

Are we an agri-rural country?

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It is one of those typical Thursday evenings; I'm glued to my computer multitasking. Working on a research project whilst concurrently listening to one of those policy webinars that have become all so come in the post-Covid era.

Now most of what is said in these virtual gatherings fails to stir my imagination, even if it stems out of speakers' subconsciously driven idiosyncrasies. But during this fine Thursday evening, something was said that made me pay attention. One of the webinar speakers, who perhaps fittingly was a retired civil servant, started his address by: "Since Pakistan is a rural country that relies on agriculture..." His comment was more ironic given that I at the time was working on a research paper precisely targeted at addressing the persistent misconception that Pakistan still is a rural country with an agrarian economy.

The reason why I narrated the above story is to allude to the often offhand manner in which people, even those closely aligned to research and policy circles, like to make loaded statements that often either oversimplify complicated issues, or – worse – paint a totally different picture altogether.

The contention that Pakistan is predominantly a 'rural' country is one such blanket statement that skews the actual picture. It is indeed true that if one was to believe census results, nearly two-thirds of the population lives in areas that have the designated 'rural' label. But if one were to observe the key social and economic indicators of these rural areas, it becomes clear that these areas have vibrant economies and do not fit the picture of pastoral abodes that one often associates with rural areas.

Before delving into meticulous analysis of Pakistan's rural areas, it is important to point out that the percentage of rural population on the whole has been steadily declining over the past several decades with the country having one of the highest urbanization rates in the region. Furthermore, the agriculture sector, the sector one most frequently associates with rural areas, now contributes less than 20 per cent to the annual GDP.

The point is that key economic indicators indicate that the areas designated 'rural' in Pakistan are far from being typical bucolic habitats and instead have vibrant and diverse regional and local economies. It is indeed true that nearly half the working population in these areas is involved in the agriculture industry, but this percentage has also come down by almost seven percentage points in the past decade and a half.

At the household level, about two-thirds of all household income comes from sources that are not directly related to agriculture. This shrinking of the share of agriculture at individual, household and macro levels is uncontestable. Having said that, what remains to be answered are the reasons behind this shift in addition to the typical low returns to agriculture reflected in the agriculture industry having the lowest average wage even in

rural areas.

Additionally, if one were to complement the income figures with household expenditure trends, another set of important observations become conspicuous. Contrary to many mythical concoctions of casual policy commentators, households on average in the rural areas in Pakistan spend more than half their incomes on non-food items. This is true even for the bottom 20 per cent – the poorest of households.

All the above evidence, which to be honest is just a set of basic descriptive statistics and not some convoluted rocket-science, indicates that the rural milieu in Pakistan is changing rapidly. Given the scenario, it is of paramount significance that whenever we hear simplistic offhanded comments on the plight of rural Pakistan, we should call such commentary out immediately.

There is an imminent need to reimagine our epistemic understanding of rural areas with particular regard to our biases that have been etched over time. For instance, why is it that we only have the dichotomous category of rural-urban when it comes to census taking and surveying? What about the suburban areas that many informed analysts now believe make up a significant chunk of the total area in the country?

But saying that creating new categories for counting purposes would solve the issue is also misleading. The undeniable fact one that needs to confront, despite our inclinations to stereotype, is that the rural areas in Pakistan have changed and continue to undergo change at an unprecedented rate. And it is about time we stopped making unfounded claims that unknowingly relegate, foremost in our urban-centric minds, a major chunk of our population to inhabitants of uninteresting, monolithic abodes that do not add value to our economic and social advancement.

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