No more master plans, Please!
Naveed Iftikhar and Samna Sadaf Khan

Cities facilitate human interaction. From a traditional perspective, master planning is the act of giving a shape and foreseeing this interaction through spatial development plans, provision of amenities, housing, transport systems, community facilities and determining land use. However, human societies are complex, and the future does not always pan out go as forecast or planned.

There was a time when most countries used to develop 5-year plans. Later, however, it was realised that such were not very helpful in dynamic societies. Yet, the field of urban planning in Pakistan continues to rely on the obsolete approach of master planning that is hindering prosperity and innovation in our cities.

Pakistan inherited the practice of centralised top-down master plans from its colonial rulers who have now progressed to contemporary approaches of neighbourhood planning, bottom-up initiatives and

democratising decision-making through public participation.

Pakistan, while adhering to the bygone paradigm of master planning, has lacked the institutional capacity to focus on participatory and inclusive urban management. There is a lack of understanding in bureaucratic and political leadership of Pakistan that urban planning should be undertaken as an exercise rooted in public aspirations and supported by national and sub-national development perspectives.

Broadly speaking, there are three barriers to breaking away from the master planning paradigm. First, the authoritarian political manifestos are not open to institutional changes; rather they produce an overdose of regulations to bring out any systematic change. Master planning has been an inside job where a limited number of town planners, politicians and builders have the decisive role in the name of development.

The projects are barely responsive to socio-economic and environmental realities. Fiscal decentralisation has not been realised to its full potential to enable localism. Hence, the first point of argument is the rigid system created by the governing bodies to protect the interests of the rulers and other powerful groups.

Second, town planners try to predict the future; like astrologers, they often fail miserably. Moreover, lack of useful data makes the process even less informed. By the time a resource- and time-consuming master plan is approved (many never get the approval) it has already become obsolete.

Third, there is a failure to recognize alternative planning approaches being discussed and practiced globally. From literature to policy to projects, every example is out there as precedents that can be used to our benefit. There has been a shift from

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large-scale restrictive planning to guideline-based planning interventions to meet the urban challenges of the cities. What stops us from bringing this change is the first barrier identified as the rigid system. The power resides in the industry of master planners who have no empathy to engage local people in the planning process. The voice of people - women, children, differently abled, minority, poor, entrepreneurs, street hawkers - remains unheard. Highway projects, for instance, are put forward yet there are no answers to the challenges of mobility; percentage of income spent on transportation cost, choices of transport, safety for women in travelling, etc.

Expansion of a city with housing societies is discussed yet there are no answers to the affordability criteria, livelihood, provision of jobs and entrepreneurships to access adequate housing. Ironically, the master plans never get implemented. Yet we continue to teach the same curriculum to civil servants and engineers about developing master plans. All that is needed from our town planning authorities and related government bodies is to understand the problems faced by the people and find up to date solutions.

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We need to realise that a country with a highest rate of urbanisation cannot afford to waste time by sticking to unsuccessful approaches. Our cities face immediate urgencies, which need fast-paced regenerative responses. Population is increasing by the day and our resources are not getting any better. Before we have met our challenges of services provision, affordable housing and economic opportunities, we have upcoming environmental challenges at hand with global emphasis on climate change and sustainability. This is why a shift from traditional master planning to strategic vision planning is imperative.

Planning literature has been identifying density, resiliency, multi-functional and walkable neighbourhood, cellular city and iso-benefit urbanism approaches as more responsive towards the contemporary challenges. Moreover, literature has also discussed the change in the role of planner from the sole originator to a mediator, an advocate and collaborator under strategic planning, collaborative planning, co-production and just city. Why has our idea of urban planning and a planner been so reserved when we are living in a globally connected world?

The urban understanding has evolved; hence going back to re-defining spatial models is not a sustainable approach. We need to delve into the definition of urban and the practice of urbanism as it is all

"We're waiting for the city to come to us..."

around us. Of, course, we need to find solutions for the urban challenges but master plans are not the solution. Tactical urbanism, for instance, is a low-cost guerilla approach to improving local neighbourhood and public spaces. It has a quick impact. Then there is the example of Paris's 15-minute city proposal, advocated by its mayor. It shows that the answers do not all come from a master plan.

Urban planning does not need to come from the government only; it can be a product of social interventions and public involvement. The urban development teams need to extend beyond town planners. City management is about people not about infrastructure. So we need economists, sociologists, historians, anthropologists, public health professional, psychologists and other professionals to work together to develop city visions instead of entrusting engineers to do it by themselves.

The right approach is to develop a vision and broad guidelines for city management, followed by capacity building at municipal level to carry out localised projects. Every civil servant and political leader can contribute to area development with the support of an inter-disciplinary teams and local people. People-centric urban management will lead to building trust between the citizens and local government practice and improve the sense of ownership. In order for this change to occur, the key lies in urban governance which needs to allow the changes to happen.

The following perspective by Christopher Rufo should enlighten us in this process:
"Life in a metropolis is simply too complex, too variable, and too ephemeral—it will evade even the most careful planning. If we want better, more beautiful, cities, we must bring neighbours, developers, employers, and governments into the conversation. Our cities must be built through cooperation, not compulsion."
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