



# PIDE

## COVID-19 BLOG

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### Assaying Urban Governance Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

Preying pan[epi]demics are as old as the history of human civilizations. Genetic traces of microbes have also been found in Egyptian mummies. Science also confirms that the microbes are even older than human existence on earth and helped evolve the life on the planet. The beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was marked with massive industrialization and spurred large-scale urbanisation led economic transformation in Europe. This mass scale urbanisation also caused squalor and public health threats across Europe and Asia. Since most of the industrialisation took place within the already congested urban cores and poor living conditions seriously endangered the public health with an eruption of life-threatening pan[epi]demics.

Historically, Flu pandemic in 1890 took one million lives, Cholera in 1910 killed around one million people, Spanish Flu in 1918 took 50 million and Flu continued to hit humankind almost every decade. These days, 7 billion people on the planet are struggling to survive the deadliest COVID-19 outbreak. The pandemic is believed to took-off in Wuhan, China (a well-planned urban-industrial megacity with 11 million population) where patient zero of the disease was found in December 2019. The deadly bug has killed so far 50,000 people while contracting another one million, and the count is still on. COVID-19 has literally paralysed life on the planet. Pandemic is believed erupted in Wuhan's illegal seafood market where wild animals (such as Horseshoe Bats, Snakes and Pangolins containing the deadly virus) were sold as an eating delicacy to satiate unhealthy eating habits of the locals. The virus is believed to be a spill-over zoonotic and a successor to its earlier known variants SARS 2003 and MERS 2013, which also had killed thousands. COVID-19 outbreak certainly intrigues one with a fundamental question- How illegal public health threatening land use activity remained unchecked in a city that has one of the best urban planning and governance models?

Over the past century, contemporary urban planning helped shape our cities the way they appear today. Popular suburban housing surrounded by lofty green pastures, sited miles away from CBDs, without workplaces was the first response of contemporary urban planning to ease the disease ridden congested and unhealthy urban cores. During the same era, port cities of New York, London, Paris, Shanghai, and Rome emerged as global economic, knowledge and cultural hubs owing to modernised air and marine connectivity. Lately, planners realised the economic and

social downside of the suburbia and regenerated the deserted cores into high-density mixed use districts to help urban economies grow while leveraging on density, proximity, knowledge clustering, enhanced social and cultural interactions. Both density and suburban sprawl were going fine in parallel despite having many divergences and disparities till the day COVID-19 struck and paralysed both.

Cities are never designed for lockdowns, they are mobility and interaction friendly, and are planned to facilitate the interactive unrestricted flow of people; goods, services, and information. Cities economically thrive on efficient mobility, knowledge clusters, social solace and density, whereas, pandemics are anti-urban, anti-social, anti-density and anti-humanity. Even world wars didn't harm the urban social fabric the way COVID-19 does. Cities exhibit and promote the sense of collectiveness, social interactions and harmony but pandemics appear denting all the social conventions. Currently, 3.5 billion people are locked-down, economies are sinking, and even most developed health systems are failing. Is corona going to kill our cities too?

Only Wuhan is able to restore back to normal life and presumably, they defeated it because of their controlled urban governance structure, smart connectivity, density based urban planning, intelligent use of science & technology and robust decision making by their apt leadership. Credit also goes to their tolerant and law-abiding masses unlike more open and democratic cities such as New York, London, Rome, and Madrid, where governments are struggling hard to contain people. Pakistan is no exception; where educated urban youth is not ready to adapt to any of the social-distancing and lockdown protocols.

During the past decades, nations remained focused to raise giant multinationals, overwhelming bureaucracies, mega infrastructure projects and militaries to combat 'Fictional Enemies'- of course the fellow humans- until the real 'Bio Enemy' struck them hard. Nations didn't invest enough in city systems to build on community-based resilience to combat disasters, biological threats, ignorance, functional illiteracy and other public health challenges. Federal Government in Pakistan is also struggling hard to battle the disease but there a clear disconnect between urban masses in the absence of city councils. Previous governments in Pakistan remained obsessed to build infrastructure whereas health, education, science, technology, social capital has always remained a lesser priority. All big cities like Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad, and Faisalabad are being administered by a couple of federal and provincial offices.

Cities must devise contingency plans to mitigate and adapt to the crises as well as restoration/recovery plans to manage post-crisis scenarios. In Pakistan, pandemic laws and crisis management regulations were never in place and are just being made in the wake of the crisis. Of course, the ubiquitous technology is readily available to do geo-fencing, location finding, financial/social aid enablers etc. but how this all will be working well without carpet mapping, realistic data and community engagement.

And also, how such mass scale mitigation will be coordinated and executed at a grass-root level without having lynchpin local institutions. Cities must endeavour to have interactive GIS based land use change detection and surveillance systems to help check the health threatening activities and land uses. GIS based parcel level household data repositories and mapping can also help execute mitigation plan effectually during the crises. Engagement of trained certified community leaders is important to combat the crisis without risking the lives of naïve volunteers. Such digital plans can help locking down targeted communities rather than seizing whole cities. Further, enhancing the e-governance, e-commerce and remote work capabilities are equally important to maintain long term physical distancing protocols to escape reoccurrences. Cities will also have to consider urban design retrofits.

Apparently, the pandemic is going to change the way cities are being managed since in practice governance systems have proved them inept of fighting such predicaments. The crisis is also expected to make nations rise to choose their new more capable leadership at global, national and city levels. COVID-19 will not only change the urban governance structures but also repaint the global economic and political power landscape, in post COVID-19 world.

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