

Policy Review

The curious case of pandemics and 'mobility in panic' within Pakistan

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Introduction and Background

Based on clear evidences emerging from around the world about the linkages between human mobility and the spread of COVID-19, Pakistan is gradually moving towards a countrywide lockdown situation. Though such measures are absolutely imperative to contain the virus and flatten the curve, their repercussions are widespread and may have long-lasting implications for the socioeconomic outlook of the country. In this policy review, a mobility perspective has been adopted to analyze how the different lockdown scenarios impact internal (within country) human mobility and how those mobility patterns influence the cartography of virus spread.

In the light of the current health emergency, travel restrictions are key policy interventions that are increasingly being imposed in many countries (Fang et al. 2020). In addition, the impact of pandemics and health emergencies have different socioeconomic outcomes than other global crises. For instance, previous studies conducted by Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) show that during the global financial crisis of 2008, the inflow of remittances to Pakistan soared to record levels despite increase in unemployment and poverty headcount ratio (Ahmed and O'Donoghue 2010; Ahmed & Sugiyarto 2012). However, the impact of current global health crisis on remittances and employment trends of overseas Pakistanis is much more skeptical.

In international media, much attention is being given on travel restrictions and its impact on the airline industry. Such restrictions and lockdowns have implications for internal mobility patterns as well, which have not been studied carefully. This is especially important to consider because the target population affected by air travel restrictions and internal travel restriction is starkly different. It is important to understand who moves in what circumstances and how in order to understand the impacts of travel restrictions and lockdowns are experienced by people belonging to different socioeconomic backgrounds.

Pakistan received its first COVID-19 carrier on February 20, 2020 when the infected person returned to Pakistan from Iran. (First Coronavirus Case in Pakistan 2020). Since then, the number of positive cases has been exponentially rising, creating much panic and fear, putting heavy burden on the under-resourced health sector and straining the already fragile economic situation of the country. In terms of mobility regulations, what started with international travel restrictions is now gradually moving towards a country-wide shut-down and provincial lockdown at a time.

Pakistan has one of the fastest rising urban population in South Asia not only because of a natural population growth rate in the urban areas but also because of rural to urban migration. About 73.6 million population of Pakistan (36.7%) lives in urban areas (Statista Research Department [SRD] 2010). About half of the labour force coming from rural areas to urban areas is engaged in informal sector. Mostly they are domestic workers or daily wagers (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics 2018). These internal migrants not only contribute heavily to the urban informal sector, but also keep rural economies afloat

through their ‘remittances’. The contribution of their remittances, which has not been empirically documented due to shortage of data, is much higher than international remittances (Ishfaq et al. 2017)

In such a scenario, lockdowns mean loss of work and job layoffs for many of these informal workers. Though lockdowns are absolutely imperative for flattening the curve and containing the spread of the infection, its repercussions on shaping different mobility patterns warrant a discussion. The following observations come to the forefront:

Dynamics of mobility in panic

In fear of potential lockdowns, especially in the urban centres, a huge flock of people started returning to their native areas, which in most cases are smaller towns and villages. While the rich and privileged can afford to stay in the cities with their families, most of those ‘fleeing’ are those who are unable to sustain themselves in the cities due to loss or slowdown of business or job or decline in demand in case of daily wagers. In this way, the initial anticipation of potential lockdowns spurs a huge internal mobility flow in the direction opposite to the usual trend of movement (Azam 2020).

Most of these ‘returning migrants’ use public transport to move around, e.g. buses or trains. These modes are used more often by the common citizenry of Pakistan, especially those who cannot afford to hire private transport. In this way, a large group of people is at the risk of getting exposed to the Coronavirus if an infected passenger is travelling with them.

Such movements may contribute to the transmission of the virus to the smaller towns and rural areas where health facilities are already inadequate and further constrained. In addition, limited awareness of the methods to protect oneself and nonseriousness towards changing social behaviours, especially in areas where education levels are low, may actually impede efforts to control the virus and result in a wider transmission of the disease.

In addition to health concerns, it is also to be noted that many of these daily wagers are the sole earners of their households. Any analysis of decline in socioeconomic wellbeing due to job losses and layoffs must take into account the household as a unit, rather than the individual. Besides the immediate impacts on losing income and experiencing food insecurity, medium to long-term impacts may also be visible through decline in savings, asset accumulation and further decline in the standards of health and sanitation, and education.

Scale of internal mobility restrictions: from hyper-mobility to a standstill

Another factor that plays a role is the scale of mobility restrictions and how that changes actual population movements. An incoherent lockdown approach introduced within the country with different provinces following different timelines for complete and partial lockdown created an uncertainty within the population (Bhatti 2020). This resulted in a scenario of ‘hyper-mobility’ initially. Though many

daily wagers could not anticipate the severity of the situation at first, the announcement of decisions to close down all public venues with the deployment of military and police created a sense of emergency and frenzy as many people attempted to reach their hometowns and native villages with restricted transport options. This created a scramble at various railway and bus stations (Public transport owners defy lockdown 2020).

Such scenarios lead to hyper-mobility before the enforcement of a complete lockdown, and in fact, defeat the purpose of imposing a lockdown as the risk of virus transmission increases. Thus, government authorities when ordering a lockdown in the area need to consider the possibility of unintended mobilities resulting in inadvertent spread of the virus.

On the other hand, in progression towards a complete lockdown scenario, a ‘forced immobility’ for those relying on mobility for their livelihoods is also a point of concern for many. Many of the daily wagers are engaged in the transport industry, driving taxis, rickshaws or involved in delivery tasks. With a standstill situation created as a result of a lockdown, they are deprived of the ability to earn and provide for their families. In extreme cases, income loss may also restrict their ability to avail healthcare facilities, leading to greater health risks.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

This study highlights how constraining human mobility at domestic level serves as an integral policy tool for controlling the spread of an epidemic. The debate around the decision to levy a nationwide lockdown is also based on the trade-off between the containment of the virus and the loss of livelihoods. Both aspects have associated consequences, the intensity of which differs for different groups of population. So, while internal migrants may serve as vectors of the infection to smaller towns, they are also the main victims of the double jeopardy of health-risks and loss of livelihoods.

For an effective and efficient control of the epidemic, an early and immediately implemented lockdown situation may have been helpful in containing the spread of the virus. In the current policy scenario in Pakistan, the incoherent and uncertain implementation of lockdown decision is acting as a double-edged sword: it first resulted in a hyper-mobility situation, creating a higher risk setting for the spread of the virus and then hit the daily wagers by restricting their earning capacities.

In such circumstances, the following policy measures will offer some respite to the marginalized population groups.

- To control hyper mobility created in a panic, the decision of lockdown needs to be coupled with extensive social protection with immediate implementation. Though the PM’s stimulus package is a welcome step in the right direction, the implementation mechanism may take some time to materialize delaying the provision of basic facilities and survival items to the poor.
- Daily wagers involved in the transport sector, especially taxi-drivers, could be hired by the government as ‘ambulance-drivers’ on a contractual basis. They could be part of the PM’s tiger force with some monetary compensation. This would ensure a source of income for those relying

on other people's mobilities during conditions of a lockdown while also offering modes of conveyance to people with no private transport to reach hospitals.

- The forthcoming relief package for construction workers needs to be expedited. The benefits of both the PM's stimulus package and the upcoming construction package need to be implemented at both urban and rural level to ensure provision to migrant workers who have returned to their villages due to loss of jobs.
- Workers from the informal economy and daily wagers could be engaged in ration distribution drives.
- Philanthropists and private actors should be mobilized to generate funds to provide for the unemployment created in the informal sector. A central volunteerism mechanism should be created by engaging different philanthropy organizations for effective distribution and avoidance of duplication of efforts.

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