Peri -Urban 2016

Issue Brief -1

Key points

- In last 69 years, it was the first time that the census 2011 reported a higher absolute increase in urban population than in the rural areas.
- By 2050 almost three quarters of the world's population will live in cities and towns with most of this increase occurring in the developing countries
- Cities are expanding at the cost of peri urban areas. The expansion and the ensuing land-use changes destroys the periurban ecosystems, leading to a host of problems that very often have no solution in the short run.
- Existing conceptualisations of the peri-urban, in general, do not follow a consolidated approach that integrates historical and contemporary development processes, ecosystem dynamics, changing socio-economic and gender relationships

Conceptualising the Peri-Urban

The outward expansion of cities, gradual changes in land use and occupations have transformed the rural hinterland into semi-urban or 'peri-urban' areas. Inhabitants of these 'peri-urban' regions are increasingly threatened by a deteriorating quality of life prompted by deforestation, water depletion and pollution as well as by the poor or almost non-existent mechanisms for public service deliveries.

The Crisis of Urbanisation

India is going through a silent but sweeping change in terms of the composition of its population as well as land use patterns. For the first time since Independence in 1947, the National Population Census of 2011 reported a higher absolute increase in urban population than in the rural areas. The ruralurban distribution was 68.84 per cent and 31.16 per cent respectively in 2011. The level of urbanisation increased from 27.81 per cent in 2001 Census to 31.16 per cent in 2011 Census and the proportion of rural population declined correspondingly from 72.19 per cent in 2001 to 68.84 per cent in 2011 (Chandramouli, 2011). The annual urban population growth rate was 2.76 per cent, nearly the same as in (2.73 per cent) as reported in 2001. The urban population of India was 377 million with 31.16 per cent of the total population living in urban locations. The decadal urban population growth rate during 2001-2011 was 31.8 per cent, 1.8 times the combined urban and rural growth and 2.6 times the rural population growth. The number of towns rose from 5,161 in 2001 to 7,935 in 2011 adding 2,774 'new' towns (Chandramouli, 2011).

Rapid urbanisation is a global phenomenon. About 15 per cent of the world's population lived in urban areas when the 20th century began. By 2007 urban inhabitants surpassed rural

population globally. According to a recent UN estimate, by 2050 almost three quarters of the world's population will live in cities and towns with most of this increase occurring in the developing countries of the global south (United Nations, 2009)

This rapid urbanisation and the accompanying large influxes of rural populations as well as the spread of the urban into rural areas, has major implications for providing infrastructure and other civic amenities in urban areas (Bhagat, 2011; Ahluwalia, 2011; Kundu, 2011). The fast pace of residential and commercial development is replacing agriculture and other undeveloped land around them, severely impacting the ecosystems and the lives of the people dependent on them. Urbanization affects land changes through the transformation of urban-rural linkages. The problems of urban sprawl, loss of open vegetation and a general decline in environmental quality can be generally attributed to increasing population concentrating more people on less land even as the total land devoted to urbanization expands (Dutta, 2011). The expansion and the ensuing land-use change, destroys the ecosystems, leading to a host of problems that very often have no solution in the short run. These impacts are acerbated by archaic policies that do not go beyond considering the differences between the urban and the rural as a question of numbers of people and geographical spaces. And as often happens, by the time the realisation dawns about the perils of altering the eco-systems and the consequences on lowering the resilience to climate change, it is too late to bring about a reversal.

Conceptualising the Peri-urban

Generally speaking, direct attention to peri-urban areas is lacking, at least in the discourse of officials and policy makers in developing countries including India. Often the inherent dynamism in such transitions is little understood even as the artificial distinction into rural and urban prevails. Generalisations are made from ecological, environmental as well as socio-economic processes from other production systems environmental and ecological processes tend to be relatively familiar from other production systems, leading to a queer amalgam of the rural and the urban in analysing peri-urbanity. Even when the solutions are known, structural weaknesses in the economy deter effective implementation (FTI,1999).
Multiple understandings and definitions of the concept of the 'peri-urban' prevail in the academic literature, often leading to confusion. Conceptually, it is seen as the transitional zone between a sprawling city and its rural surroundings, neither rural nor urban in its outlook and characteristics (Dutta, 2011, Prakash 2012). Not definable clearly, given the contextual and situational specificities involved, it remains a fact that in most parts of the world, peri-urban spaces are rapidly expanding and being occupied by increasing numbers of people (McGregor et al., 2005). Analyses of peri-urban contexts do not provide the basis for a unified understanding of urban sprawl (Iaquinta and Drescher, 2001). Such attempts to seek a unified understanding can be counter-productive results based as they are on binary classifications (rural and urban) with a mediator (peri-urban) thrown in.

This brief deliberates the various conceptual issues involved in the notion of the peri-urban to evolve an understanding of different context specific views.

Existing conceptualisations of the peri-urban, in general, do not follow a consolidated approach that integrates historical and contemporary development processes, ecosystem dynamics, changing socio-economic and gender relationships. They provide either a geographical (or land-use) categorisation or a social relations perspective. Sharp dichotomous classifications assume that rural livelihoods are agriculture, horticulture and animal husbandry based while the urban is associated with manufacturing, services and commercial activities. But even in contexts where activities can be described as either urban or rural and are spatially separated, there is always a continued and varied exchange of resources, including labour, capital as well as cultural, between urban and rural areas (Mitra et al, 2015).

The sectoral interaction consists of rural activities taking place in urban areas and services taking place in rural areas, or even the peri-urban flows to and from rural industries that are spatially concentrated around urban areas (Tacoli, 1998). Peri-urban areas are thus typically characterized by uncertain land tenure, inferior infrastructure, low incomes, and lack of recognition by formal governments (Hogrewe et al, 1993). So, providing only a place based definition provides an incomplete picture of what peri-urban areas are like. The incongruence in the urban and rural definitions is also a reflection of the diverse geographic contexts of these places. Rural is not only defined relative to its urban counterpart, but also relative to the specific political-economic, ecological and social-cultural context in which such spaces emerge (Lerner and Eakin, 2011).

Narain (2010) argues that peri-urban is better understood in terms of its characteristics; a mix of agricultural and non-agricultural land uses, flows of goods, services and resources between villages and urban centers and a social profile that is very heterogeneous and in a state of flux. Some of the literature on peri-urbanisation process attempts to

define 'mixed' ruralurban interfaces, and to construct a new understanding of social reality which undermines the notion of rural livelihoods being separate from urban. Lerner and Eakin (2011) portray the peri-urban space as a 'space' in itself, enveloping dynamic interactions between population and the landscape and their associated land uses and livelihoods, supporting the notion of a vibrant flow of agricultural goods and ecological services both within peri-urban zones and between peri-urban and urban core areas. Peri-urban boundaries are forever shifting, followed by extending urban areas engulfing the interface in route. Due to rapid urban growth, city peripheries undergo multiple transformations physical, morphological, socio-demographic, cultural, economic and functional (Dupont, 2004, Brook and Davila, 2000). These transformations cause this area to experience high spatial uncertainty resulting in undesirable, complicated land use/land cover necessitating the protection of land use patterns and common property resources that are diverted to other activities and purposes (Narain, 2009; Narain and Nischal, 2007).

Peri-urban areas of cities experience significant land transformation, due to expansion of the urban core. The resources and energy required for the rapid expansion is actively supplied by peri-urban areas at the cost of their natural/semi-natural land-cover, which under this pressure gets disintegrated. Managing the environment of this interface has significant implications, for sustainability of urban and rural development, since the ecological, economic and social functions performed by and in the peri-urban interface affect both city and the countryside (Narain, 2009; Allen, 2003). Moreover, the current top-down policies for land acquisition by the land authorities in developing cities do not consider social equity and environmental integrity (Narain, 2007). Under these circumstances, the adapting to climate change or resilience to it gets undermined, rendering the city, the peri-urban areas as well as the poorer populations very vulnerable.

Haphazard and unregulated construction not only consumes precious land resources, but is largely responsible for the high costs of infrastructure and energy, congestion of transport networks, the increasing segregation and specialization of land use, and also degradation of the environment. All these elements tend to draw a city away from the model of sustainable development, and undermine certain traditional features, such as its compactness and diversity (Camagni et al., 2002). Accurate and timely information on the status and trends of peri-urban ecosystem has been attracting increasing attention recently (Díaz-Caravantes et al., 2011). Unfortunately, due to the lack of basic knowledge and timely information of the urbanization process and its long term ecological impacts, urban and regional planners in developing countries have not been able to analyse consistently, much less manage and restore the ecosystems in peri-urban areas.

Conclusions

The expansion of urban and peri-urban areas poses many challenges, especially in South Asia. Expanding cities pose many threats to the peri-urban spaces and may also bring in benefits. To understand this further, the peri-urban interface needs to be analysed from the perspective of the linkages and flows of goods and services between urban and rural areas. These flows could be of human or material resources. Increased job prospects in menial and semi-skilled work areas; peri-urban agriculture that caters to urban populations such as growing vegetables; and rising land prices could provide benefits for the peri-urban residents.

But of all the challenges, the biggest remains of understanding and measuring the phenomenon of peri-urbanisation. Contemporarily, peri-urbanisation is based on the inclusion of rural areas into a town/city's master-plan for inclusion/exclusion with the urban boundaries in a finite future. Officially kept a 'secret' to prevent land speculation, it hardly remains so. However, the distinction still remains a binary construct in the official data. Just to take an example, while the national population census records an unprecedented urban growth, it is not readily possible to analyse at the national level the peri-urbanisation situation. The Census 2011 recorded 3.72 million urban cultivators in 2011, a sharp rise from the 2.6 million in 2001.

Correspondingly, the agricultural labourers rose to 7.3 million in 2011 from 4.3 million in 2001 in the urban areas. This has been accompanied by a sharp fall in the rural agricultural workforce between 2001 and 2011. There were 124.7 million cultivators and 102.4 million agricultural labourers in 2001. In 2011, there were 115 million cultivators and 137 million agricultural labourers (Chandramouli, 2011). This shows that while a lot of displacement of cultivators is happening (making them agricultural labourers), peri-urbanisation is changing livelihoods and lives. Similarly, the Agricultural Statistics of India, brought out annually by the Ministry of Agriculture, does not even give the details of urban agriculture, perhaps assuming that all agriculture is necessarily rural.

Researchers will need to work with concerned civil society organisations not only to conceptualise and contextually define per-urbanity but also advocate for changes in the official data bases to better grasp the implications of the phenomenon.

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