

Discussion Paper II

Population Growth in Pakistan Demands Cultural Reform and Demographic Governance; Moving Beyond Family Planning?

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Abstract

Population growth in Pakistan is widely framed as a family planning deficit; a problem of contraceptive supply, reproductive health outreach, and behavioral awareness. This paper challenges that assumption. Drawing on demographic transition theory, Caldwell's wealth-flow hypothesis, and institutional political economy frameworks (including Acemoglu and Robinson's theory of inclusive versus extractive institutions), it argues that persistent high fertility in Pakistan reflects a governance symmetry reinforced by weak institutional capacity, fragmented federalism, gender inequality, and culturally embedded social norms. Fertility behavior is not merely reproductive choice; it is embedded in structures of economic insecurity, urban informality, elite incentives, and intergenerational wealth expectations. Using demographic data, human development indicators, and recent multilateral policy frameworks; including the World Bank Group Country Partnership Framework (CPF) 2026–2036; the paper demonstrates that population growth functions as a “challenge multiplier,” intensifying fiscal stress, climate vulnerability, urban fragility, and youth disenchantment [1]. The paper concludes that demographic stabilization in Pakistan requires governance reform, gender-transformative social policy, institutional continuity, and technological modernization — not merely expanded family planning services.

Context: The Policy Puzzle

For decades, population discourse in Pakistan has oscillated between alarmism and technocratic optimism. The dominant narrative reduces demographic expansion to contraceptive prevalence rates and unmet need for family planning. This framing is analytically narrow and politically convenient. It isolates fertility from its structural determinants and confines policy response to health-sector interventions. In short, population policies centering family planning have been misdiagnosed and improperly designed.

In 1994, at the Cairo ICPD conference, population was globally reframed as a human development issue. Pakistan's Prime Minister, Benazir Bhutto, embraced that vision, linking reproductive autonomy with dignity and development. Yet three decades later, Pakistan's population has grown from 126 million to approximately 241.5 million (2023 census). During the same period, repeated macroeconomic crises and even today IMF engagements continue to persist. This simultaneity is not accidental. Demographic expansion has consistently outpaced institutional adaptation (see, *Pakistan@2050: Demographic Change, Future projections, and Development Opportunities*, 2024)

The key argument of this discussion paper is straightforward but substantial: Pakistan's high fertility is not primarily a family planning failure; it is the outcome of a growing gap between governance effectiveness and cultural practices and religious beliefs on family size and child birth.

Classical Demographic Transition Theory (DTT) postulates that fertility declines when, urbanization expands, female education increases, infant mortality declines and opportunity costs of childbearing also increases. Pakistan exhibits partial transition: mortality declined and urbanization expanded, yet fertility decline stalled at 3.4 births per woman (2022). The transition has decelerated. DTT has limitations, it underestimates institutional quality and political economy.

John Caldwell's wealth-flow hypothesis argues that fertility declines when intergenerational wealth flows reverse; from children-to-parents to parents-to-children. In Pakistan's case Caldwell's hypothesis helps us understand three inter-related points: weak social security systems make children old-age insurance; informal labor markets maintain economic utility of large families; rural landholding and kinship structures preserve traditional wealth flows. Thus, fertility decisions remain rational within existing economic incentives.

Drawing from institutional theory (Acemoglu & Robinson), societies with inclusive institutions encourage human capital investment and productivity growth, accelerating fertility decline. Extractive or weak institutions sustain low-skill equilibria and high fertility.

Pakistan's institutional characteristics include; (1) Policy discontinuity across electoral and civil- military regime cycles. (2) Fragmented federal-provincial coordination, particularly,

post-18th Amendment (3) Weak implementation capacity. (4) Patronage-driven resource allocation.

High fertility persists not because of ignorance but because institutional incentives do not sufficiently reward smaller family norms.

How is Population Growth a Challenge Multiplier?

To understand why Pakistan's demographic structure is a challenge multiplier, here are a few salient pointers: (1) Nearly 60% of the population is under age 30 (2) Youth size (15–29) is projected to reach 95 million by 2050. (3) Child stunting is 40%. (4) Learning poverty 78%. (5) Infant mortality rate is 62 per 1,000 births. This structure generates four types of dilemmas: A. Fiscal Dilution: public expenditure per child declines as cohort size expands. B. Human Capital Crowding; quantity overwhelms quality in schooling and health systems. C. Urban Fragility: By 2050, nearly half the population of the country, may reside in cities. Informal settlements, Kachi Abadis, expand faster than governance capacity. D. Climate Stress: population density in flood-prone and climate-vulnerable zones intensifies disaster impact.

The World Bank Group CPF (2026–2036) identifies reduced stunting, learning poverty, climate resilience, and private investment as strategic outcomes. Yet none are feasible without slowing demographic momentum. Population growth acts as a multiplier of existing governance deficits.

Why Cultural Reform Matters

Culture matters in determining the outlook, orientation and attitudes towards treating population as a development issue and not simply a reproductive concern. It deserves attention and careful reflection that population behavior in Pakistan is embedded within a norm structure. At the societal level Pakistan is increasingly belief driven, where traditional cultural practices are intertwined with religious rituals. To illustrate this normative dimension for example, let me highlight three social or familial pressures; marriage culturally implies childbirth within a year. female reproductive autonomy is socially constrained. Contraception carries stigma in conservative settings, particularly rural areas and to cap it all, family elders exert reproductive expectations. To counter these familial and societal pressures, the family planning programs alone cannot overcome these social taboos, prevailing norms and

attitudes. Therefore, cultural reform must shift norms around. In that spirit consider three policy choices; birth spacing as child welfare, female education as economic necessity and delayed marriage as rational life planning.

State can make a difference; the historical evidence from South Korea, Bangladesh and Iran demonstrates that fertility decline accelerates when state policy, female education, and public messaging align.

Governance Fragmentation and Policy Incoherence

It is worth noting that some of Pakistan's population programs, including the Lady Health Workers Program, were well designed but poorly institutionalized. The 18th Constitutional Amendment empowered the provinces through decentralization and devolution but has also fractured the already weak federation -province coordination, fragmented accountability and incoherent provincial implementation.

Governance theory emphasizes policy coherence and monitoring mechanisms. Without these, demographic policy becomes episodic. Therefore, improved governance requires population management along three critical components; develop long-term KPI's (e.g. TFR target 2.2) Link – funding with performance at provincial and local levels, more importantly, promote inter-ministerial coordination integration (Finance, health, education, climate, urban planning), both at the federal and provincial levels.

Why Reform is Hard

Reform implies redistribution of political power and reallocation of financial resources and this threatens entrenched interests, therefore: rural elites resist land and gender reform, patronage politics favors distributive subsidies over structural investments and short political cycles discourage long-term demographic strategies. These constraints make change hard and thus; fertility persistence reflects political rationality.

In Pakistan's case reform requires a broad consensus among political parties and the military on recognizing population growth as a core governance issue and developing a demographic compact that has long-term framework (10 to 15 years), which encourages civic coalition building with religious and community leaders and that means instituting local government and local communities' empowerment.

Technology, AI, and Demographic Governance

Technological modernization offers transformative potential, consider developing: Real-time demographic dashboards (2) AI-based maternal health tracking (3) Predictive urban expansion modeling (4) Targeted welfare delivery. Pakistan's National Security Policy (2022–2026) gestures toward technological transformation but lacks execution pathways. AI can enhance governance efficiency only if institutional incentives reward transparency and data integrity.

Designing Strategic Framework for Demographic Governance

Let me propose a five-point demographic governance framework:

1. Institutional Coordination; Restore federal-provincial coordination mechanisms. Revive and activate Inter-Provincial Coordination Ministry, routinize the Council of Common Interest (CCI) Meetings and resurrect Local Government that empowers communities. Develop effective coordination between the Planning Commission of Pakistan and provincial Planning Departments. Establish National Demographic Council that has provincial and local level set ups.

2. Gender Transformation:

Strict enforcement of Article 25-A (free compulsory education). The Article states: "*The state shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age five to 16 years*". Quality early childhood education is crucial for cognitive development and long-term academic success. This includes training teachers, developing relevant curricula and ensuring that schools have the necessary resources. Expand female secondary and vocational education. Incentivize female labor force participation.

3. Urban Integration; Integrate demographic projections into master planning. Tracking migration and monitoring small towns. Urban Unit Punjab has done some credible work in this direction built upon it.

4. Youth Export Strategy: This needs to be thought through carefully. Consider, language, culture appreciation and skills training for aging economies (Japan, Germany, Russia,).

5. Technological Governance: AI-enabled service monitoring. Utilize the services of institutions such as Punjab Technology Board and build its professional capacity. Transparent data systems.

Policy Impact Framing

This argument has three high-impact implications:

1. Donor Strategy Shift

Population cannot remain a sub-sector under health; it must anchor development strategy.

2. Fiscal Reform Alignment

Macroeconomic stabilization and demographic stabilization are interdependent.

3. Political Narrative Change: Population must be framed as a national governance priority, not a moral or cultural sensitivity issue. The emphasis should shift from “family planning delivery” to “demographic governance architecture.” Population growth in Pakistan is not merely a family planning issue. It reflects a governance deficit embedded within cultural norms and political economy constraints. Treating it narrowly as contraceptive access underestimates its systemic nature.

Conclusion

Pakistan stands at a demographic crossroads. Without institutional coherence and cultural reform, demographic expansion will continue to dilute human capital and strain governance systems. Family planning matters but Pakistan’s case shows it is insufficient. Population growth in Pakistan is a governance inertia sustained by institutional fragmentation and cultural norms. Breaking this sluggishness requires structural reform, gender transformation, technological modernization, and long-term policy continuity. Demographic governance and not contraceptive distribution alone, must become the organizing principle of national development strategy. The issue, therefore, is not whether family planning matters—it does—but whether Pakistan is prepared to treat population growth as the Core governance challenge shaping its development trajectory in the twenty-first century.

[\[1\]](#) For a wide ranging, data driven analysis and projections by demographers, see: Pakistan@2050: Demographic Change, Future projections, and Development Opportunities, a recent publication by the Population Council and UNFPA (2024). For a nuanced approach to limits to growth, development and combating poverty for citizen welfare, see , Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Dufflo, “How Poverty Ends: The Many Paths to Progress and Why They Might not Continue” *Foreign Affairs* (January/February, 2020). From a political economy perspective, analysis, data and a reformist agenda, see Ahsan Rana, *Hain Kawakub Kuch: Capitalist Welfare System: Assumptions and Reality* (Urdu,2024), World Bank Country Framework for Pakistan 2026-2036 (World Bank: Washington, DC) For an excellent empirical study on Contraceptive Prevalence Rate(CPR), family planning policies and practices, see Muhammad Asif Wazir (UNPF) and Yilma Melkamu Alazar (UNFPA, Nepal), “Bayesian Modelling of Subnational Contraceptive Prevalence in Pakistan: are the 2018-2030 policy targets achievable? Working Paper 2025, downloaded from ResearchGate. 19th February,2026.