

Chapter 9

Challenges of Inclusive Urbanization in the Face of Political Transition in Nepal

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ABSTRACT

Nepal is one of the rapidly urbanizing countries in south Asia. This trend of rapid urbanization and on-going political change has created several challenges to the planned urban development in Nepal. This chapter presents a picture of urban development and growth in Nepal and identifies key challenges why the existing model of urbanization has not delivered results that are commonly expected through urban transformation. Unclear and inconsistent policy regime, poor municipal services, urban disaster risk and environmental vulnerability, managing the politics of slum, and transforming informal economy are the five key urban challenges for the inclusive urbanization that are discussed in this chapter. The chapter concludes with brief recommendations for each challenge.

INTRODUCTION

Nepal—a relatively small country between China and India and with its largely rugged mountainous topography with a small plain area in its southern part—is one of the fastest urbanizing countries in South Asia. Throughout the past six decades of planned development in the country, the development of cities and towns has been seen as an engine for ushering growth and employment. The policy makers, in the 1960s and 1970s in particular, conceived of balanced development of the country by dividing it into “development regions” wherein cities and towns were expected to serve as hubs to provide markets for goods and services and for improved living conditions and employment for the city dwellers as well as those in the surrounding rural localities. Accordingly the government of Nepal, from the first (1956-59) to the sixth plan (1980-85) period, undertook planned resettlement and urban development programs especially in the southern Terai region (Adhikari and Dhungana, 2010). These programs largely benefited those who were close to the governing elites, and with passage of time, gradually gave way

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to an autonomous urban sprawl. Individuals and families with dispensable income bought lands and constructed buildings in cities and towns or along the highways in an unplanned and haphazard manner. An economically weaker section of population also began to converge in the public spaces in and around the cities, along riverbanks and highways—making informal settlements and adding stress to already scarce urban services. With law enforcement weakened and service support systems paralyzed following the insurgency in mid-1990s, urban development in Nepal is yet to take a firm footing in terms of planning, governance and delivery of essential services to the diverse urban populace. Added to this are the environmental stress and vulnerabilities that particularly hit hard on the poorer and marginalized sections of the urban population. Understanding these challenges offers the unique perspectives on how the government and other actors in a least developed country can capitalize on opportunities of urban-led economic growth and other objectives.

This chapter presents a picture of urban development and growth in Nepal, and identifies key challenges why the existing model of urbanization has not delivered results that are commonly expected through urban transformation. After presenting the current status of urban growth in the next section, author identified and explained five main challenges associated with urban development in Nepal. In the final section, the chapter offers what reform opportunities exist around those challenges.

URBAN GROWTH IN NEPAL

Nepal has a predominantly agrarian economy and rural socio-cultural outlook, and has historically a little experience in rational organization of human settlement and economic activities. The very idea that the government is to support people on a regular basis through social security or health, education or environmental services or in times of need, such as through medical aid and disaster response is relatively new. The various political experiments—authoritarian rules until 1950, and both regimented polity and liberal democracies after that, has so far created a state that is yet to command popular legitimacy by responding to the needs of rural and urban population. The country remained in self-imposed seclusion from outside world until 1951, and the formal “development planning” that came with the promulgation of periodic development plans from 1956 conceived of relocating and rearranging settlements especially in the country’s Tarai region¹. This region, once being a flat, fertile area with dense forest, was long seen as a prospective site for agriculture expansion and human settlement. At the same time, it provided incentive for the rulers to benefit from timber trade and secure their own political ascendancy by favoring a certain group of people by providing free land. The significant growth of towns in Tarai can thus be traced to the high migration rate from hill to Tarai after the malaria was eradicated and the east-west high way was constructed in southern Nepal. In the past, Rajbiraj was planned in classical *Prastara* form after Hanuman Nagar was swept by the flood in Koshi river in eastern Nepal. In the far-western Nepal, the town of Tikapur was planned following a Grid Iron Pattern. After these twin efforts, however, the city planning exercise came to a virtual standstill in Nepal. These initial advances in settlements in the otherwise densely forested Tarai paved the way for town development in the region, while in the Hills, the valleys of Kathmandu and Pokhara saw an increasing influx of new inhabitants, especially as monetary income and savings increased with the opening up of Nepal and its development in the post-1950 period.

There has been some documentation about the development of ancient towns in Nepal. It is suggested that some localities, such as Nuwakot, Dolakha, Banepa and Panauti had urban features back in early years of Nepal’s written history stretching to the Lichchhavi dynasty (Basyal and Khanal, 2001). In the

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