Population and environment: A critical assessment

Kalim Siddiqui

ON THE WORLD stage, the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in September 1994. One very positive outcome of the conference was the call to move beyond the physical limitations of the Third World and into the future. However, in the context of this call, environmental concerns were largely neglected. This is not to say that the environment was not discussed at all. Instead, it was seen as a byproduct of economic development, environmental degradation and population growth.

Some emphasize that the current growth of world population is the main problem, which prevents any problem being solved. From their perspective, the birth rates are the first solution needed in any country where it is above replacement levels. They also stress the need to 'limit' the number of people in the world.

While other groups agree that high population numbers are a problem, but argue that core problem is the development of poverty which would not only make people irreplaceable, but would in itself lead to population growth. As they argue, the ability of the resources to support the growing population decreases. They often suggest that the size of the population can be reduced by increasing the availability of food and other basic necessities. However, famine and malnutrition are often seen as the result of the growth of population, rather than the cause. It seems that the population is growing in a self-perpetuating cycle.

If, however, we look at the population size in a broader context, we can see that the population is not just a byproduct of economic development, but a driving force behind it. For example, the growth of population is a result of economic growth, which in turn is driven by technological progress.

It is argued that population growth is not just a byproduct of economic development, but a driving force behind it. For example, the growth of population is a result of economic growth, which in turn is driven by technological progress. The technological changes have led to the development of new products and services, which in turn have created new jobs and increased the demand for more goods and services. This has led to an increase in the population, which in turn has led to more technological change, creating a feedback loop.

The methodology behind the calculation of population growth is based on the assumption that population growth is a result of economic growth. This is often referred to as the demographic transition theory. However, this theory is often criticized for its lack of consideration of the impact of population growth on the environment.

The current global population is estimated to be around 7.7 billion people. However, this number is expected to rise to 9.7 billion by 2050, and 12.2 billion by 2100. This growth is driven by a combination of factors, including increased lifespans, decreased fertility rates, and increased migration.

The impact of population growth on the environment is significant. For example, the increase in demand for food and water has led to a rise in the prices of these resources, which in turn has led to increased poverty and inequality. The increase in pollution and waste has also led to a decrease in the quality of life for many people.

The relationship between population and environment is complex and multifaceted. It is clear that population growth is a major contributor to environmental problems, but it is also clear that environmental problems are a major contributor to population growth. The solution to this problem is not simple, and it will require a coordinated global effort.
Population and environment: A critical assessment

Kalim Siddiqui

FURTHER, within the Third World countries wide differences are found in consumptions. For example, in India, the figures on consumption disparities are startling. The bottom 20% of the population has a share of about 8% in total consumption, while top 20% has a share of about 41%. It is simply not true that the poor are consuming resources disproportionately. The conclusion is that simply population control is not efficient way to save resources.

Further, within the Third World countries wide differences are found in consumptions. For example, in India, the figures on consumption disparities are startling. The bottom 20% of the population has a share of about 8% in total consumption, while top 20% has a share of about 41%. It is simply not true that the poor are consuming resources disproportionately. The conclusion is that simply population control is not efficient way to save resources.

I N THE poor countries, children serve as the chief source of income against uncertain future, especially for women without husbands. Under the situation of acute poverty and socio-economic inputs, women desire to get more children. On the other hand, women with access to better income, health, education and employment tend to have fewer children simply because they have a more secure future.

The poor would reduce the number of desired children if they found ways for children to find adequate socio-economic opportunities. Measures that would enable this to happen include educational opportunities for women, employment opportunities for all, and better health facilities. To achieve a safer fertility, a very high per capita income and consumption is not needed. Take for example, the case of a small country of Kenya with an annual per capita income of less than 100 dollars has a birth rate of about 20 per 1000. This is much lower to average of about 31 for India as a whole. Kerala owes its success to higher literacy rates including for women.

Environmental solutions are inconsistent with the short-term interests of private profit maximisation. In the absence of any social co-ordination of ecological choices it is more profitable for private investors to carry on with old production methods. How the large MNCs make investment decisions in the poor countries is well known from Bhopal, in India, disaster of 1984. In the world's worst chemical industry disaster, more than 3500 people lost lives and several thousands were maimed for life. Of the victims were poor shanty dwellers. The death resulted from the leak of a poisonous gas from an MNC's Union Carbide plant manufacturing pesticides.

In the third world countries, the blind adaptation of models of development drawn from the historical experience of industrialised countries have resulted in environmental problems from two related sources. Firstly, projects and technologies developed under capitalistic conditions in the West have frequently proven ecologically disastrous in the Third World, for reasons similar to those in the industrialised countries and also because environmental laws which are more lax in poor countries, as their governments are busy in attracting foreign investments. Second, the growth of modern industrial sector in the Third World has come along with ecological deterioration like deforestation, flood, famine, and created ecological refugees drain to the cities in search of new livelihoods. In India, recently the scientists at the Delhi based Centre for Science and Environment stated that 85% of the timber felled in 1991 in the state of Himachal Pradesh in India was used for commercial purposes and only 15% of the forests was used for local purposes. Environmental degradation in the poor countries carries with it the impoverishment of local communities who subsist on the ecosystems and the in fact, environmental degradation and social injustice are the two sides of the same coin.

The global structure of economic and political inequalities that is responsible for the environmental crisis. Therefore placing global overpopulation as the real cause of environmental crisis is a wrong approach and will only succeed in diverting the attention. Certainly more US and West European type of growth will exacerbate our planet's ecological deterioration. But an egalitarian improvement in living standards is necessary to eliminate poverty in the Third World and would ultimately reduce population growth.

In short, the gap between rich and poor is a problem within the Third World countries and also between the developed and less-developed countries at a global level. Inequitable distribution of resources, income, food, health care, education, work, social benefits, leisure and many are a universal issue. In many Third World countries, increasing number of people do not have secure income or employment. The migration in search of work is seriously disrupting the social fabric of people's lives, with negative consequences as diverse as marital breakdown and increased ethnic and racial tension. Food production is too high in some regions or countries and inadequate in others, while food distribution is plagued by political wrangling, causing unnecessary hunger and starvation for millions.

Widespread production of junk goods and over consumption patterns accompanied by vast quantities of waste goes on in the developed world, where the primary responsibility for international resource depletion lies. Third World countries too have serious environmental problems, many of which result from supplying the developed world with resources and others from unregulated economic activity. Meanwhile military spending and debt servicing are swallowing national budget in almost all the Third World countries and worldwide economic recession is destroying much of the progress made in the past decades in economic development, public health and education. By forcing them on high fertility rates and population growth in the Third World means as a refusal on the part of governments to acknowledge other problems, accept responsibility, change their policies or relinquish their power or reduce elitist consumption.

— Concluded