



Nepal's Changing Demographic Structure from a Socialist Perspective:

Some Policy Considerations

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Executive
Summary

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According to the 2021 Population Census (2078 B.S.), Nepal's fertility rate has fallen below the replacement level, while infant and child mortality rates have declined. The population growth rate has dropped below one per cent, and life expectancy has increased. These changes have brought about significant shifts in Nepal's demographic structure. The proportion of children is gradually declining, while the share of the working-age population has reached nearly two-thirds of the total population. At the same time, the proportion of older people is increasing. Overall, the dependent population remains considerably smaller than the working-age population. Given this demographic structure, Nepal must make the fullest possible use of its abundant labour force, accelerate productivity and harness the benefits of its demographic dividend. The country cannot afford to delay in taking advantage of this favourable demographic window.

Nepal's approach to population policy and related programmes has so far broadly followed global and United Nations frameworks. However, the substantial changes in Nepal's demographic structure now require a corresponding shift in both perspective and policy priorities. Nepal needs to move beyond the Malthusian, control-oriented approach and adopt a forward-looking population perspective and policy framework suited to its changing demographic realities. In this context, it would be appropriate to examine the human development approaches of Amartya Sen and Mahbub ul Haq from a socialist perspective.

The human development approach places people at the centre of development. Building on this perspective, the article proposes a three-part cyclical framework for understanding the relationship between population and development: 'resource-means-end'. Under this framework, population itself constitutes a resource, a means and an end. Human capabilities—both existing and potential—are the fundamental resource for development. When these capabilities are developed and utilised, people apply their knowledge, skills and creativity and participate actively as agents in the development process; in this sense, population becomes a means of development. The development generated through this process, in turn, is intended for the well-being and improved quality of life of the people themselves. In this sense, population also becomes the end, as well as the ultimate goal, of the development process. The proposed resource-means-end cyclical framework draws conceptually on the human development theories of Amartya Sen and Mahbub ul Haq, as well as the demographic theories of Karl Marx and Ester Boserup.

Building in this conceptual framework, the final section of the article proposes a number of sector-specific policies to enable Nepal to make the fullest use of its abundant human resources and capabilities and thereby achieve the desired level of human development in the context of current demographic change. These policies cover fertility; internal migration and foreign employment; children, adults and older people; and women's empowerment.

In the area of fertility, most existing policies should continue, but they should be complemented by measures aimed at preventing the fertility rate from declining further. At the same time, women's empowerment needs to be advanced more substantially. This would contribute to achieving targets related to reproductive health, as well as maternal and child health and mortality. Women's empowerment also has an important role to play in reducing child marriage and enhancing the recognition, value and status of daughters within families and society.

For both children and adults, age-appropriate, differentiated and progressive educational policies are necessary. At the same time, employment opportunities for adults should be expanded through the industrialisation and commercialisation of both existing and emerging areas of economic activity. Internal migration should be supported through planned urbanisation and the development of appropriate, integrated settlements that provide adequate living conditions. Foreign employment should be made simpler and more accessible, while also being made safer and more dignified, with the aim of increasing remittance income. To achieve this, young people need to be equipped with appropriate education and skills, while Nepal should gradually shift its foreign employment model from one centred predominantly on 'physical labour' towards one increasingly based on 'knowledge and intellectual labour.'



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