**Overpopulation: A time-bomb ticking**

M Jalal Hussain

Published : Saturday, 01 June 2013


The population of a country is one of its most invaluable assets. When the population exceeds the optimum level, the invaluable assets become a liability for the country. Bangladesh is a small country with an area of 147,570 square kilometers and a population of 161 million. The country has the highest density of population in the present world. In 1971, when Bangladesh achieved independence, its population was about 75 million and this has increased by more than double within the past 42 years. The current growth rate varies from 1.5 per cent to 2 per cent a year according to assessments made by various analysts. Considering an annual average growth rate of 1.75 per cent a year, Bangladesh's population will be 350 million within the next 40 years. If the population growth goes unrestrained and unbridled and remains in the present position, what will happen to Bangladesh and its citizens when the population doubles? The policy-makers, and the people of Bangladesh must plan now to keep the population growth under control and at a desirable level. When the population was 75 million, the policy-makers should have taken long-term and pragmatic plans and programs to keep the population in check and at the optimum level.

Bangladesh is called a 'population outburst' country meaning the country has very little check and control over the population growth rate. It is a constant threat to our environment and existence. It is the greatest problem in Bangladesh. The land area of Bangladesh is relatively less than her vast population. For this reason, Bangladesh is considered to be an overpopulated country. Various economists, analysts and researchers have identified the causes for the population boom in the country. Illiteracy and ignorance, geographical location and climatic conditions, poverty, unemployment, early marriage, polygamy, superstition, lack of family planning knowledge and apparatus and finally the failures of the state policy- makers are the major causes for the population boom in the country.

Global population is increasing rapidly and at an alarming rate. The leaders and politicians of the modern world express disquiet on the population growth. A new report was released by the UN's high-level panel on global sustainability. Unsurprisingly its conclusion is that the world's current economic, environmental and demographic trajectory is not sustainable. According to the UN estimates, as reported by Reuters: "The world's population looks set to grow to nearly 9 billion by 2040 from 7 billion now, and the number of middle-class consumers increases by 3 billion over the next 20 years. The demand for resources will rise exponentially. Even by 2030, the world will need at least 50 per cent more food, 45 per cent more energy and 30 per cent more water at a time when a changing environment is creating new limits to supply."

The trouble is that our recent successes have left a major impact on the environment - 5.2 million hectares of forest are lost each year and 85 per cent of fish stocks are over-exploited.
Experts and geologists believe that the effects of climate change will rigorously impinge on Bangladesh's population, which is dependent on its limited natural resources. Given the spiraling population growth, depletion of vital resources such as fresh water, forests and farmlands will strain the country's sustainability. The world's most densely populated Bangladesh is losing its cultivable lands due to the ever growing population's demand for industrialization, farming and human habitat. The country is losing 8,000 hectares of cultivable land every year from its original 13 million hectares due to industrialization, urbanization, and unplanned new housing and infrastructure buildings to accommodate the country's fast growing population. Many real estate and land developing companies have undertaken new projects at remote district levels which further deplete the arable land of the country. It is feared that there would be no cultivable lands left in 50 years' time if the cultivable lands are taken away for non-farm purposes like housing and industrial projects at the present ratio.

Overpopulation has many more adverse aftermaths.  Some problems associated with or exacerbated by human overpopulation are: shortage of food, inadequate fresh water for drinking water use as well as sewerage treatment and effluent discharge, depletion of natural resources like fossil fuels, changes in atmospheric composition and consequent global warming, illegal immigration to the developed world on an unprecedented scale, high infant and child mortality, unhygienic and very poor condition of living in the urban slums, conflicts over scarce resources, crowding, jam, congestions and cataclysms on the transport and traffic systems, high crime rates and social unrest and unemployment of thousands of young and adult people, low standard of living and poor per capita income. The whole of Bangladesh has become overcrowded. Starting from streets to shopping centers, bazaars, roads and highways, transport communications like railways, buses, water transports all are overcrowded by people making life uncomfortable, inconvenient and difficult. Everywhere there is sign of overpopulation and its horrible effects on the lives of the people of Bangladesh. In the midst of rapidity, a constant and never-ending sign in Bangladesh that can in no way be overlooked is one of the fundamental causes at the core of many social, economic and environmental problems and this is 'overpopulation.'

Demographers, environmentalists and scientists forecast that the 'overpopulation' problem of Bangladesh would be antagonized and compounded further due to climate change and global warming. The southern parts of the country will be swamped by sea water and make the area unlivable by human beings. The situation would further worsen since India starts diverting water in the dry season by making dams and barrages surrounding Bangladesh's borders, causing the country's river system to be filled with sands, silts and sediments, making it difficult to handle the water load during the monsoons. Without addressing population growth, Bangladesh cannot be expected to achieve meaningful economic expansion to avert large-scale poverty, which in turn can lead to anarchy. In fact, constant unrest on university campuses, unrelenting deadly confrontations in the political arena, the rise of fundamentalism, and serious economic agony followed by general lawlessness and social unrest are indicators of such an eventuality. To control its spiraling population, Bangladesh could draw important lessons from countries like China, which has taken the most drastic measure of restricting the number of children per family to just one. China is in a unique position to adopt such a policy. Even though it has embraced a capitalist economy, its Communist Party continues to exercise total control over government policy. In pursuing its population policy, China has instituted a social security system for the elderly.

The most effective tool to control and contain population growth is to educate the people by long-term planning and eradicate illiteracy from the country. So many seminars and programs on family planning and birth control have been undertaken by spending billions of taka since independence of the country. But the output and results are quite frustrating. The policy-makers should have undertaken revolutionary education programs including compulsory education and should have achieved 99 per cent literacy during the last 42 years. If the people are educated they do not need advice from the family planning workers or from the NGOs. By dint of their education they would know which is good for them. We notice in our society that the educated people, living in urban and rural areas, are very much aware of the family and they always keep the family limited by having one or two children and educate them.

It is one of the most commonly agreed assumptions that the sections of the society deprived of education contribute more to overpopulation. Lack of education, coupled with poverty, gives rise to a simple theorem in impoverished classes: "More hands, more money".

Lack of education and knowledge have created a cycle in Bangladesh where the rich and educated people who can afford to maintain and educate more children, are having only one or two children. The large number of uneducated people who can't afford to maintain and educate many children, is overburdened with many children (varying from four to eight children). As a result, perilous economic conditions and social imbalances are built up every day.  Poverty and inequality are at the heart of poor health, high mortality and lack of access to education. These factors themselves perpetuate and deepen individual poverty and national and global inequality. Many people take recourse to polygamy and early marriage of their children due to lack of education and knowledge.

Early marriage is one the causes of overpopulation in the country and the policy-makers should make laws like the developed countries that none can get married before attaining the age of 18. Polygamy in the country is also a grave cause for overpopulation. A large number of people, especially the uneducated people, make use of polygamy and have many wives and children. They fail to educate the children and create an illiterate and poor society in the country and the cultures continue years together. The polygamy system must be controlled and stopped in the society by introducing laws.
Overpopulation in Bangladesh is just like 'a ticking time bomb'. For safety, security, peace, progress and happiness of the people, the time bomb needs to be defused by taking immediate and appropriate short and long-term plans by the policy-makers and the people of the country. Unless the policy-makers solve the most vital problem of overpopulation, all the efforts and plans for economic development, economic emancipation, stability and progress of the country will, no doubt, be in jeopardy.