

Education As Contraception

How population pressures have been changing the face of one of the world's most fertile but land-scarce countries like Bangladesh needs no telling. From 35 per cent in the 1960s, rural landlessness has risen to 53 per cent by the early 1990s. What this means for a predominantly agricultural people, with virtually no back-up support in socio-economic security, is worse pauperisation and, inevitably, migration to the swelling urban slums as formal and informal labour.

And governments come and go, scarcely bothering to think consistently about this growing army of rural-urban migrants and their need for basic civic amenities like water, shelter and sanitation, access to health care, education and secure employment. The result is a general degradation of the natural and built environment as the large number of the poor, the not-so-poor and the handful of the rich compete with one another in the urban jungle, leading to conflict and social disintegration. Indeed, all around us are the warning signals of a highly stressed ecological base — fast dwindling natural resources like fish, fowl and fruit trees, shrinking and poisoned water bodies as well as arable land.

But is population and ecological deterioration the result of poverty or of inept governance over the years? Development philosophers, who have no blinkers on, point out that a runaway population (and poverty) is the effect, and not the cause, of governments not investing seriously enough in their human resource. Unfortunately, not many of our decision-makers have been thinking on this line. But happily, speakers at a recent seminar on 'Challenges of Population and Development in the Next Millennium' were reported to have suggested that the government should invest more, and effectively, in the education of girls as part of the national population planning programme.

The received wisdom is that governments should think in terms of planning and not controlling populations. Human beings are more than numbers, no matter how poor, powerless and "dispensable" they may appear to fat cats here and in the rich countries. The politically correct thing to do is to stop blaming the baby-breeders, who are actually victims of maldevelopment, and start investing in them in earnest.

Development experts had advocated for decades that investment in human resources specifically the education of girls, has a beneficial impact on the birth, infant mortality and maternal death rates of countries, besides enhancing the lives of the people themselves. The reasons are obvious. Girls in the process of education usually delay marriage and childbirth as they are in a better position to access relevant information. But it would be foolish, if not dangerously explosive, to underestimate the importance of educating boys as well, for the population problem is not just a "women's issue".

At the global level population is projected to increase 47 per cent, or 2.8 billion, between the years 2000 and 2050. Most of this growth would be in the developing world, with the Bangladesh population nearly doubling, though Bangladesh interestingly is regarded today as a success in slowing population expansion. We are supposed to have brought down the growth rate (officially) from 2.8 per cent in the 1970s to 1.5 per cent in the 1990s! But there is no room for complacency, for the surge of population momentum would be great, given the fact that nearly half the population of Bangladesh is youthful.

Our best hope lies in developing the human resource that is already here, through compulsory universal education in as many ways as possible. Education is the best contraceptive and the best security. No excuse of 'budget stress' should be per-

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Chittagong highway at Koralpali point was damaged by flood water on July 1

