Pakistan's Population in the 1970's: Problems and Prospects

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For advocates of family planning and fertility control, Pakistan, circa 1968, was a nation of hope and promise. Social and cultural conditions in Pakistan were assumed to run counter to those typically associated with rapid fertility declines (see Section II). One could thus argue that if family planning were to be a success in Pakistan, family planning as a voluntaristic approach to fertility limitation had a good chance of success in many of the developing countries where demographic problems seemed most severe.

There were many positive features of the Pakistan family planning program in 1968. Pakistan had adopted a population policy based upon ambitious demographic targets calling for a reduction in estimated birth rates of 20 percent in five years. Starting in selected districts in 1965, by 1968 a nationwide program was in operation. Available statistics suggested that Pakistan had stimulated a remarkable degree of successful adoption of family planning, often using a wide range of innovative activities.

By 1970 a degree of disenchantment had arisen with respect to Pakistan's family planning program. Leadership of the program had changed with the removal of President Ayub Khan and the dismissal of large numbers of senior civil servants including the head of the family planning program. Statistics related to the family planning program from 1965 through 1968 were viewed with increasing skepticism and entirely new organizational forms were introduced to “make up for the false starts” introduced earlier (see Section III).

The events of 1970 et passim have overshadowed the normal operation of social service programs such as family planning in Pakistan and have introduced new demographic dimensions into the development and administration of population policies in the country. Without representative elections, the relative voting strength of distinctive “ethnic” or linguistic groups was unimportant. The 1970 election and the “block” support provided to Sheikh Mujibar Rahman in East Pakistan introduced a new element in the consideration of population policies in Pakistan, even after the break-up of the country into Pakistan and Bangladesh.
While this paper is concerned only with the country of Pakistan as constituted in 1973, the issue of relative population size among various ethnic or linguistic groups cannot be ignored. That issue now focuses on the strength of the four major provinces in Pakistan – Punjab, Sind, Northwest Frontier, and Baluchistan – and the relative strength of the four dominant ethnic groups – Punjabis, Sindis, Baluchis, and Pathans. To what extent these differences will influence the operation of population programs will be explored in Section IV. In Section II, however, we will note that issues of relative population strength have already influenced the collection of population statistics in Pakistan.

Although a new population policy issue has emerged in Pakistan, the social and economic problems underlying the earlier adoption of a strong population policy in Pakistan remain. In this paper, we shall argue that it is the social and economic factors associated with population change which will be most important in the management of population programs in Pakistan, or even in the four autonomous provinces, during the 1970s.

The Population of Pakistan

The Difficulty of Knowing. For the scholar interested in the population of Pakistan, it is important to recognize the degree to which analytical work is restricted by the availability of population statistics and by the quality of those statistics which are available. To utilize a now hackneyed expression, population statistics in Pakistan must be treated with caution. Problems associated with population statistics in Pakistan arise from a number of sources: organizational problems, lack of continuity in statistical systems, and the inherent difficulty of collecting demographic data in a country such as Pakistan.

In spite of the existence of the Central Statistical Office, the collection of and analysis of population statistics has been widely diffused in Pakistan since independence. Each of the three censuses carried out since independence has been the responsibility of a special, temporary census office set up within the Ministry of Home and Kashmir Affairs.

The Ministry of Health has been responsible for the collation and analysis of vital events, but this system which eventually depends upon reports by the village chowkidar (village watchman) has never produced adequate reports. To provide current estimates of fertility and mortality, the Central Statistical Office in 1962–65 in conjunction with the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics undertook the Population Growth Estimation (PGE) Survey (Farooqui and Farooq, 1971). In 1968 the PGE was replaced by a different form of survey, the Population Growth Survey-I (PGS-I). Where the PGE study utilized two independent data collection systems to provide pooled estimates of fertility and mortality (continuous registration and quarterly retrospective surveys), the PGS-I utilized monthly retrospective surveys. The monthly system proved unworkable, and in 1969 it was replaced with PGS-II which employed quarterly retrospective surveys. Data from PGS-II have yet