COMMENTARY

Population Dynamics and Demographic Change in Bangladesh: What are the Key Messages?

Mohammad Mainul Islam

Department of Population Sciences at the University of Dhaka, Bangladesh

Corresponding Author's e-mail:mainul@du.ac.bd

Bangladesh is the 8th largest and one of the most densely populated territories, with 173 million in 2023 (The 2022 Revision of World Population Prospects) and a population growth rate of 1.23% (Population & Housing Census 2022). Currently, the country shares 2.2% of the global population, which is a big number, a big challenge, and a big opportunity. Despite such scenarios, the country is graduating from the LDCs in 2026. Now, the questions raised are- '*How far have the population dynamics of Bangladesh come, and where are such dynamics headed*' *toward demographic change and emerging population issues*?

Bangladesh is experiencing the third phase of demographic transition from high to low fertility and mortality. Within the last 52 years since its independence, the country has made remarkable progress in population and development. A gradual increase in life expectancy at birth, owing to improvements in public health and family planning, nutrition, personal hygiene, medicine, awareness, *gender parity in schooling, women's empowerment*, educational attainment, *and overall economic development*, has contributed immensely.

To understand population dynamics, we must shape responses that confront the challenges and harness the opportunities. We need to engage in policy debates and conversations; several key messages can be drawn that apply to Bangladesh:
(i) The Bangladesh population continues to grow, but the pace of growth is slowing down; (ii) policies-especially family planning, aimed at reducing fertility, would have a significant impact on the rate of growth. However, despite impressive success in family planning until the 1990s, the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) and Contraceptive Prevalence Rate (CPR) are almost stagnant; (iii) while life expectancy at birth continues to increase, female life expectancy is higher than male that has been observed since 2000, and now there are 4.5 years of disparity; (iv) a rising share of the population the working age can help boost economic growth per capita.

Through the successful demographic transition, the country is experiencing the opportunity to maximize the benefits of the first demographic dividend, where the window opportunity will peak in 2033 but close by 2049 following 'The 2022 Revision of World Population Prospects' but other estimates differs where the opportunity will close much earlier ; (v) the population of older persons is increasing both in numbers and as a share of the total. The country is becoming one of the fastest-growing older persons in South Asia; (vi) international migration is essential to population trends

where more than 15 million people have already gone abroad as migrant workers; (vii) the COVID-19 pandemic affected all three components of population change-fertility, mortality, and migration. However, the impacts of COVID-19 on population dynamics need more examination; (viii) Bangladesh is one of the world's most climate-vulnerable. Climate has an impact on population dynamics here. People experiencing impacts as frequent floods threaten livelihoods, agriculture, infrastructure, and clean water supply. (xix) In addition to the displaced population due to natural or environmental reasons, the country experienced more than 1 million forcibly displaced Myanmar nationals (FDMN). There is no clear direction for their return to their home country but affecting both their lives and the host with adverse consequences. The practice and use of contraception among Rohingya displaced women in the camps are low, and the birth rate is high, which needs more critical attention; also there are significant gaps in requirements of total funding and incoming funding; and (X) population data-disaggregated data can provide crucial information for use in development planning in Bangladesh. It is required to make updated national, regional, and local data available. Only reliable and quality data can allow the government to assess better the needs of a changing population for demographic resilience.

Bangladesh's 'demographic window of opportunity' can be turned into a 'demographic dividend' through planned investments in health and education to produce human capital and create enough jobs for the increased labor force. Utilizing this demographic dividend will foster sustainable development; failing to do so will create a 'demographic burden.' The critical challenges are reducing the *youth unemployment rate, low female labor force participation, increased vulnerabilities imposed by climate change, income inequality, and ensuring quality education, good health, and good governance*. COVID-19 made enormous challenges, causing multi-faceted impacts, including family planning, maternal and child health, etc.

The country has to take urgent action to address the *high prevalence of child marriage, high unmet need for family planning, high maternal mortality, and gender-based violence*- which are given commitments at the ICPD25+ (International Conference on Population and Development, 1994), 2019 and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to achieve by 2030 and to become a developed country by 2041. Focusing on individual rights, choices, equality, and quality of life- population and development issues under changing population dynamics and demographic change should be prioritized, integrated into national development plans and policies, monitored, and evaluated with updated, quality data and good governance.