of industries in the urban areas leads to squalor, disease, congestion and poverty of a different kind - lack of shelter and serious pollution as the city grows in size. There is a tendency for the creation of more urban areas as indicated by the urban population growth rate, particularly in the developing countries which is much higher - 4.3 per cent as compared to 1.2 per cent in the industrial countries. This trend needs to be arrested through the dispersal of industries and better conditions of living in the rural areas. This is not an easy task. As such, simultaneous action is needed to (i) provide facilities in the urban slums to improve the quality of life of those who have already landed in the cities, (ii) take policy steps to disperse industries and discourage their concentration in the cities, and (iii) provide services in the rural areas which would keep the rural population at home as long as some source of employment is there.

While discussing the relationship between population and development, the factor of energy is somehow by-passed. In fact, the supply of energy is a pre-requisite for development and deserves close attention. It is needed for industry, agriculture, transport and simply living - irrespective of the level. The importance of energy in development can be gauged from the amount of commercial energy consumed, which in 1995, was 5118 Kg

(oil equivalent) per capita in the high income countries as compared to 198 Kg per capita in the low income and 1139 Kg in middle income countries. The major sources of large scale energy consumption are fossil fuels, hydro electricity, thermal power and nuclear energy. The use of wood is on the decline as the forests are depleted. However, there are serious problems being created by the burning of fossil fuels and thermal electricity production as they cause pollution and environmental degradation. Hydel power capability is limited to proper water resources which are limited. The only clean and inexpensive source is nuclear energy which is denied to the developing countries for political reasons. In the given situation, developing countries will have to resort to every possible means of energy given their potential resources. However, the combination of energy production can be very tricky, economically as well as socially. The potential damage to the environment can reach unmanageable proportions if the pollution factors are not given a serious thought.

The provision of social services is of paramount importance in the context of balanced pollution and economic growth. Social Development as a concept is not new in the international academic and research circles. It was being discussed in various forums even in the 1950's but it has started receiving attention in concrete form only recently when the World Bank, IMF and various agencies of the United Nations realised that the development of social sectors was necessary for social and economic progress. However, this 'discovery' was really not that sudden. In fact, the Developing World could not become an effective market for the industrial countries unless cheap labour of the South were used - and for that it had to be educated, skilled and healthy. Likewise, the consumers had to be reasonably modern to create a demand for new amenities of life. The end of the cold war played its own role in this change of heart as the defence industries started converting themselves into consumer goods products.

The assertion above may look biased but a comparative look at the situation in the developing and the industrial countries will explain the point. Besides the abject poverty in most countries of the developing world, the basic rights and needs of the individual are not being made available to the majority of the population as compared to the industrial countries. To start with, the life expectancy at birth, in the developing countries in 1995 was only 62.2 years as compared to 74.2 years in the industrial countries; it was as low as 51.2 years in the least developed countries. The population of all developing countries was 4.39 billion in 1995 as compared to only 1.23 billion in the industrial countries. It meant that almost four-fifths of the world population had a life expectancy about ten to twelve years shorter than that of one-fifth of the population. Due to this variation in life expectancy, the years of life lost in the developing countries in 1992 stood

at 49 and 92 in the least developed countries as compared to 13 in the industrial countries.

The general indicators of health are equally dismal. In 1993, there were 76 doctors for 100,000 persons in the developing countries compared with 287 in the industrial countries. Since most of the population of the world lives in the developing countries, the doctor-population ratio was 122 for 100,000 people for the entire world. Access to health services in the developing countries in 1995 was 80 per cent while 71 per cent of the population had access to safe water supply and 30 per cent had sanitation facilities. In 1996, 95 per cent children in the developing countries died before the age of five; in the least developed countries this ratio was 171 per thousand live births. The expenditure on health in the developing countries in 1990 was far below that in the developed countries - 2.7 per cent in the low and middle income countries and 6.9 per cent in the high income countries.

These are sombre statistics. They indicate the condition in which the vast majority of the population of the world lives. Every increase in population makes the situation more difficult and adds to the misery and suffering of the poor population. The difference is equally well-marked at the national and regional levels as the access of different groups of population to health facilities varies according to income, occupation and geographical location. However, the most significant dearth of health facilities is found in the rural areas where more than 63 per cent of the population of the developing countries lives (1993 figures). The reluctance of doctors and paramedical staff to serve in the rural areas, non-existence of medical or health centres, equipment and medicines exacerbate the problem further. Absence of communications and other infrastructure makes the situation still more difficult particularly in the remote desert, mountainous or coastal areas. Women suffer more in this situation. Apart from receiving poor attention as compared to men, 488 women have to pay with their lives during child-birth for every 100,000 live births every year; in the least developed countries their number is 1100 while it is only 30 in the industrial countries. The mortality rates are about 9 per thousand population for all developing countries and 16 in the least developed countries; but in some areas it is as high as 22 per thousand population. Other health hazards such as impure drinking water, lack of sanitation, malnutrition exist in addition. The high death rates as such lead to high fertility which is a way to compensate the losses incurred by death. The pre-occupation of health personnel with medical problems does not allow them to even refer to preventive measures including family planning.

The situation of education in the developing countries is equally dismal. In 1992, 900 million adults in the developing countries were illiterate, out of whom 600 million or two thirds were women. In 1994, the adult literacy rate was 69.7 per cent in the developing countries. 80 million children were out of school. The situation of the 86 per cent children enrolled in primary school during the same year was not good either - only 51 per cent of primary school entrants moved over to the secondary stage. In the least developed countries, only 17 per cent primary school students were admitted into secondary schools. The condition of women was worse as only 34 per cent females reached the secondary school stage. For the least developed countries, the figure was 12. A scrutiny of individual countries does not suggest any major change in this scenario during the last seven years.

The situation of education has a direct bearing on social and economic development as well as attitude towards population planning. In 1995, the developing countries spent only 3.8 per cent of GNP on education as compared to 5.2 per cent in the industrial countries; some nations were spending as little as 1 to 2 per cent of their GNP on education. The pupil-teacher ratio, in 1990, in all developing countries was 33 while it was as high as 45 in the least developed countries. Low literacy level, meagre schools enrollment, inadequate number of schools and congestion due to high pupil-teacher ratios make even the existing educational system ineffective and result in low standards of education. Three major areas stand out in the context of education. First, universal adult literacy needs to be achieved so that the entire population could actively and intelligently participate in the process of development. Second, 100 per cent enrollment in the primary schools, particularly the females, should be ensured. The drop-out rate both at the primary and the secondary levels is very high as indicated by the gap between the number of children enrolled in the first grade and those reaching secondary school. This wastage should be plugged by proper legislation and strict inspection and monitoring measures.

There is hardly a need to stress that education, especially female education, is the most important deterrent to large families besides being a powerful instrument for improving levels of living. The developing countries should not grudge allocating more resources to education and human resource development by diverting funds from sectors having short term goals rather than those with nation-building potential.

During the last two decades or so, much rhetoric has been spewed about women development. However, the burden of centuries weighs heavily on development programmes for women. They suffer from

deprivation of the worst kind in respect of literacy, education, nutrition, health, employment and most of all, status in society. The adult literacy rate of females in 1992 in the developing countries was only 58 per cent as compared to 79 per cent among males. Mean years of schooling for females was only 3.0 years as compared to 4.9 years for males. In the least developed countries, females had only 0.9 years of schooling while the males studied for 2.2 years on the average.

Practically, in all the developing countries, women are equal partners in economic activities. In the rural areas of some countries, the percentage of female farmers is even higher than the males. But the vast majority of them are still not counted in the labour force. They are discriminated against for positions in the government, judiciary and in politics. It is encouraging to see that during the last decades, the prime ministers of four countries had been women and steps have been taken to give higher representation to women in various fields. But the problem is much bigger. There is the need to change the attitude towards women and raise their status in society. Even within the family, in the traditional societies, the women occupy a secondary place as compared to males - even the minor male children. Needless to say that female education, economic independence or at least earning power, social security and insurance against crimes against women are the minimum conditions for giving women their proper place in society. One should recognise their role in rearing a healthy family, developing mores to build human relationships and creating norms of conserving and protecting the environment. They should be protected against crime, exploitation and abuse and allowed to stand on their feet.

The demographic structure of high population growth countries contains almost half the population in the younger age groups. It will be quite some time before their proportion starts declining as it is linked with the decline in birth rate. Until such time, children and the youth will need heavy investment in health, education, skill development, recreation and strong measures to keep them away from the scourge of drugs, unbridled sex, truancy and delinquency. The governments and the NGOs with the help of other interested groups should develop programmes to promote healthy habits and life styles for the youth and show them the way to a fruitful future.

The poor segments of the population in the developing countries tend to have large families. As a result, many a young member of the family is employed as child labour. This practice is wide-spread in some trades and occupations. Most countries have laws against the practice but they are not followed. Legislative measures may not be able to eradicate the practice easily as it is entrenched in the social and economic system of traditional



societies. Drastic social and administrative action will be required to stop the employment of children through the boycott of the establishments employing child labour. Many industrial countries have been threatening to ban the use of products in which children are used as labour. But hypocritically, they continue to import and promote the use of such products. This duality has to be stopped as it involves the health and welfare of millions of children around the world.

It is generally not realised that high birth rates and declining death rates ultimately result in a large older population. As the life expectancy rises, more people survive and reach a ripe age. These senior citizens in the coming years will be a major burden on national resources. This is the time that steps should be taken to look after this growing segment of the population and provide them sustenance, a useful occupation, recreation, and medical care. The developing societies have still not drifted too far from traditions so they may succeed in encouraging young families to look after their older members.

As an important vehicle of change, the communication system should be expanded to cover more members of society so that new ideas can be spread effectively and widely. The modern world owes much of its success to efficient communications. It will continue to be so in the future.

Sensible decisions about the size of the family and the style of family management are closely related to the development of the social sectors. The emergence of a better informed society will carry the nation to prosperity more easily than a semi-literate population suffering only from illusions and delusions of greatness without doing much about it.

In the final analysis, the ultimate reason for high population growth is poverty. The denial of all economic and social opportunities, poor standing in society, lack of education and health facilities, poor housing, electricity, safe drinking water, sanitation, low status of women, and most important, employment lead to conditions that encourage large families. The birth rates remain high as they off-set high infant mortality. Large families also provide child labour. Illiteracy and the low status of women make it virtually impossible to make a decision regarding the size of a family and how to go about it, which encourages unchecked fertility. Disease, unattended morbidity, unhealthy living conditions lead to a life where the pressure of a large family is not even felt as the senses are dulled by perpetual struggle for existence, and a large family becomes just another fact of life.

The reason why this author considers poverty as the root-cause of population problems is that poor standards of living are the sum total of all the forces in society which deprive the common man of his rights and the basic needs of life. Without philosophising further, one has only to pick up the thread by which poverty is woven and how the class suffering from it can improve its situation - the adoption of the small norm is one of the measures towards that end.

First, let one reaffirm the assertion that population growth and poverty are the basic link in the chain of population and development relationships. In all developing countries of the world, 31 per cent of the population lives in absolute poverty - 37 per cent in the rural areas and 28 per cent in the cities. In the least developed countries, 64 per cent of the people live under the poverty line - 71 per cent in the rural areas and 31 per cent in the urban areas. The crude birth rates (CBR) in these groups are 30 per 1000 for all the developing countries and 44 for the least developed countries. The total children born to a woman (Total Fertility Rate or TFR), in 1992 was 3.8 for all developing countries and 6.1 for the least developed countries. These figures clearly establish the relationship between poverty and high population growth. A study of individual countries establishes this thesis further. The only question that remains to be resolved is whether it is the high population growth which leads to poverty or is it the poverty which encourages or at least licenses high population growth. This is a debate which is not easy to resolve. The safest statement can be that both should be attacked simultaneously. However, the alleviation of poverty argument has an edge, as its adoption would provide at least the beginnings of a decent living for the poor which would automatically lead to low birth rates.

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