

Population Challenges and Opportunities of Bangladesh in the Coming Decades

Partners in Population and Development (PPD)

In 1951, the total population of the territory which is now sovereign Bangladesh was over 41 million. The population had doubled by 30 years to over 87 million in 1981 and it took another 20 years to reach over 124 million in 2001; in 50 years period the population of Bangladesh had tripled. The current population of Bangladesh stands at about 150 million, which ranks the country as Asia's fifth and the world's eighth most populous country.

In Bangladesh, over 1000 people live in one square kilometer area, which makes the country the most densely populated country of the world. According to the UN projection (medium variant) the population of Bangladesh would be over 194 million by 2050, a 4.6 times increase in 100 years (1950 to 2050).

Due to the population momentum, Bangladesh's population would continue to increase and stabilize at about 250 million by 2080, even if a replacement level fertility 2.07 birth per women is achieved by the year 2015. The reason for this is the high fertility in the past contributed to a large proportion of people in their reproductive age now.

The population challenges in Bangladesh are myriad and complex. Bangladesh has been experiencing a shift in its population structure. From 1951 to 1974, the under 15 population followed an increasing trend and thereafter it started declining and was 31.3% of the total population in 2010. From 1951 to 1974, the population aged 15-59 years declined and then followed by a rise in population 15-59 years, which stood at 62.1% in 2010.

Due to the consequent changes in the age structure in Bangladesh, the proportion of the working age population is increasing and offering a window of opportunity, referred to as the 'demographic dividend'. On the other hand, the percentage of older persons aged 60 years and over would grow substantially within this century. The population over 60 years stood at 6.6% in 2010, according to the UN, the population over 60 years will continue to rise and would reach over 22% by 2050. This would pose numerous challenges for the health system, the labor force and the social security system in ability to access basic health services and providing meaningful employment. Bangladesh can plan for a second 'demographic dividend' through adopting policies for active ageing and creating opportunities for extended economic life of its ageing population by investing in ageing human capital, needed infrastructure and social services.

The population growth rate was 0.5 in 1951 and it peaked to 2.48 in 1974. Since 1974, the population growth rate started declining responding to the national policies and successful

programs and currently stands at 1.37. According to the UN projection the population growth rate would follow a similar trajectory to reach 0.25 in 2040 and 0.10 in 2050.

The Total Fertility Rate (TFR) was 6.4 births per woman during the period 1950 to 1955. The TFR declined sharply from 6.3 births per woman from 1971 to 1975 and to 5.1 births per woman in 1987-1989. These followed another rapid decline to reach 3.3 births per woman for the period 1995-97 and declined further during the current decade to reach 2.3 births per woman in 2011.

Family Planning Program in Bangladesh is a success story which has resulted in a significant fertility decline. However, where the TFR in Bangladesh has declined by more than 50 % since 1975, the Age Specific Fertility Rate (ASFR) for age 15-19 years is still one of the highest in the world. The ASFR was 140 during the period 1993-94, 126 in the year 2007 and 118 in 2011. The contribution of the ASFR to TFR was 20% in the period 1993-94 which increased to 23.3 % in 2007.

Use of contraceptives by married women in Bangladesh increased gradually from 8 % in 1975 to 61 % in 2011, a greater than sevenfold increase in the last four decades. However, 14 % of currently married women in Bangladesh have an unmet need for family planning. Contraceptive use among adolescents (15-19-years) increased significantly from about 25% in 1993 to over 47% in 2011. The Unmet need among the adolescent was 17% in 2011.

Bangladesh is the 3rd highest country of the world for child marriage and the highest in South Asia. Although, the legal age of marriage in Bangladesh for women is 18 years, a significant proportion of marriages still take place before the legal age. The median age at first marriage among women aged 25-49 years was 15.5 years and about 65 % women aged 20-24 years were married by age 18 in 2011. Over the past two decades, the proportion of women marrying before the legal age has decreased from 73 % in 1989 to 65 % in 2011. In 2010, 4,806,000 women aged 20-24 were married before age 18 and if the present trend continues, 4,597,000 of the young girls born between 2005 and 2010 will be married before age the 18 by 2030. This may reverse gains made in reducing TFR, Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR) etc. in the coming decades.

Bangladesh has one in the world's highest rates of adolescent pregnancy. In 2011, 30 % of adolescent aged 15-19 years had begun childbearing and about one fourth of them have given birth, and another 6 % were pregnant with their first child. The risk of maternal death during childbirth is 2 to 4 times higher among adolescents mothers than women aged 20 or older. In Bangladesh, MMR among the adolescent was 30-50 % higher than over all national rate.

In Bangladesh, the major impact on fertility would come from rising the age of marriage which eventually will increase the age of first birth. Urgent action is needed to address the situation and prevent early marriage of the thousands of girls in the next decades. Ending child marriage

would require strategies for empowerment of girls, changing of social and cultural norms, legal reform and reinforcement and appropriate policy and program implementation. Proven solutions include girls' schooling, programs offering life skills and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) information and services as well as programs to increase community awareness and participation, address gender equity and equality, youth-adult partnerships and male participation in SRHR programs etc.

Bangladesh is now in the third stage of demographic transition; a low-mortality and low-fertility phase. Due to the decline in fertility and consequential 'youth bulge' in the population structure, Bangladesh is currently experiencing a 'demographic dividend', an opportunity to achieve a steady economic growth.

Investing appropriately, to harness the benefit of 'demographic dividend' will be one of the critical challenges of Bangladesh. Bangladesh requires a forward looking population policy with adequate resources and political will investments to benefit from the 'demographic dividend'. Unless a carefully planned investment plan is in place, the 'demographic dividend' may turn out to be a demographic disaster. The percentage of youth with low literacy level and no meaningful employment and income is an early warning sign. Adequate investment in education, sexual and reproductive health needs and developmental aspiration of adolescents and young people is essential to reap the benefit of 'demographic dividend'

To sustain and to reap the benefits of demographic dividend further, Bangladesh needs to achieve a) further decline in fertility through universal access to reproductive health b) ensure education and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) of adolescents c) increasing investment in human capital for the adolescents d) adopt rights-based and gender-responsive approaches to maximize opportunities for gainful employment e) strengthen migration governance and meeting SRHR needs of international migrants etc.

Sources:

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