FUTURE OF PROPERTY RIGHTS

Displacement, De-urbanization and COVID-19

Introduction

In the six months since the coronavirus began its global spread, more than 15 million people have been diagnosed with COVID-19 and more than 600,000 have perished. Governments around the world have instituted lockdowns and shut down businesses. Entire industries have been devastated, notably travel, hospitality, and entertainment in the formal sector, and day labor and street and market vendors in the **informal sector**. Overall, hundreds of millions of people worldwide have lost their livelihoods.

These facts are well known. But less documented are the various implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on the land and property rights of billions of people around the world. This brief, inspired by and sourced heavily from the Land Portal's **Migration, Displacement, and De-urbanization in the Context of COVID-19** webinar and discussion series, spotlights a selection of these challenges, and provides suggestions for how they may be addressed.

The Challenge

The COVID-19 crisis has millions of people on the move. As economies shut down and lockdowns proliferate, de-urbanization has emerged as a serious challenge throughout the developing world. Millions of migrant workers, day laborers, and others in the formal and informal economy are **relocating** to their villages and family homes, **putting pressure** on limited land resources and increasing the potential for conflict.

Below are the major challenges associated with migration, displacement and de-urbanization caused by COVID-19:

- **Bad data:** We know very little about who is actually moving, and where they are going. Is migration mostly internal or is it international? How many people are actually leaving, and where exactly are they going? How long do they intend to stay? Without knowing the answers to these questions, planning policy responses becomes difficult.

- **Increased pressure on rural housing and land resources:** After decades of **rapid urbanization**, many rural towns have adapted to a low population density. This is expressed through reduced availability of social services,

schools, jobs, and healthcare, but also through availability of housing and land. As rural governments struggle to allocate land and homes to a reverse migration of residents, **conflicts** are arising over scarce resources. In particular, common resources such as pastures, forests, and communal agricultural land are coming under stress.

- **Population movement makes it difficult to distribute aid:** With millions on the move, some of them across international borders, governments are having a hard time quantifying and distributing aid. In particular, international migrant workers, many of whom are not registered as laborers in their host country, are being overlooked by government relief programs and local relief measures.

- **Lack of remittances means less money for property upkeep:** Rural communities have long relied on remittances from cities to make **long-term investments** such as purchasing land or maintaining property. In India, for example, remittances provide stability and even out seasonal land-related incomes. However, as urban workers lose their jobs and head to the countryside, this source of rural revenue has **dried up**.

- **Properties left behind in cities are increasingly vulnerable:** As workers flee cities and return to the countryside, they leave behind homes for which they often lack formal documentation. These vacant properties are vulnerable to being occupied by squatters, or to simply being razed and redeveloped. This later concern is particularly acute for informal settlements in rapidly developing parts of cities.

Early Responses and Key Considerations

Early observations suggest, unsurprisingly, that a combination of strong local institutions and robust non-governmental networks are helping to soften the destabilizing effects of mass migration and de-urbanization. Below are early recommendations for meeting these challenges:

- **Gather improved data on key population movement metrics:** The ubiquity of smartphones has allowed both governments and NGOs to trace large scale population movements. This capability has been successfully deployed

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in the wake of **earthquakes** and natural disasters in order to target aid, and indeed limited cell phone tracing has been instituted post-COVID-19 to assist with contact tracing and enforcing of lockdowns. Governments and NGOs should apply this methodology towards understanding where populations are moving, and whether they are remaining at their destinations, moving on to new locations or returning home.

• **Improve dispute resolution mechanisms:** Towns should begin preparing now by scaling up their dispute resolution mechanisms, whether that means enlisting the support of local civil society groups, hiring additional judges, lawyers, and mediators, or simply instituting an intake process that avoids clogging up courts with property disputes. National governments should explicitly resource local governments and NGOs to improve dispute resolution capacity.

• **Allocate land to returnees:** Local governments should examine their land use plans and land banks (if any) to proactively allocate land to new arrivals (some of whom may even contribute to local revitalization by bringing new knowledge and experience from cities). Many municipalities' land allocation procedures are rigid and overly bureaucratic; in these cases, the procedures should be made more flexible in order to accommodate rapid influxes. Municipalities should be transparent and consistent about the criteria they use to allocate land in order to minimize grievances from existing community members, and should ensure women are not left out of land allocation decisions.

• **Protect supply chains by moving processing closer to production:** Supply chain disruptions are threatening to cause food shortages and food price spikes. Advocates suggest countering this possibility by moving food processing closer to production sites.

• **Greater focus on safety nets for migrants:** In many countries, including OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries, undocumented migrants are **excluded** from social safety nets, stimulus payments, and unemployment benefits. But this exclusion is short sighted: The resulting cash crunch pushes migrants to relocate back to family lands where they often put pressure on scarce resources. Governments should include migrants and undocumented workers in vouchers, cash, and stimulus payments.

In India, the state of Kerala has emerged the leader in managing COVID, owing to strong village-level governance, a healthy civil society, and women's active participation in governance in the state. Kerala's Kudumbashree program encourages rural women to form self-help groups and their federations act as an organized civil society counterpoint to village panchayats. Nearly 65 percent of all women elected to the panchayats are Kudumbashree members. It's no coincidence that Kerala happens to be the first state to usher in pro-women land reforms. These measures were not put in place to fight coronavirus, but rather are a legacy of good state policies that prioritize gender equity and empowerment.