



Is High population growth in Pakistan a supply side issue or demand side issue?

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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 like us, have successfully done so? Is it a failure on the demand side or the supply side, is the question that has been debated within PIDE recently.

Two contrasting viewpoints have emerged within the debate. As Dr Zeba Sathar (Senior Associate and Pakistan Country Director at Population Council) has emphasized, the failure of family planning services is 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 by how the preference for children remains high among both married females 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 added to the debate of demand-side causes of population outburst within Pakistan by highlighting how in absence of an institutional mechanism of old age support within Pakistan for general population, there will always emerge the need of having large family size to have children as means of financial insurance for parents at end of their life cycle.

The debate concluded with 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.. Human development is a long-term strategy, but in the short-term creation of awareness through media, civil society and lady health workers is the need of the day.

In my opinion, the 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 in Pakistan a success, it is important that our politicians and policymakers re-think the NFC awards as 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.

