

HIGH POPULATION GROWTH IN PAKISTAN: A SUPPLY AND DEMAND SIDE ISSUE



Pakistan has the highest population growth rate in South Asia, standing at 2.4% as per 2017 census. Why have we failed to restrict our population growth rate close to 1.5%, when other South Asian countries like Bangladesh and India, which are somewhat culturally similar to us, have successfully done so? Whether it is a demand side or a supply side failure is a question that has of late been a subject of a crucial debate within PIDE.

Two contrasting viewpoints have emerged within this debate. As Dr Zeba Sathar (Senior Associate and Pakistan County Director at Population Council) has emphasized the failure of family planning services as the most important cause of such high population growth rates. Whereas, Dr G. M. Arif (Ex-Joint Director, PIDE) and Dr Durre Nayab (Joint Director, PIDE) emphasized on demand-side explanation.

Dr Sathar's argument was built on high rates of abortion within Pakistani urban females; demand for population control is stated to exist and such high abortion rates indicate a failure of family planning services to stop such unwanted births at the stage of conception.

Dr G. M. Arif and Dr Nayab built their case for demand-side factors as the most important cause of high population growth rate. It was stated that the preference for children remains high among both married female and married men. In this context, they build their case on how the ideal family size (as per the recent Pakistan Demographic Health Survey) comes out to be 3.9

for the females and 4.6 for the males—including a high preference for more children even among those who have two or more children.

Emphasizing on the failure of family planning policy within Pakistan on account of weak demand side enabling factors for population control, Dr. Arif emphasized that unless the norm of having small families is not cultivated culturally and a discussion on importance of small family size does not initiate at household and community level, we will not see our investment into family planning initiative yield fruit. In this context, he emphasized the important role of economic and human development, whereby he believes that the cultural transformation towards two-child family will only initiate when child-rearing will be made more expensive— a transition that can only materialize if parents start to invest in the quality of a child than merely focus on quantity of children.

Dr. Nayab lent her support to the demand side causes of population increases, highlighting the lack of old age support mechanisms in the country as a genuine reason behind the need for having larger families. Hence the debate ended at the consensus that there is a need to take a holistic view to family planning initiative. Stress needs to move from family size control by creating easy access to family planning means to create a norm of small family size. However, supply-side dynamics cannot be ignored, and should not be ignored also. Human development is a long-term strategy, but in the short-term creating awareness through media, civil society and lady health workers is the need of the day.

In my opinion, debate on population growth and development nexus needs to be approached not just on how there may emerge demand-side tendencies for a small family size with development, but also on how controlling population size can increase the capacity of the government to increase the quality of its population and their developmental perspective. This point is even more relevant in the context of Pakistan's commitment to SDGs. Though population control is not a part of any goal or target, it is one of the most important causal factors that can have a significant impact on each of 17 goals and their implementation.

To further make population control policy within Pakistan a success, it is important that our politicians and policymakers re-think on NFC awards and how it may be creating disincentive in implementing family planning initiatives effectively. For, if the financial resource allocation of provinces is indeed linked to their population sizes as per NFC award, then does this not create an incentive to not control population or over-report the population figures? –just some food for thought. |