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Do Cities offer a Better Alternative?

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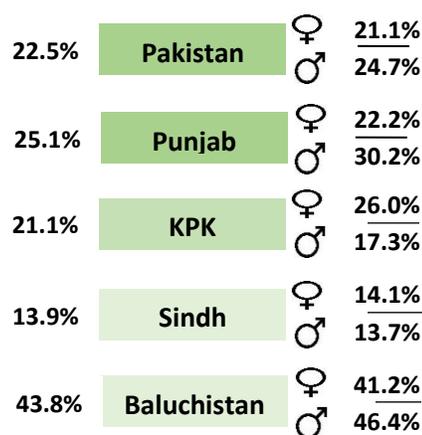
Pakistan's Urbanization Experience

In recent times, Pakistan, as is the case with several countries having disproportionately large and developed urban centers, compared to their proximal rural counterparts, has witnessed messy and hidden³ urbanization that has accelerated at a rapid pace. Owing to poverty of the data ecosystem, especially at the district-level, numeric evidence to back claims on such social and demographic transformations is either not available or available with questionable authenticity. However, with cities expanding and rural livelihoods like farming and agriculture facing an imminent decline, the rural-urban migration phenomenon has become a visible and therefore an undeniable reality.

The cities offer better social infrastructure through relatively improved schooling and health facilities, however, the absence of income opportunities, especially for new settlers neutralizes such an advantage. The lack of affordable education and health in the cities whose agency is mostly concentrated in the private enterprise offsets any income gains that the cities may offer, albeit only to migrants that are proficient in a certain skill, for others, the income gains may not be present either.

For those migrants who own property in their village/town, comparative housing in the cities is either not affordable or not comparable to the space and comfort that their village housing provides, which effectively deteriorates their standard of living. This is an interesting argument since the rise in the housing or rental prices in the cities is itself caused by such migration while it may also disincentivize such migration by making housing unaffordable.

Figure 1
Rural-Urban Migration
2014-15



Source: Labor Force Survey 2014-15

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³ See World Bank Report on Messy and Hidden Urbanization".

According to some sources, more than half of rural households are landless and therefore migration to the cities for such rural inhabitants is an even larger burden than those who possess some rural landholding. Even still for families that do have some landholding in the village, the higher rental costs in the cities may result in the deterioration of their standard of living amongst other problems that such migration would cause to the natives of the cities who are already pressed for availability of water, health, education and housing spaces.

Pull and Push Factors

The search for higher incomes is one key factor that pushes rural peoples to the cities. People from the small villages and towns migrate to large cities in hope for better employment and for safe and secure future of their families. Figure 1 presents 2014-15 rural-urban migration data for Pakistan. According to the Labor Force Survey of Pakistan, 22.5% of the total population of Pakistan has migrated to the urban centers. In Punjab, 25.1% of the rural population has migrated whereas for KPK, Sindh and Baluchistan, the number is 21.1%, 13.9% and 43.8%, respectively. As per the 2017 census, 75 million people live in urban areas. Ten major cities of Pakistan constitute 54% of the urban population of the country. Amongst other consequences, one worrying result of such a transformation is the development of expanding urban slums characterized with poor living conditions, environmental pollution, health hazards, contaminated drinking water, etc.

The SDGs Phenomenon

Sustainable Development Goal 11 on ‘making cities and human settlements, inclusive safe, resilient, and sustainable’ addresses some of the challenges that urbanization brings especially those pertaining to how population pressure in the cities could cause environmental and health hazards due to lack of access to clean drinking water, development of slums that are disease and poverty ridden and excess release of carbon in the atmosphere - primarily a product of more cars on the road and traffic congestions. The environment being a shared commodity, the ravages of such excesses may also impact the rural environment.

The first target of goal 11 seeks to ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and upgrade slums”. Pakistan is a signatory to SDGs and is working towards mainstreaming, acceleration and localization of SDGs through joint efforts of the UNDP that is working with the provincial governments in all provinces to bring home the SDGs agenda alongwith its 244 indicators and 169 targets, part of which is goal 11 and its targets and indicators.

The internationality of SDGs implies that Pakistan would strive to achieve them if not for the development and welfare of its citizenry but to project a progressive image of itself in the international community. This may provide it the incentive to resolve issues that continue to arise vis-a-vis urbanization, its contributing factors and its socio-economic and environmental repercussions.

Population Pressures: The Case of Lahore

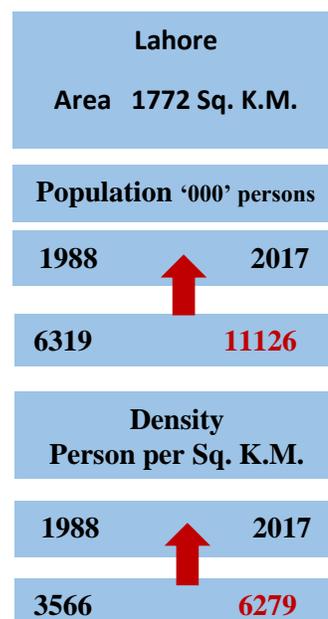
The increasing rate of urbanization is evident through the immense expansion in large urban centers of the country like Lahore, Islamabad and Karachi⁴. In Figure 2, comparison of population statistics of Lahore for years 1988 and 2017 present a clear picture of the unsustainable increase in urban population.

The city's population has shown an increase of 76.08% whereas other major cities of Punjab have seen their populations increase by 50.76%, 45.01%, 47.43%, 52.23%, 60.69%, 36.60% and 38.92% for Bahawalpur, Faisalabad, Gujranwala, Multan, Rawalpindi, Sahiwal and Sargodha, respectively.⁵ This sharp increase in population of Lahore has its roots in the rising rate of rural-urban migration in excess of the natural rate of population increase.⁶

Conclusion

The idea of a commuter city that is in close proximity to an urban center, enough to enable its residents to access the health, education and employment opportunities usually available in an urban setting but while doing so, manage to reside in a commuter city or a village-like setting is not only workable but also quite fascinating and effective for a country like Pakistan where the large strips of unused suburban to develop such communities is available around all major cities. The idea is workable and effective because it puts a lesser burden on the housing resources of the cities thereby controlling traffic congestions and escalation of housing prices, while also putting breaks on the rapid development of disease and poverty-ridden slums in the cities. The government should

Figure 2



Source: Punjab Development Statistics 2017

⁴ Lahore, situated in the province of Punjab is the second largest metropolitan city after Karachi. Islamabad lies up north of Punjab and is the capital city of Pakistan.

⁵ Data from Punjab Development Statistics, 2017. This data is published on an annual basis by the Bureau of Statistics, Government of the Punjab.

⁶ The difference between birth and death rates.

follow plans that look at the migrants and inhabitants of the cities with the same lens implying that the interests of neither of the two parties are compromised to ensure larger protection for the other. A policy framework that is inclusive and participatory from the perspective of protecting the health and environmental interests of the inhabitants of the cities while also ensuring that the economic interests of the those that are forced or incentivized to migrate be also protected. The residents of the smaller towns, cities and villages that are in close proximity to a larger city must either have a productive employment opportunity in their own village or community or if that can not the case, which it clearly isn't for a large part of the rural population, then an efficient transport system should support daily commute for city workers that reside in a nearby small city, town or rural village. In due course, the governments will have to mark and designate some cities as suburban that connect with a larger city and invest in providing basic infrastructure to disincentivize casual migration.⁷

References:

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Labor Force Survey 2014-15, Government of Pakistan

Punjab Development Statistics 2017, Government of Punjab

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) National Framework, Government of Pakistan

<https://dailytimes.com.pk/131048/lahore-city-slums-shanties/>

<http://www.lead.org.pk/lead/postDetail.aspx?postid=326>

⁷ Migration when it is not absolutely necessary for the migrant's survival. It is done to explore if the perception that cities provide especially with regards to higher incomes is true or not.