

Population growth rate poses a major challenge for Iraq

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Rapid demographic growth coupled with a population explosion are important issues facing many countries, not least Iraq. Rapid population growth poses a challenge to a country's economy and sustainable development and can comprehensively impact living standards as well as economic resources. In general, future population growth depends on many complex and interrelated factors, including demography, public policy, the economy, culture and social development.

If not managed effectively, Iraq's high population growth rates will, it is believed, lead to significant pressures on the economy and the country's natural resources. Iraq depends heavily on its oil revenues to finance its expenditure and over the past decade, oil revenues have accounted for more than 99 percent of exports, 85 percent of the government's budget and 42 percent of GDP¹.

¹ The World Bank in Iraq. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/iraq/overview>

According to the annual statistical survey conducted by the Ministry of Planning last year, in 2023, Iraq's population was estimated at 43 million and 324 thousand people, indicating that the annual population growth rate stood at 2.5%².

According to these statistics, out of the total population, the percentage of males amounted to 50.5% and that of females 49.5%. The results also indicated that the percentage of the population under 15 years of age was approximately 40%; whilst 75% of the population were aged between 15 and 64 years and young people within the age group 15-24 years accounted for 28% of the population³.

Approximately 50% of Iraq's population is concentrated within the governorates of Baghdad, Nineveh, Basra and Dhi Qar. The urban population constituted 70% of the total with the remaining 30% living in rural areas. It was also observed that there was a significant improvement in the health of infants and children under five years of age, reflected by the decline in mortality rates within this category to less than 20 deaths per 100 thousand live births. This also reflected positively on an improvement in the average life expectancy which rose to 74 years⁴.

The statistical survey also revealed that the fertility rate for women aged between 15 and 49 years witnessed a decline from 3.66 in 2018 to 3.3 births in 2022. It is envisaged that the population of Iraq will enter the fourth stage of demographic transformations, entering what is termed as the demographic gift stage in which fertility rates decrease to the level of replacement where the percentage of the population with dependent children in a society decreases against a rise in the percentage of its working-age population⁵.

Some of the Possible Repercussions of Iraq's Rapid Population Growth

Pressure on resources: An increase in the population increases the demand for essential resources such as water, energy, food and housing. It can prove difficult to meet this growing demand quickly and efficiently, which negatively impacts the quality of life and compromises economic stability.

Increased unemployment: Rapid population growth may lead to increased unemployment, as more individuals are seeking employment from the limited resources

²General Authority for Statistics and Government Information in Iraq: <https://cosit.gov.iq/>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

available. This may increase pressure on the labor market and affect income, poverty and economic inequality.

Poor infrastructure: It may be difficult to meet the growing infrastructural needs to cope with the rapid population growth. Cities and communities need to provide roads, schools, hospitals, and other public services to keep up with population growth, and this can be difficult to achieve in the face of large population growth.

Increased poverty: Rapid population growth may increase poverty rates and exacerbate social justice. Access to employment and basic services for all can be difficult to accomplish, which heightens economic and social injustice.

To overcome these challenges, comprehensive sustainable development strategies focusing on increasing employment opportunities, infrastructure improvement and the provision of basic services are needed. Family planning and the provision of quality health care also play an important role in balancing population growth and economic development. Promoting non-oil sectors such as agriculture, industry and tourism are also a critical part of the equation.

The Need for a Population Census in Iraq

The population census in Iraq is carried out by the General Authority for Statistics and Information, which is responsible for collecting demographic, social and economic data and based on this information, produce the necessary reports and statistics.

According to the General Authority for Statistics and Government Information, the census process in Iraq is usually carried out periodically and aims to provide an accurate picture of the composition of the population and its distribution over the various geographical areas in the country. The process involves collecting and analyzing data from individuals and households regarding age, gender, education, occupation, income, family makeup and other social statistics⁶.

Are there discrepancies in the field of statistics in Iraq?

It is possible to find certain discrepancies in the field of statistics in Iraq, which depend on several factors that can lead to variations or discrepancies in the statistical process.

⁶ General Authority for Statistics and Government Information in Iraq: <https://cosit.gov.iq/>

The dire security situation and political instability in Iraq may affect the ability of stakeholders to carry out censuses fully and accurately. There may also be challenges in data collection in areas affected by conflict, particularly in disputed areas such as Kirkuk.

Demographic and social obstacles are also an influential factor in the field of statistics in Iraq. For example, there may be challenges in the collection of data in displaced communities, remote or hard-to-reach areas.

In addition, policy and legislative changes may also affect the methods and means by which data is collected and the statistics analysed. The implementation of a successful census may require consensus and cooperation between the various parties and adherence to standards of accuracy and transparency.

Finally, censuses require strong infrastructure and adequate resources, such as properly trained personnel and the necessary technical know-how. At present, there may be some degree of difficulty in providing all these resources and even if they were made available, they are likely to encounter serious difficulties in carrying out their work.

It is important that a census is carried out in an accurate, properly documented, reliable and continuous ways in order to obtain up-to-date and comprehensive data. There must be broad collaboration between government agencies, academic institutions and civil society to ensure the success of this process. In a statement previously issued by the Ministry of Planning on the occasion of World Population Day, it was indicated that the Ministry was working towards conducting the general population census during this year of 2024. The census is aimed at development at the national level, by building a comprehensive and complete database on the reality of the population in all sectors. This will, it is hoped, underscore the country's future development plans. The Ministry further added in its statement that the government has paid great attention to creating the appropriate conditions for the implementation of the census by allocating the necessary funds⁷.

The absence of any government solutions

The absence of government solutions and the inability of the economy to support this level in the annual growth of the population is seen as a serious problem that may increase the burden on individuals and reduce the possibility of wealth accumulation and economic sustainability. According to some economists, if an individual finds himself having to provide an income for more than five people, then this puts him under great

⁷ Planning: Iraq's population for the current year reached 43 million and 324 thousand people: <https://www.ina.iq/189184--43-324-.html>

economic pressure and limits his ability to rationalize consumption and save money. This in turn leads to a pattern of consumption that relies on instantaneous consumption and which eliminates the ability to save money or to invest⁸.

Some economists believe that the problem is very deeply entrenched because Iraq, in its current state, has gone through many challenges and crises over many decades. Since the US occupation of Iraq in 2003, which led to the fall of the former regime, followed by a period of turmoil, violence and internal conflicts; it appears that the crises have re-emerged and the negative impact on the livelihood and psychology of the Iraqi individual has redoubled, having inherited a system riddled with mistakes throughout the life of the modern Iraqi state. Every new system comes with its own set of new problems, as well as inheriting the old ones⁹.

Accordingly, the current state of affairs calls for a diversification in the sources of income, strategic planning, investment in technology, infrastructure and the development of human skills. The formation of an oil sovereign fund can be an effective mechanism for managing oil wealth in a sustainable manner. The Fund must be designed in a way that achieves transparency, good governance and an equitable distribution of proceeds, whilst taking into account the protection of the rights of future generations.

Emphasis should also be placed on discussing development and social justice issues as primarily national issues, which are linked to the role of the State and the economic and social model adopted in the country. These issues also have an international dimension, represented by the State's obligations to adhere to certain international conventions and international cooperation treaties through international development plans¹⁰.

Iraq may also be able to benefit from international cooperation according to international relations such as the 2030 Agenda, which is the result of negotiations between the different elements of the international community and multiple agreements¹¹.

These actions may take considerable time and effort to be fully implemented and will require cooperation and coordination between the government, the private sector and civil society. As such, rigorous studies and in-depth analyses should be organized to understand the potential challenges ahead and to develop effective strategies to manage Iraq's population growth.

⁸ Iraq's 'population explosion' breeds slums and raises poverty <https://shorturl.at/huwSO>

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Toolkit for mainstreaming social justice principles in development policies. Issued in: 2020. <https://shorturl.at/aqAS1>

¹¹ Ibid

Sources:

- 1- The World Bank in Iraq <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/iraq/overview>
- 2- Toolkit for mainstreaming social justice principles in development policies. Issued in: 2020. <https://shorturl.at/aqAS1>
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