

PIDE NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON CITIES AND URBAN ISSUES IN PAKISTAN

MANZOOR A. KHALIDI

PAF-Karachi Institute of Economics and Technology

E-mail: khalidi@pafkiet.edu.pk

“Cities are an enigma – overcrowding, soaring land prices, intense competition, traffic congestions, poor housing, poor sanitation, mounting social problems, deteriorating environment and rising crimes should push people and businesses away from the urban centers”.

This excerpt from the vision paper of PIDE conference of November 2006 appears to be a reflection of the state of affairs prevailing in Karachi until a few years ago – the city was going through its worst crisis which seemed to be worsening with the passage of time. But the city refused to die. A few businesses did move away, but the people instead of leaving, continued to pour in. The population of the city kept on increasing. The government was totally apathetic to the plight of the city dwellers of Karachi. Their philosophy was that if development funds were invested to improve the infrastructure of the city, it would increase the pace of intra-country migration and increase the pressure on the city. Their strategy was to freeze all development work in the city. Yet the city refused to die. This was the picture a few years ago. Things have changed since then.

The theme of this conference “Cities: The Engines of Growth”, is a reflection of the change in the thinking of the government towards the development of cities, in particular Karachi. The conference provided a forum bringing together researchers and stakeholders from a variety of backgrounds and experiences including architecture, urban planning, law, and urban economics. The participants also included the framers of the present local body system including General Tanvir Naqvi and Danial Aziz, as well as, some city Nazims who were there to share some of their thoughts and experiences regarding the governance structures under the new local Government Ordinance.

The themes of the conference included: the economy of cities; managing cities; including the poor; urbanization; culture and society; and management of mega/large cities under LGO. Two papers stood out as particularly provocative and enlightening:

Issues in Urban Planning by Arif Hassan: Arif Hassan, a disciple of Akhtar Hameed Khan who has been involved at grass root development discussed the basic principles of sustainable urban development and the inability of the present urban planners to follow them. At the heart of the problem is the inability of the planners and the urban middle class to see the urban poor who provide the bulk of the support services necessary for sustaining the urban system. He also presented some fascinating statistics about Karachi, for example, 60% of Karachi's population is below the age of 25 and this population segment has a literacy rate of 88% which reflects a significant value change that is taking place in Karachi.

Shelter for the Urban Poor by Tasneem Siddiqui: Tasneem Siddiqui, another disciple of Akhtar Hameed Khan presented the concept behind the success of the 'Khuda Ki Basti Project'. He began with some statistics regarding the ground realities of urban dwellers. The income distribution of the urban dwellers in Karachi is currently estimated as follows:

5%	Income above Rs.15,000 per month
15%	Rs.5,000 to Rs.15,000
60%	Rs.2000 to Rs.5000
15%	Rs.1000 to Rs.2000
5%	Living on charity

Around 55% of Karachi's population lives in Katchi Abadis, and the Khuda Ki Basti project was a novel idea which focused on this segment of the population. Khuda Ki Basti was also a revolutionary idea which broke all the rules of the conventional urban development paradigm. This generally envisages a period of over a decade from the allocation of plots to the construction of a majority of the houses and the area becoming inhabited. The conventional paradigm involved the sale/allocation of land, followed by the development of the infrastructure, followed by construction of houses on the plots of land, and finally the transfer of families to occupy the houses. Khuda Ki Basti was a revolutionary idea in the sense that instead of undertaking the four above noted activities in serial order, the project involved a parallel execution of all the four activities. The process involved the families coming to the site office and being allocated a plot of land and building material for the construction of temporary shelters. The families construct a temporary shelter and immediately move into the temporary shelter and gradually build their permanent houses. The infrastructure development continues in parallel, and until the infrastructure is developed the site management provides water and other facilities on a provisional basis. The success of the Khuda Ki Basti has been recognized globally, and also in Pakistan. Tasneem Siddiqui has now set up an NGO and is replicating the model in other areas of the country.

The grand-finale of the conference was the final session on 'the management of mega/large cities under the Local Government Ordinance' which was chaired by Danial Aziz and included three papers on some of the important aspects of the new local government system. The session was dominated by the session chairman himself who discussed some of the salient aspects of the new system, threats to the new system, and future plans. He also used the occasion to answer the critics of the local government

system and also to throw some dirt on his critics. The session also involved brief statements (they were not so brief and lasted 20 minutes each) by the Nazims of Quetta and Peshawar who shared their thoughts and experiences regarding the governance structures under the Local Government Ordinance.

The conference which was a personal initiative of Dr. Nadeem-ul-Haque, the new Director of PIDE shows a shift of direction in the focus of PIDE from the run of the mill theoretical economic issues to more applied problem solving. It is hoped that Dr. Nadeem-ul-Haque would provide the vision and the leadership to convert PIDE from a dull and drab government organization into a dynamic and progressive research based institution.