**National urban policy**

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Pakistan desperately needs urban planning, the lack of which can lead to the worst scenario of regional disparity. Ever since the creation of Pakistan, regional disparity has been a serious issue, and has even led to the separation of its eastern wing.

Even though we could have learnt lessons from our past mistakes, the debate on regional disparity has always been ignored. Successive governments have been boosting the economy by launching multiple fiscal and monetary policies, but they have failed to achieve the desired results.

The term ‘disparity’ highlights a discomforting scenario. It is defined as lopsided development or the unequal distribution of opportunities, resources and facilities among people. This widens the gap between regions and the socio-economic fabric of people, leading to unrest and frustration.

Time and again, policies related to rupee devaluation, interest rates, tax reforms didn’t succeed in rearing benefits for the health of the economy. One of the most promising factors that has been overlooked is the formulation of laws related to spatial or urban planning, which addresses the equitable and informed distribution of resources.

Investment decisions for the various sectors of urban development are randomly selected and are mostly influenced by political motives. Cities are the hub of innovation, liveability, diversity, culture and economic development, but if not adequately administered, they may plunge into chaos. Inclusion of planning laws in an hierarchical manner could create liveable cities that are economically viable, technologically advanced and sustainable.

Regional disparities usually occur in the absence of guidelines or comprehensive laws. In such a scenario, investment decisions are also uniform and not comparable to the requirements of the region. This increases the gap between the population and its resources, negatively affecting an area’s standard of living.

Cities and towns are the cohort for factors of production that put the economy in the take-off stage. Urban areas help a country compete in the global economy by making the best use of land, attracting capital, taking sane investment decisions, providing skilled and division of labour, promoting entrepreneurship, and generating revenue through industry, trade and tourism.

A comprehensive national urban policy (NUP) catering to the regions under its canopy is likely to ensure the development of all regions at a comparable pace. It helps identify the regions that are short of facilities and municipal services and aims at addressing other macro-level issues like environmental impacts, increasing the resilience of cities to natural disasters, and protecting their people from the effects of climatic change.

It remains central to translating decisions into actions that can achieve tangible and positive changes. During the development of an NUP, an implementation plan should be produced, which must delegate responsibilities to all tiers of government and specify the role of civil society and the private sector and academia. This plan must be assisted with a monitoring plan to track the outcomes of the process.

National policy objectives are further translated into regional plans that deal with efficient placement of land use activities and related infrastructure. One of the most distinct features of regional plans is that these are the basis for identification of establishing connectivity among facilities. For instance, high-order facilities like tertiary-care hospitals could be more accessible for people from far areas to connect readily in the case of highly connected means of transportation is there.

Consequently, at the regional level, efficient and well-built roads and public transportation services affect access to jobs, education, and healthcare opportunities. Improved public transportation services are particularly important for people who are unable to afford or drive their private vehicles, such as members of low-income households, children, individuals with disabilities, and senior citizens.

Land use like the protection of farm and agricultural lands, industrial spaces, transportation hubs, heritage or cultural heritage and tourist destination preservation and uplift are benefitted under regional plans. These plans are an answer to regional disparities. They address region-wide environmental, social and economic issues which may necessarily require a regional focus. Similarly, in the case of the prioritisation of roads or other infrastructure facilities like identification of disposal sites for solid waste, regional plans are the most promising document.

The next in the hierarchy of an NUP fall development authorities for metropolitan cities. Each successive category of a city or town must have an integrated planning mechanism. In the hierarchical system of cities, where large metropolitan cities generally lead the country’s economic growth by harbouring the most innovative and dynamic economic activities, regional centres and medium-sized cities provide support to their respective regions, and small towns make the linkage with their rural hinterlands. This helps in making corrective policies for the population and the economic distribution of resources and development projects. For instance, master plans that are conventionally made, independent of any overall policy, should be made in line with a national policy with no discrepancies.

Planning laws and their appropriate implementation curb waste of funds in non-productive channels and initiate development where it is needed. Also, investing in infrastructure gives boost to productivity and the investment process. The cycle of income and employment gains momentum by the injection of finances in service delivery and infrastructure.

In addition, human capital and its capacity also hold an important place in the implementation mechanism. It is obvious that whatever set of laws we make and however we invest, we always need manpower to make tasks operational.

The haphazard sprawl of conurbations gives rise to the development of clusters of urban mess. These messy areas become a hub of crime, a breeding ground for diseases, and an example of social and physical degradation of standard of living. The law must address this issue by limiting the role of local governments over decision-making related to land use in the local government system and determine their consistency with national guidelines; metropolitan-area-wide control of land use decisions and state regulations of local land use and the prohibition of specific zoning practices.

Pakistan needs urban planning reforms. The prerequisite is the formulation of a statutory system that has roots in our way of living and circumstances. It should not be a borrowed set of laws that is difficult to implement. The environment we have given to our children is not conducive to a decent way of living.

The country ought to come out of the shadows of ‘being underdeveloped’ and ‘having lack of resources’. It is time to redirect the thought process and formulate a comprehensive policy and channelize development through statutory measures and a well-thought-out implementation process. Otherwise, the contemporary trend will prove to be detrimental for our future generations.

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