

Book Reviews

T. Nirmala Devi. *Population Growth and Development in SAARC.* New Delhi: South Asian Publishers, 1996. Hardbound. Indian Rs 160.00.

The complex relationship between population growth and socio-economic development has long been debated. The arguments about the direction and causality of the relationship between population growth and development indicators remain inconclusive. The available literature on the subject reflects three main ideological groups. Nationalists see population growth as a stimulus to economic development, whereas the neo-Malthusians see it the other way round. The Marxists, however, see the population problem being solved in terms of development through a socialist model.

The author of this study appears to take the neo-Malthusian and neo-classical approach where population growth must slow down to promote economic and social development. The justification for undertaking such an approach is that, as the statistics show, the existing population growth rates in the SAARC area are unsustainable at least for the near future, and pose a major development challenge in the region. In this context, an attempt has been made to pull together information on the population of the SAARC countries and assess its negative externalities for development, in terms of their implications for education, health, employment, and environment policies. The main objective outlined in the study is to examine how and to what extent the size, age structure, and growth of population have a determining role in the choice and execution of development strategies of the SAARC economies. For this purpose, cross-country data from secondary sources have been used for substantive evidence to support the arguments.

Comprising six chapters in all, the study begins with a brief introduction to the issue of population and development interactions. Chapter two presents historical trends and components of population growth using available data for six countries in the SAARC region. The description is useful for observing the population profile of these countries and demonstrating how each country has moved along the path of demographic transition since the 1950s. The next chapter deals with issues of population growth in terms of the urban-rural variations, incidence of poverty, and performance of vital rates in each country, while the second half of the chapter is devoted to assessing the effects of selected socio-economic variables on population parameters in a regression analysis. The interrelations between population growth and development indicators in the SAARC context are analysed in Chapter Four, followed by a review of population policies and programmes in each country in the next chapter. Some concluding observations and policy implications which emerge from this analysis are summed up in the last chapter.

A key question examined in the study is that a large and growing populations in the SAARC countries continues to constrain economic and social development, a phenomenon which has depressed the per capita income growth in the region. The author argues that the population problem is further aggravated when the policies related to population control, human resource development, and poverty alleviation are not implemented successfully. However, a good deal of literature accumulated on the economy and society now clearly suggests that the economic and social problems and related policy issues in such countries exist due largely to weak governance, unstable political conditions, and fluctuations in economic growth, which, in turn, increasingly depend upon international forces. These need to be taken into account in any analysis of development policies.

In Chapter Two, where the author employs the regression technique to determine the role of socio-economic variables in demographic change, adult literacy is spelled out as a significant factor in bringing down fertility and mortality indicators—a finding reinforcing an already established fact. However, because of the cause and effect relationship between the two sets of variables, the statistical method used is inadequate for examining the interrelationship in a robust manner. The multicollinearity and interdependence among the variables and their structural variations among countries limit the estimation of a parsimonious model. The statistical analysis done thus raises many questions about the utility and specificity of the models used, and adds little to reveal the complexities of the relationship between population and development indicators.

A major limitation of the study is the low quality and variation in the reliability of data and statistics on key variables. In the case of Pakistan, outdated figures on population parameters are reported. These may have produced misleading results and policy conclusions. Indeed, limitations imposed on the analysis by the lack of data is an issue highlighted in the beginning and at many points in subsequent chapters. This situation perhaps calls for making a strong case about the need for collecting improved and reliable data on economic and demographic indicators in these countries before substantive and policy conclusions can be drawn.

This book, however, will appeal to researchers and policy-makers to enhance their knowledge about the population and development issues, those who can utilise a large quantity of information collected from various sources and who can assess and identify major weaknesses of population policies and programmes of individual SAARC countries. Although one will find unevenness and imbalance in the quality and coverage of information in these chapters, the book is a useful contribution to a topic that continues to be important to the demographic community as well as the policy-makers in the context of development of the SAARC countries.

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