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Population And Environment Related Issues In Maldives

By

Ahmed Mohamed
POPULATION AND ENVIRONMENT RELATED ISSUES IN MALDIVES

The population of Maldives is growing at an unprecedented rate. By the end of this century it would have most likely reached 300,000 - an increase of 100,000 in twelve years. It took hundreds of years to record first hundred thousand in 1966, but only twenty two years to add the next 100,000. This phenomenal growth is mainly caused by the continuous high rate of birth and the declining mortality levels. Due to the demand for expatriate labour the impact of migration on population growth is likely to become more significant in the near future.

In Maldives the negative consequence of population growth have not caused serious alarm in the past. However, at present, population explosion is adversely affecting the environment and all major areas of development - social services, housing, transport and communication etc.

One of the most important factors in the substantive development of a nation is the sustenance of the available natural resources. Most resources do not increase on their own. However if the people who live in a particular place makes the effort the resources can be sustained. We know that natural resources are not inexhaustible. However, the available natural resources are being reduced at an alarming rate due to the unwise disproportionate use of that resources.
The rapid increase in population in the Maldives has placed great constraints on the available resources. More and more islands are feeling the effects of the constraints on their resources due to this fast population growth. Male', the capital island, has probably suffered most in this regard. The overcrowding in Male' has placed great pressure on the available resources and as a result, people in Male' are feeling its effects more and more.

A quarter of the country's population live in Male'. This is not only because the birth rate in Male', is higher than the death rate. The main reason for this is because of the migration of the people from the islands to Male'. People from the island migrate to Male' to seek employment and better educational and health services.

The immense pressure on the available land for housing is just one example of this. The rapid increase in the number of people who have to share this land has consequently given rise to more complicated problems. As land resources get scarce, more and more people are compelled to build their houses upwards to make more room for more families as people get married and need their own rooms/places to live. This has resulted in the rapid increase in the number of high raised buildings.

The pressure on land for housing purposes not only places great constraints but also on the availability of land for other purposes. One of the tragic consequences of the increasing population pressure on land has been the rapid rate at which
trees have been cut down which has made the island bare in terms of greenery. In addition to stripping the islands of greenery, this has made the environment hotter and dustier in turn creating more health related problems.

Now people are aware of the effects of increasing population on available natural resources and the environment. Today many islands are faced with the problem of shortage of land, thus forcing a number of families to live under one roof. If a family in such an island now has 6 children and if each one of these children have 6 children in turn, in 20 years time the family which would consist of 36 members no doubt would have to face immense problems living under one roof.

Until recently in the country peoples' way of living have had no adverse effects on the available natural resources of the environment itself. The natural environment and the people have existed side by side in harmony. Each island consisted of a small population and there are sufficient trees and food available on the island to meet the demands of the people living on the island.

As a result of the improvement of the living standard of the people in the past 20 years, the population of the country has increased rapidly. And as population grew more people used the available natural resources, resulting in marked reduction of those resources. The increased demand on available natural resources has not followed with an effort to increase or sustain the available resources.
The rapid population growth has led to the increasing salinity of the ground water. Male' is one of the examples of this. Realising the problems the government have been warning people residing in Male' and other crowded islands to take all measures possible to maximise wastage of water. However, as population increased more water is drawn from the ground, leading to face the current situation faced with regard to potable ground water.

In the efforts to raise the standard of living, the traditional toilets 'gifili' has been replaced with modern version of toilets. The water from these toilets is pumped out into the sea. Thus, contributing to the increasing salinity of the ground water. The situation has reached almost crisis point and one is not wrong in saying that the ground water in any part of the Male' now is unsuitable for drinking. As the salinity of the water increased, the government launched a project of desalination of water in an attempt to provide safe, drinking water to the public of Male'. The government have also implemented a project to construct water tanks at various points in Male' and in private homes under a special project. Today, people in Male' obtain water from such sources for drinking and cooking. At present we have a number of islands facing the salinity of ground water problem.

The lack of consideration given to the utilisation of available resources, specially water in Male', have affected adversely the living standard of people.
When there were fewer people living in Male', earlier, the problem of garbage was not heard of. It was because, most homes had some empty space to bury or collect the garbage and also the garbage consisted of mostly of dried leaves and other organic matter, which decomposes naturally. Throwing this garbage into the sea was also possible and did not give rise to major problems, as the quantity was rather small.

But due to the sudden increase in population, the amount of garbage increased tremendously, and almost all empty space in most houses have been used up for living space. The garbage can no longer be buried in backyards nor can it be thrown into the sea because the quantity has increased so much as well, which has given rise to the present day garbage problem in Male'.

We do not want our other islands to become like Male'.

Fire wood is a vital resource for our subsistence and as an economic source. Up to now, most people have been able to obtain the firewood they needed from their own island. However, as the population increased and demand on land for housing and other purpose increased more and more trees had to be cut down. This has resulted in a shortage of firewood available from the island. Hence, the people are forced to spend their income on obtaining substitute for firewood or the alternative is to waste much effort time and energy in obtaining firewood from another island. It is true with modernisation more and more people are turning towards an alternative to firewood but the fact remains that in the country the majority of the people use an alternative source out of necessity rather than choice.
Today we hear more complaints about poor catch from fishermen. One of the main problems facing fishermen today is the difficulty in catching bait. As population increases so does the number of people working. Hence there has been an increase in the number of fishermen and fishing vessels. As a result, bait fish might not be multiplying at the rate which it is being caught. Furthermore, as population increases more coral from the reefs have to be mined for construction purposes, thus disturbing the natural environment in which bait is exist. So, the rapid growth in population might be a cause for the difficulty faced by fishermen in obtaining bait fish. The population increase is also causing destruction of the environment leading to land erosion and flooding due to tidal waves.

Actions being taken for minimising the environment problems in Maldives are:-

- Planting trees for every tree cut down
- Avoid removing coral from the surrounding reef.
- Avoid removing sand from the beaches
- Using cement blocks for construction of buildings
- Rain water collected from the roofs should be drained into the ground or wells.

Unplanned population growth adversely affects the quality of life of the people not only in terms of environment and resources but also in terms of other social services.