

# PAKISTAN NEEDS MORE URBANISATION

Babar Khan Mumtaz

41

The commonly held view in Pakistan is that urbanisation, and large and growing cities are problems that need controlling<sup>1</sup>.

What and for whom is urbanisation 'a problem' that must be solved? The problems are for those who are living in cities and are as follows:

- Cities are becoming too large, creating problems of housing, traffic, pollution, infrastructure and services. Often, crime and lawlessness are added as is anti-social behaviour;
- Cities are expanding spatially, building over productive agricultural land and developing it for housing and other urban purposes.

The root cause of urban growth is said to be the influx of large numbers of people from rural areas and smaller cities: rural-urban migration, which must be stopped or at least controlled. As a result, proposals to regularise or upgrade low-income housing areas or the provision of low-cost housing are seen as invitations for further rural-urban migration and encouraging squatting and the construction of katchi abadis (unofficial informal settlements).

Countering such arguments does not require rocket science. Pakistani cities have problems of housing and infrastructure shortages, yet the availability of employment and opportunity is far greater than in rural areas. Indeed, whatever the measure or the definition, 'urban' living conditions are 'better' than rural. Housing, education, health, infrastructure and transport are all 'better' in urban areas than in rural.

For someone living in the rural areas wanting to improve their lives, there are three possible strategies:

1. Develop urban infrastructure in their settlement — this cannot be done by individual effort
2. Commute to an urban area — this depends on location and needs affordable transport
3. Move to an urban area — this has risks, is possibly expensive but likely to work with assistance

Therefore, it makes eminent sense for people to move from rural to urban areas in the hope of a better life, and it is not just cussedness, illogical or the attraction of the 'bright lights of the city' that prompt rural populations to move to cities. It is not surprising that Karachi and then Lahore, Islamabad and the other provincial capitals attract the most in-migrants, resulting in the rapid growth of these cities. However, to blame the problems of these cities on rural-urban migration is to miss the point.

Official figures state that "Average annual population growth rate (1998-2017) at national level is 2.4 percent whereas growth in urban areas is 2.70 percent which is higher than the population growth rate in rural areas which is 2.23 percent"<sup>1</sup>. This means that during that period, urban growth was 0.3% higher than the national population growth. In other words, that rural-urban migration was responsible for 20% of the growth of urban areas<sup>2</sup>, the rest being natural growth.

<sup>1</sup>At the same time, the fact that Pakistan has the highest rate of urbanisation in Asia is seen as something to be proud about

<sup>2</sup>A significant proportion of migrants were propelled by natural and man-made conflicts and calamities.

So, while migration has added to urban growth, it is not the major problem. The problem is not urbanisation but rather urban management. The small towns of Pakistan have the same problems of overcrowding, traffic, and poor infrastructure that the largest cities have. For instance, at the time of partition, Shikarpur was the third most important town in Sindh and had a fully reticulated sewerage system. Some 50 years later, its population had doubled, but the sewerage system had not been added to at all. Despite a loan being available from the Asian Development Bank, the system still has not been extended or replaced - 75 years later.

The same is true of most of the towns: size does not matter, nor the speed at which they grow. Urbanisation is not the problem. If anything, it is the answer. If we don't want people to migrate to the big cities, let us take urbanisation to the small towns. What would it take to increase urbanisation – the proportion of Pakistanis living in urban settlements?

There are two essential ways of making a place 'urban'. The first is by designation, i.e. a government can call any place 'urban' for administrative reasons or based on population size, for example. There is no universally agreed definition. The second is by its structure – physical (density of development) or economic (preponderance of non-agricultural employment and activities).

The designation and administrative hierarchy that the government uses is mainly for its own purposes, although this has implications for resource allocation and hence influences politics and power. The more important criterion for livelihoods is the economic structure: to have most of the population employed in non-agricultural activities. Despite the huge bias towards agriculture in the taxation structure which has supported large landholdings and neo-feudal social structures, agriculture is no longer the mainstay of the national economy nor of the local, especially if we discount daily wage labourers. If Pakistan is to retain any credibility as an agricultural producer, it will have to change its mode of production and make it more efficient, probably through more mechanisation. In any case, the increasing rural population cannot be absorbed into agriculture without making it even less efficient and thus less competitive globally.

At the very least, this will require the introduction of processes that add value to crops by finishing, polishing, and packaging if not through the production of table-ready foods, end-user consumer goods and manufactured goods and components. This movement up the production chain will inevitably require denser settlements and/or more efficient transportation as well as machine and equipment operators (and eventually manufacturers) as well as packaging, marketing, and trading activities. The introduction and operation of enhanced non-agricultural activity could form the basis for an increasingly urbanised countryside. For this, better social and support services as well as urban infrastructure will be needed. To the extent possible these should be locally manned and managed rather than the inefficient centrally controlled education, health, and utility systems we now have.

We must introduce distance learning, community-managed utility systems and a more gender-inclusive approach to living and livelihoods. Local self-management of settlements and cities should be supported by a professional cadre of

settlement and city-managers acting as advisers to local self-government instead of the current top-down bureaucracy.

Taking urbanisation to the country requires a change of mind-set, but it will conserve agricultural land – not only by curbing urban sprawl but also by better utilisation of rural waste land. It will improve the national economy, raise the standard of living, especially for the rural poor and by extension, of the urban poor. It can also reduce the impact of climate change and calamities through more effective planning and management of settlements.

The time to do this is now. Many people have already moved temporarily to nearby cities and settlements because of the recent floods. Many of them do not own any land and providing housing will require land acquisition or a continuation of the old zamindari system.

They don't have a house, and one would have to be built, which might as well be in the settlement they have moved to, using the compensation and relief funds.

Many of them were jobless, doing casual manual labour or sharecropping. They could just as easily do this where they have moved to.

The financial and technical support going into rehabilitation could be used for resettlement and the development of small-scale manufacturing, construction, and trading.

For those who had land and housing, creating more 'urbanised' settlements would not only be more productive but also lead to faster recovery. The relief, recovery and climate-impact funds could bring about more permanent, more effective change through more and faster urbanisation.

*The author is an economist, architect, and urban development planner. He was a member of the Steering Committee of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture 2000-2003 and the HEC Professor at the National College of Arts, Lahore and University of London Reader in Housing Studies.*