

The necessity of inclusive urban planning

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Slums are the inevitable outcomes of master plans, not their violations (Uncivil City, Amita Baviskar).

A well-planned city is one that provides a framework for development designed to increase livability, prosperity, and equity. Planned cities are a great tool for enforcing sustainable development and balancing the need for growth with nature conservation. Master plans, especially if they aren't updated regularly, might lock the city into inflexible designs that do not always meet the current demands.

Cities have been the home of civilisation and economic development since the beginning of time — at least 80 per cent of global GDP is generated in cities. With a population of 220 million people, Pakistan contributes only 0.34pc of world GDP. On the other hand, Hong Kong contributes more to the world economy than Pakistan, with a population of 7.4m people (0.43pc). In terms of GDP and growth, Pakistani cities are clearly underperforming. “It’s time to rethink what Pakistan’s urban planners have done to our cities,” Dr Nadeem Ul Haq correctly stated.

Dr Haq, Vice-Chancellor of the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE), has raised this issue repeatedly on different forums. He is of the view that urban planners have a legal monopoly on creating massive plans that will dictate how we will live in the future decades. They receive massive government subsidies to create master plans that outline where and what may be developed. The world is changing rapidly, with the emergence of new technologies and challenges like climate change. Do our city planners take these issues into account in their master plans? They have failed to do so.

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In a recent Twitter thread, Dr Haq highlights the incompetence of urban planners. Urban planners do not allow people to build houses and shops together. They have put all the flats in one sector, all schools and universities in another sector. They divided the city through flyovers and underpasses to prevent walking. Our planned cities failed to provide us with parks, cycling tracks, pedestrian paths, community centres and parking spaces. Looks like our planners have built cities for cars not for humans and have created sprawls rather than cities. Should planners who made such bad master plans in the past be allowed to tell people how and where to live, work, and play?

They should not. Dr Haq is of the view that urban planners are necessary to systematise the work of city development but not to command cities and plan for the future.

The way forward

PIDE, as a think tank, has conducted a number of discussions on a wide range of social and policy issues in the recent past, as well as research on urban planning and issues related to it. The issue related to our cities is given special attention in “The PIDE reform agenda for accelerated and sustained growth.”

When we consider what a city should be like, the first thing that comes to mind is inclusivity. In order to facilitate the growth, we will have to make our cities creative — which boils down to making the cities dense, mix-use and inclusive — this will also imply that cities expand vertically rather than horizontally, as is presently the case. The mix-use of urban space, ie, having all that a person needs in close proximity, reduces transportation costs and generates several agglomeration economies.

The vertical and inclusive places also discourage sprawls and thus save the cities from facing diseconomies like congestion and pollution by introducing an efficient transport system and congestion tolls.

We must also use the concept of zones in cities by allotting enough space for commercial operations. The presence of offices, schools, and warehouses in bungalows is enough to suggest that commercial space is scarce in our cities. The zoning of a business-friendly city will address this scarcity.

The lack of inclusive cities is the primary reason for the presence of slums and sprawls. The poor are an important part of the economy; since they must work in cities, city zoning must allow them to live within the city — preferably near their place of work — failure to do so adds to slums, which cause one of several civic and societal issues. This may be accomplished by permitting a strong and vibrant rental market, which does not exist currently.

To avoid congestion in the denser areas of the city, especially during peak hours, the creative cities would need a ‘car policy’ as well as a ‘parking policy’ in order to discourage the use of cars in favour of public transport. Dr Haq in his article “[Why are we subsidising car use?](#)” and “[Bikes, density and cars,](#)” introduces a number of insights on Pakistan’s traffic issue, as well as solutions such as paid parking, dedicated fast track, cycling paths, and walking space for the citizens. The construction of signal-free corridors and overhead bridges do not solve the traffic problem our cities are facing at the moment.

Furthermore, Mr Hafeez ur Rehman’s study, “[Why Pakistan needs a car policy?](#)” provides a detailed discussion on this particular issue.

PIDE reform agenda 2021-22 proposed that dense and vertical cities will require a very efficient level of civic institutions and utility agencies.

This would require a very strong local government with enjoys control over the entire city. Thus, the present system of a city being controlled by multiple authorities will have to be dispensed. An increasing number of cities throughout the world are abandoning master plans in favour of broad rules that enable markets to decide on usage, height, and cityscape. Our city planners should use this strategy and grow cities vertically rather than horizontally.

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