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**Research Report**

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# Urban Governance and Pandemic Response: Elite Capture, Local Capacity Deficits, and the Smart Lockdown Strategy in Pakistan's Cities

*Asad Ejaz Butt<sup>1</sup>*

## **Abstract**

Pakistan's urban centers, which generate 55% of the country's GDP and house 36% of its population, have become overcrowded and underresourced due to decades of misguided development policies and massive rural-to-urban migration driven by wage disparities and declining agricultural productivity. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the systemic cracks in urban governance, particularly the elite capture of state resources that prioritized economic activity over public health, and the capacity deficits of local governments that have been systematically weakened by provincial and federal governments. While the smart lockdown strategy demonstrated the potential of localized, data-driven governance to control disease spread while maintaining economic activity, it also revealed the heavy dependence of local governments on provincial and federal support for even basic administrative functions. This chapter argues that Pakistan's urban crisis stems fundamentally from incomplete devolution following the 18th Constitutional Amendment, the lack of continuity in local government institutions, and the absence of evidence-based policymaking due to severe data poverty at the district level. Without strengthening local government capacity, activating provincial finance commissions, and shifting from elite-driven infrastructure development to inclusive service delivery, Pakistan's cities will remain ill-prepared to handle future crises.

## **Introduction**

Pakistan's cities are not large, they are massive. Nearly one in every five people lives in one of the 10 large cities. These cities have expanded in all directions with little regard to planning and clearly with even lesser regard to the services that they can deliver to their citizens. The Government's response to the emerging challenges in the cities has been lackluster. The systemic cracks in the cities have widened during the pandemic that has not only exposed the capacity and functioning of the government but also brought back to the fore the debate about cities.

Pakistan's rural settlements have done well to catch up with the cities. Barring a few cities in Baluchistan that continue to remain backward in terms of their performance on various human development indicators, and some in Sindh where water scarcity and waste management remain unresolved issues, Pakistan's cities have generally improved. The incidence of a catch-up therefore implies that not only have cities improved but also their rural counterparts. Almost all of Punjab's rural villages and small towns are now electrified, and if electrification is some guide, we have done well to make development happen. And if one takes air quality as a measure, there would be little reason why someone would migrate from one of Pakistan's rural areas to one of its 10 large cities.

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The case of other South Asian cities, Delhi, Dhaka and Colombo, is not very different. Urban sprawl and haphazard development have resulted in growth of slums which are a major cause of pollution, disease, poverty and congestion in these cities. These development problems have a universal presence in South Asian cities. Apart from a better livelihood and slightly higher incomes that cities provide to a select few, they don't really seem to offer much else in terms of quality of life. If cities have nothing exclusive to offer, why is Pakistan's urban population, according to several reports by the UNFPA, expected to rise to 50% of the country's total population? It currently stands at around 36% of a population of nearly 220 million people. That makes it roughly about 80 million, which is more than twice the entire population of Canada and around 20% higher than the populations of UK and France.

Urban population generates around 55% of Pakistan's GDP<sup>1</sup>, employs nearly 21% of the labor force and is home to 36% of the population. On the contrary, the rural areas host 64% of the population and generate only 45% of the GDP. Their share in the labor force is even more striking at 79%. These statistics point to the relative productivities of the rural and urban areas and to the variance in the level of wages that are being paid to urban workers in comparison to their rural counterparts. This has incentivized internal migration, a phenomenon that is crippling cities by pressing on meager resources and making resource planning ever more difficult for city governments. Social development facilities in the cities—hospitals, schools and sanitation and hygiene centers—have not developed at the same pace at which population has risen in almost all of Pakistan's large cities.

### **Market Failure in the Cities**

The gaps between the demand and supply of public services in the cities have caused severe market failures, and there is little realization amongst planners and policy-makers that the governance problem they face in the cities exists because of market failure. The market failure in the cities is also caused by the unplanned development of public goods and the inability of the government to develop and enforce a pricing mechanism around them. A large part of the provincial budget in Punjab is spent on developing infrastructure, more specifically roads and overhead bridges. Most of this infrastructure has been developed without estimating the return on investment it would provide. Governments have continued to invest in urban infrastructure primarily to accommodate the increasing demands of an exponentially rising urban population. The political economy of infrastructure development also works out well for the populist political regimes that use the visible manifestations of development to their electoral advantage. Despite the workings of political economy in the background, there is every reason to believe that the increase in population is the main driving force behind the urge to develop urban infrastructure.

### **Messy and Hidden Urbanization**

The World Bank published a report<sup>2</sup> in 2016 in which it claimed that the urbanization taking place in South Asia is messy and hidden. It estimated that the population of South Asia is expected to rise by 250 million in the next 15 years after rising nearly 130 million between 2001 and 2011. The report postulated that this massive urbanization would contribute immensely to economic growth. In 2016, when this report was published, an estimated 23 percent of the world population and 14 percent of the world's urban population

lived in South Asia. If urbanization is considered a menace, things have not gotten better in the last four years. Cities are expanding at the expense of development and growth of rural livelihoods, which may also have severe repercussions for food and water security. Recurring wheat and sugar crises indicate that food security will further dampen as the traditional farmer quits the farming business to give in to declining incomes, demographic pressures and the visible rural-urban development disparities.

### **The Urban-Elite Phenomenon**

The pandemic became a great economic equalizer. In most underdeveloped regions, Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, those ridden by diseases like Cholera, Malaria, Typhoid and Polio are the poor and the dispossessed. These diseases were rooted out from the western developed world in the 70s and the 80s. The urban elite of the developing world, who possess unlimited power, authority and wealth, often escape the social, political and economic tragedies that regularly befall these regions. The dynamics of COVID-19, however, meant that this caveat would be overturned to make those with more possessions the greatest victims of the disease. Urban areas are ripe with economic activity whose discontinuation to control the spread of the disease implied large economic losses. The greater your fortune, the higher the opportunity cost to pause activity.

An analysis of the governance reforms applied in Pakistan yields that there is an incidence of capture of the state by elite interests, which is a major cause of corruption in the public sector. The elite capture of the state became ever more pronounced during the pandemic when economic considerations visibly overtook health and safety considerations, resulting in a premature reopening of markets. Economic activity had stalled during the pandemic and despite Rs. 144 billion cash transfer by the government under the Ehsas programme, the economic impacts of COVID-19 could not be fully reversed. Inflation was at an all-time high in January 2020<sup>3</sup>, a month before the pandemic hit Pakistan. The purchasing power of the consumer was already on the decline. That, coupled with rising unemployment and closure of markets, carved a critical role for the government that it had to play to steer the economy out of crisis. However, the task before the government was much larger than one that could be afforded by its resource envelope. It was therefore left with only two options: to go back to the international donors, which it did eventually, or to give in to the rising pressure from the urban economic elite who wanted an immediate resumption of economic activity, even at the cost of lives that were in danger of being lost to the widespread pandemic.

### **Rural Development: Misconceptions and Realities**

The false conception of rural development is to make development interventions that convert rural settlements into urban or peri-urban settlements. Bestowing urban characteristics to rural areas is not rural development. It is in fact the classic definition of urbanization, which over the years has come to be confused with rural-urban migration. Many articles and studies on urbanization tend to confuse rural-urban migration and urbanization, which amongst other things masquerades the structural and demographic transition that is taking place. Some demographers may, of course, understand the subtle difference between the two phenomena, but many papers in development economics use

the terms interchangeably, which is an incorrect basis for analyzing the demographic transition.

When Arthur Lewis, a renowned development economist, presented his 'two-sector model' in 1954, the developing economies of sub-Saharan Africa, fascinated by Lewis' propositions, thought that his ideas were the solution to Africa's labor absorption issues since the surplus labor with low skills and productivity could now be directed to the limited urban and peri-urban settlements they had to provide productive employment to these people and also ensure that some level of industry develops in their urban centers. This did not happen and there are several reasons why Lewis' ideas, though a breakthrough at the time, could not materialize into better development for Africa. One of the criticisms that later emerged on the Lewis model was that it ignored the impacts of importing the surplus rural labor into the modern urban industrial sector.

Despite implementation of many rural support programmes, Pakistan's experience with rural development has not been a successful one. Governments misinterpreted rural development and began investing in infrastructure that gave urban characteristics to rural areas. The nature of rural development that should have taken place was to progress while staying within the course of enhancing the rural characteristics of the rural areas. The progress therefore should have been toward the restoration and strengthening of the rural identity while ensuring that advancements in various fields of technology take place. What really harmed the government's cause in the rural areas was that those rural areas that received attention of the planner and policy-makers turned into urban or peri-urban settlements, while those that did not retained their rural structure but failed to 'improve the quality of life' or the 'economic well-being of people.' This neglect therefore prevented any real sense of rural development taking place. The lack of rural development created half-baked cities ill-prepared to manage crises while also leaving underdeveloped rural areas to incentivize migration into the developed cities, which have become increasingly overcrowded and underresourced.

### **Structural Transformation: The Decimation of Agriculture**

At the turn of the century in 2000, agriculture contributed around 27% to Pakistan's GDP. Ten years later in 2010, that number had dropped quite significantly to 22%, while most recently in 2020, agriculture's share to GDP had further slumped to 19.3% of the GDP. There can be several explanations for this including the decrease in labor supply to the sector, the declining productivities of the traditional seed varieties, lack of availability of water, low adoption of modern high-tech agri technologies and the massive growth in the services sector that has taken a larger share of the growth in GDP than agriculture or industry. Innumerable studies have documented these problems and since agriculture still remains a focus, not primarily for its great share in the country's production but because of a very large part of the labor force that it employs, the country is still regarded to be agrarian and therefore the sector attracts a lot of interest from planners, policy makers and academics.

Labor force participation rates are surprisingly very similar across rural and urban areas. For all ages above 10, the rural labor force participation rate is 57.26%, comprising a rate of 69.05% for males and 45.57% for females. In the urban setting, the labor force

participation rate, slightly lower than rural, stands at 42.48%: 66.73% for males and 16.74% for females.

The growth in the services sector, it seems, has taken a larger share from agriculture compared to industry. The higher labor force participation rates with a lower share in the aggregate production points to the incidence of lower labor productivity in the rural areas. That is one factor that explains the rural-urban wage and income gaps. The other, of course, is the lack of technological advancements in the agriculture and farm-sector, which has disabled the leveraging of the skills of the farmer to make higher revenues from the available technical and financial resources. The rural-urban wage and income gaps are the primary reason why families engaged in the farming business quit their trade to migrate to the urban areas that are now becoming the epicenter of death, disease and poverty. Evidence shows that the standard of living of many such families, who live in much smaller homes in the cities, get less food to eat given the urban food inflation and are exposed to a range of novel diseases prevalent in the cities, has deteriorated post-migration.

### **Urban Governance: Vulnerability to Disease, Death and Poverty**

The pandemic exposed quite bitterly the cracks prevalent in the way Pakistan's urban agglomeration economy is structured. There is a large retail service industry that thrives on the physical interaction between the consumer and the entrepreneur in a physical marketplace. This is an arrangement that is quite poorly placed to control the transmission of the virus.

According to a brief published by the UN, 90% of all COVID cases around the world have originated in the cities. Urban areas worldwide have become the epicenter of the pandemic. The large size of the population and the interconnectivity with other cities and international destinations make urban areas extremely vulnerable to pandemics. Add to that the development deficits in the cities, most particularly lack of access to quality and affordable healthcare and housing, which exacerbate the vulnerabilities of cities to hazards such as natural disasters and pandemics.

What makes an urban setting urban is a good starter to understand why urban areas became the epicenter of the virus and why cities like London, Paris, New York, Delhi and Karachi may return to host the virus as they make their dangerous return to normalcy. Large cities everywhere around the world have three characteristics: a large public transport system, physical markets where businesses meet their potential customers and high-rise residential and commercial buildings. These also include industrial units in the suburban localities that bring into the urban areas agglomeration or external economies. Another characteristic of large cities is the influx of immigrants from smaller cities or rural areas that bring social, religious and ethnic diversity, which has made large cities the polyglots that they have now become.

The defining characteristics of all large cities make them vulnerable to congestion and cohabitation. Markets that are the backbone of the urban economy, urban housing that accommodates the massive influx of people coming into cities in search of jobs and the public transport system, all congest people in closed environments suited perfectly for the unfettered spread of disease, especially communicable diseases like pandemics. Not only

do such characteristics of cities make them vulnerable to the spread of communicable diseases but also the fact that cities generate nearly 55% of the country's GDP makes it even harder for economies like Pakistan to take the difficult decision of closing them down. Since cities also host around 36% of the total population, there is an explanation for why cities became the epicenter of the virus and why the agglomeration effects that make urban economies productive have become the nemesis of the cities during the pandemic.

Life in Pakistan's urban centers is not very simple to understand. In this respect, Karachi is a great example. It is a city of more than 15 million people. A huge number of people migrated not only from different parts of India at the time of partition but from literally everywhere across the rest of the country. This gave the city a desirable, yet impossible to manage mix of religious, social, cultural and ethnic identities. The claims of the divergent identities became difficult to accommodate under one representative state narrative, which gave rise to divisive politics that was often not expressed in the most non-violent of forms. The ensuing law and order situation in the city reflected badly on the city's economy. Despite being a metropolis, it could not maximize the potential that it had due to its proximity to lucrative sea trade routes. Albeit at varying scales, the situation in Lahore and some other smaller cities like Peshawar is not much different. The successive governments have failed to maintain peace in Karachi and ensure that the business community is able to operate in a supportive and congenial environment.

Service delivery is a great concern in the urban areas. Service delivery institutions of the government, barring the mobile telecommunications industry, continue to remain under the control of the public sector. Postal and railway services are owned and operated by the government, while other services like the printing of national identity cards and issuance of passports also remain fully under government control and supervision. Service delivery in health and education remain an even larger concern with the government spending in health still around 1% of GDP, while that of education, after significant improvement, has surpassed 3% of the GDP. Private educational institutions and healthcare centers have grown tremendously over the last two decades, which has given a unique dynamic to these two industries. Quality has improved even though there is room for further improvement since doctors working in the corporate sector are mostly trained in teaching hospitals and universities of the public sector.

### **Smart Lockdown: Addressing the Pandemic**

The Government of Pakistan in June 2020 decided to impose a systematic lockdown with areas demarcated for closure based on the incidence of the virus. The approach, an estrangement from the policy of locking down entire cities, focused on identifying the epicenters of the virus within the city. This brought cities into the focus of the pandemic planning and, as expected, it yielded excellent results. This is exactly why governance best happens when power, authority and decision-making are devolved and decentralized. Policies must be made at the local level and by imaging the impacts that they would have on the local communities. Locking down cities in a systematic manner implied that the local community and governors in the cities would be taken on board to decide what areas have the highest incidence of the pandemic while deciding which ones should remain open, especially those markets upon which the economy depends. Those could remain open for

certain hours during the day. This brought planning and governance from the provincial to the local level, thereby reducing the distance between those making the policies and those being affected by them. 'Smart lockdown' was a city governance model based on principles of local governance and it was able to serve both ends of ensuring some level of economic activity and controlling the widespread of the virus.

The international community, according to an article published in *The News*<sup>4</sup>, is mulling over the likely causes of the rebound in Pakistan's COVID cases. All COVID indicators, including incidence of the disease measured in terms of total number of infected patients, daily reported cases, the number of deaths or number of patients requiring hospital care, all began to decline. This was right after a huge spike that occurred starting the last week of May soon after the country celebrated Eid-ul Fitr, the largest festival of the year that brings millions of people together. The government was implementing something it called the 'Systematic lockdown' prior to Eid, which was later reoriented and dubbed 'Smart Lockdown'. As part of the exercise, the local governments locked down areas where a certain number of cases were identified, provided residents with food, health and other utilities at their doorstep. Quarantine facilities were also provided while synergies with the local law enforcement agencies were ensured to cordon off areas. By mid-June, cases began to decline all of a sudden and by mid-July, Pakistan was making a speedy recovery. In August, many commentators had termed Pakistan 'COVID-free' since new reported cases had dropped to levels below 150 from somewhat around 20,000 reported cases per day in May. Smart lockdowns, especially in the larger cities, were implemented by the provincial governments and in Islamabad by the help of the federal government. The early success of the program provides evidence on the impact that good governance and enhancement of capacity of local governments can create. Smart lockdown also exposed the indigenous capacity of local governments who had to rely quite heavily on the provincial and federal aid to perform the simple task of locking people down in their vicinity and providing necessary supplies for their sustenance.

## **Summary**

Pakistan's urban challenges—exposed dramatically by the COVID-19 pandemic—stem from decades of misguided development policies that prioritized urban infrastructure expansion over comprehensive planning and service delivery. The massive rural-to-urban migration, driven by wage disparities and declining agricultural productivity, has created overcrowded cities ill-equipped to handle crises. While the smart lockdown strategy demonstrated the potential of localized governance, it also revealed the fundamental weakness of Pakistan's local government institutions, which lack the financial resources, technical capacity, and political continuity necessary for effective administration. The urban elite's capture of state resources and policy decisions has exacerbated inequalities and compromised public health responses. Moving forward, Pakistan must complete the devolution process initiated by the 18th Constitutional Amendment, strengthen local government capacity, improve data collection for evidence-based policymaking, and shift from elite-driven infrastructure projects to inclusive service delivery that addresses the needs of all urban residents.



## **Conclusion**

The Government of Punjab recently inaugurated the Ravi Riverfront Urban Development Project and made an exclusive authority to deliver the mandate of the project. Under the project, the government will develop residential and commercial infrastructure along the embankment of the Ravi River near Lahore. Apart from developing the uninhabited and uncultivated lands along the Ravi, the government also seeks to use this space as a strategic buffer for the city of Lahore, which is now accommodating people over its infrastructural, industrial, economic and food production capacity.

For several years now, economists and demographers have proposed the commuter city model followed around the world as a solution to Pakistan's urban problems. Lahore, a city of around 15 million, does not have a single commuter city. Those who work in Lahore have to reside in Lahore. The Government's response to this has been to develop cities further, giving rise to the existing disparities between rural and urban centers, thereby attracting more rural-urban migration. The policies of providing livelihoods to rural workers or making development happen in the rural areas could have been two policies that the government should have followed to arrest the rapid pace of rural-urban migration. But instead, it followed the idea of developing urban areas as centers of economic growth and development. In the 10 years between 2008 and 2018, the Muslim League government in Punjab, a right-of-center party, developed infrastructure through external financing from friendly countries like Turkey and China.

The most critical issues that developing states around the world face regard their capacity. The deficiencies in state capacity manifest strongly in times of crises. Cities that are overcrowded and underresourced like Lahore and Karachi become ideal hosts to natural disasters and crises. Their response is generally weak, slow to arrive and mistargeted. State capacity is heavily dependent on the quality of institutions. Local governments in Pakistan do not possess the requisite capacity. They have been used by the military regimes to gain some political strength and legitimacy and during political governments when alternate grassroots political leadership was otherwise available, electoral colleges at the local level were dismantled and local governments were discontinued. There is a continuing debate about the capacity of local governments in the post-18th Amendment scenario. The devolution from the federal to the provinces was only the first step of the process; however, devolution demanded a further transfer of power to the districts. This discussion often boils down to just financial resources and the provincial finance commissions awards. The PFC has been instituted in the provinces but its implementation, unlike the NFC, has not really taken pace.

The real issue in my opinion is not financial capacity of the provinces, which in its own right is a constraint, but the real issue is the lack of continuity of local (district) governments. Unless there is continuity, the political and social organization which is at the heart of development will not really develop at the local level. The local governments are the first point of contact for the public and the most critical unit when it comes to efficient and effective delivery of services to the public. This role is magnified during crisis situations like the pandemic. The current pandemic really tested the capacity of the local governments and also of the provinces that seemed to look helplessly towards the federal government for policy and institutional support.

The pandemic not only brought the cities back into the mainstream but also shook the governments that were slow to respond to the changing needs of the cities. It also justified the need to take the focus of governance to the cities, which must be the primary unit at which governance and administration should take place. The way governments in the provinces and the center conceptualize and look at the cities needs to be immediately revisited. Cities are not mere geographical divisions of the provinces that have identity, autonomy and administrative authorities, some of which they generously devolve to the regional or local administration. The federalism that Pakistan plans to transition towards requires governance to take place primarily at the local level. Local and city administration is not only better positioned to take critical administrative decisions but is also in a better position to deal with natural disasters, pandemics and other catastrophes. Therefore, the first support that should come must come from the cities' own administrative infrastructure. Given this background, the capacity of the cities to deal with disasters is the most critical resource that a government may possess. The current administrative system lacks both financial and human resource capacity and as such is an inadequate force to deal with modern threats like climate change, waste management, terrorism and pandemics. The ACs and DCs who head the existing institutional structure at the tehsils and the districts do not have the capacity to deal with such contingencies and therefore require support from the provincial and federal governments, which we have seen in the case of COVID-19 emergency, is often slow to come. Thus, this results in huge loss of lives and livelihoods.

### **Policy and Program Recommendations**

- The development of cities cannot be achieved without incorporating the bottom-up approaches to development. Devolution of administrative and financial powers that had to be brought into motion through the implementation of the 18th Amendment to the constitution of Pakistan only happened to the extent of the abolition of the concurrent list that transferred some subjects to the provinces. The process of devolution would remain incomplete until the capacity of local governments is enhanced to undertake broad-based reforms and provide end-to-end solutions to all development problems.
- Cities lack the capacity to deal with the problems of the modern world. Sophisticated problems require sophisticated solutions. Cities today are complex webs of interconnected activities and networks that have to be dealt with through systems and technologies that operate at a high level of sophistication. Modern-day threats like climate change, terrorism and pandemics have to be dealt with through advancements in climate control, security and health management systems.
- The large cosmopolitan cities have become increasingly multicultural and multi-ethnic. While diversity is an asset, governing cities requires accommodating the divergent claims of cultures, as Seyla Benhabib, the renowned social anthropologist, would put it. The traditional modes of governance that take place through the Commissionary system have become incompatible with modern-day requirements of new public management (NPM).
- The government is promising to reform the civil service along the lines of recommendations made by the institutional reforms committee headed by the eminent Dr. Ishrat Husain. There is little, however, that the committee is planning to change at

the local level. The focus on the structural changes in the Federal Government would not help the cause of cities, which are seriously lacking ownership and control.

- The availability of district-level socio-economic data is extremely low. There is some agri-data available at the district level but other than that the provincial statistics departments do not have the capacity to collect and report data that could inform policy formulation and implementation. The provinces publish a development report titled development statistics, but that in Punjab included only 38 of the 244 data indicators included in the SDGs. None of that data ventured into the cities, which meant that the majority of the implementation works that takes place in the cities lacks evidence. The policy deficits and failures that one sees with regards to the cities is a product of data poverty that is prevalent even amongst the most developed and advanced cities of Pakistan.
- Provincial finance commissions (PFCs) must be activated and provided with the necessary equipment and technical support to make efficient allocations based on modern techniques like the medium-term budgetary framework. The PFC secretariats in the provincial finance departments are dysfunctional and have to be activated to ensure that the financial capacity of the districts is enhanced.

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