

# THE IMPACT OF RAPID URBANIZATION ON COMMUNITY TIES AND SOCIAL COHESION IN ABBOTTABAD

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## Abstract

Abbottabad is historically and geographically very important place, with the passage of time, rapid urbanization not only making it diverse but also congested. The land was popular for its serenity, peace and scenic scenes but now this beautiful hill station has become very rough and metropolitan. This diversity can foster cultural exchange and innovation, it also poses challenges to traditional community structures. Residents of Abbottabad are experiencing changes in their social networks, with many reporting a decline in face-to-face interactions and a sense of isolation amidst growing urban anonymity. The influx of outsiders and the proliferation of gated communities and commercial developments have altered neighborhood dynamics, often prioritizing individualism over communal living. This study aims to contribute to the discourse on urbanization and social change, offering insights into the ways in which cities like Abbottabad can balance growth and development with the preservation of community ties and social cohesion. This qualitative work is exploring the impacts of rapid urbanization with the help of primary and secondary sources e.g. profile of Abbottabad, biographies, books and articles. Unplanned urbanization is becoming the most vibrant problem of this city which is not only spoiling the beauty but also its colonial legacy. The concerned authorities must tackle with this serious problem otherwise this land would lost its original shine.

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**Keywords:** *Urbanization, Social Change, Community Structure, Isolation and Social Networks, Cultural Diversity, Metropolitan Expansion, Gated Communities.*

## INTRODUCTION

Abbottabad is the divisional head quarter and one of the most urbanized district of Hazara Division in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. It has experienced major physical along with social environment transformations throughout the recent years. The development of fast urbanization together with economic growth and population movement transformed this previous small town into a vibrant metropolis. Urban development of new infrastructure along with roads and buildings has transformed the physical landscape of Abbottabad thereby creating strains on the local natural resources and city ecosystem. Modern Abbottabad has experienced a total social transformation due to shifting community statistics and cultural dynamics coupled with new economic development prospects. Different cultural groups and economic segments alongside numerous ethnic populations produced a multicultural enclave where new communal problems and social integration possibilities exist. Despite its progressive characteristics Abbottabad maintains its heritage and natural heritage that unites ancient traditions with contemporary urban existence.<sup>1</sup>

The accelerated growth of urban centers has emerged as a global phenomenon, reshaping societies, economies, and cultural dynamics worldwide. Pakistan mirrors this trend, with its urban population climbing from 17.4 percent in 1951 to over 36 percent by 2017 a transformation driven by migration, demographic shifts, and economic pressures. Abbottabad, a city in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Hazara region, exemplifies this rapid urban expansion. Between 1998 and 2017, its population more than doubled, soaring from 105,999 to over 200,000 residents, largely due to rural-to-urban migration and natural population growth. This swift urbanization has triggered significant shifts in the city's socioeconomic landscape, presenting both opportunities and challenges. While it has spurred economic mobility, expanded access to education and healthcare, and elevated living standards for many, it has simultaneously eroded longstanding social networks and communal ties. As diverse populations converge in densely populated urban spaces, competition for resources and cultural friction have contributed to social fragmentation, heightened isolation, and rising crime rates a paradox of progress that underscores the complex interplay between development and social stability.<sup>2</sup> Despite these critical implications, scholarly attention to urbanization in Pakistan has disproportionately focused on economic and demographic metrics, often overlooking its sociocultural ramifications. In Abbottabad specifically, the absence of empirical research on how rapid urban growth affects social cohesion and community belonging leaves a gap in understanding the human dimensions of this transition. This chapter addresses this lacuna by examining urbanization's impact on local institutions, shared values, and collective norms. It explores how traditional community frameworks have adapted or faltered amidst urban pressures and proposes policy-oriented strategies to strengthen social bonds and participatory governance. By situating Abbottabad's experience within broader debates on urban

governance and societal resilience, the analysis aims to inform inclusive policymaking that balances growth with the preservation of communal identity in rapidly evolving cities.<sup>3</sup>

### **RAPID URBANIZATION IN ABBOTTABAD**

Over the past few decades, Abbottabad, a city nestled in Pakistan's Hazara region, has experienced a striking transformation driven by rapid urbanization. Its population nearly doubled between 1998 and 2017, surging from approximately 106,000 to over 200,000 a growth rate of 88% that reflects profound shifts in the city's social fabric and physical landscape. This expansion has been fueled by a mix of rural-to-urban migration, natural population increases, and the city's strategic role as a hub along the Karakoram Highway, a vital corridor connecting Pakistan and China. While urbanization has spurred economic activity and infrastructure development, it has also strained public services, reshaped community dynamics, and triggered environmental pressures, creating a complex interplay of progress and challenges.<sup>4</sup> A significant driver of this change has been the steady influx of rural residents seeking better livelihoods, education, and healthcare opportunities often scarce in their home regions. Persistent poverty, underdeveloped rural infrastructure, and limited job prospects have pushed many toward Abbottabad, where they frequently end up in informal settlements on the city's outskirts. These neighborhoods, lacking reliable access to electricity, clean water, and sanitation, grapple with overcrowding and stark living conditions. Compounding this migration, the city's own population growth bolstered by higher birth rates and improved healthcare has further stretched housing, transportation, and public utilities, leaving municipal systems struggling to keep pace.<sup>5</sup>

The environmental toll of Abbottabad's growth has been equally pronounced. Forests and wildlife habitats have dwindled as urban sprawl encroaches on natural spaces, while the Khanpur Dam, a critical water source, faces depletion and pollution from overuse and contamination. Air quality has worsened due to rising fossil fuel consumption, and inadequate waste management systems have compounded pollution concerns.<sup>6</sup> Yet urbanization has also brought economic diversification, with investments in roads, bridges, and industries like textiles, food processing, and tourism. These developments, however, have not bridged deep inequalities; many residents remain excluded from the benefits, trapped in cycles of poverty and social marginalization. Moving forward, Abbottabad's trajectory hinges on balancing growth with sustainability. Addressing strained infrastructure, environmental degradation, and fractured social ties will require inclusive urban planning that prioritizes equitable resource distribution, community engagement, and ecological stewardship. Without intentional policies to safeguard vulnerable populations and natural ecosystems, the city risks deepening disparities and eroding the very foundations of its progress.<sup>7</sup>

### **IMPACT ON COMMUNITY TIES**

The swift urbanization of Abbottabad has left an indelible mark on social bonds in the city. As the population of the city has increased and become more diverse, social networks and traditional social bonds have weakened. Most of the residents have moved to the city from rural towns, and with them came varying social and

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cultural norms. This has resulted in the disintegration of the conventional community institutions, including the Mohalla (neighbourhood) system, which previously had a central position to ensure social solidarity and community relationships. The Mohalla system, which was the backbone of the community life of Abbottabad in the past, has been decimated by high rates of urbanization. The system, based on a structure of close-knit neighborhoods, gave the inhabitants a feeling of community and belonging. Yet as the population of the city has expanded and become more mixed, this system has collapsed. Most residents no longer recognize their neighbors, and Mohalla activities and events, which were once part of everyday life, are now uncommon.<sup>8</sup>

The weakening of community bonds has also been fueled by the rise in individualism and the loss of collective values. While residents have become increasingly concerned with pursuing their own interests and goals, they have become less invested in their own communities. This has contributed to a downward spiral in community involvement and social activism, as residents have become more isolated and disconnected from their neighbors. In addition, Abbottabad's own rapid urbanization has contributed to greater social inequality and segregation. As the city's population expanded and became more heterogeneous, various social and economic groups became more segregated from each other.<sup>9</sup> The rich have retreated to upscale neighborhoods, and the poor are left to huddle in congested and underserved neighborhoods. This has been responsible for breaking social cohesion and social connections because inhabitants with divergent backgrounds no longer care for each other as much as before. The effect of rapid urbanization on community relationships in Abbottabad has also been fueled by expansion of modern technology, including social media and television. These technologies have offered people new forms of entertainment and social contact, but they have also led to deterioration of traditional community relationships. Most residents now spend more time engaging with their screens than with their neighbors, and this has resulted in reduced face-to-face communication and community interaction. Moreover, the swift urbanization of Abbottabad has also contributed to higher migration and mobility, which has further disintegrated community bonds. Most residents have migrated to the city from rural areas, and they tend to keep strong connections with their villages and families. But as they settle in the city, they tend to become disconnected from their communities and social networks. This has contributed to the decline in social capital and community cohesion, as residents became increasingly disconnected from each other.<sup>10</sup>

The loss of community relationships in Abbottabad has also had far-reaching effects on social cohesion and community wellbeing. As residents have become more disconnected and isolated from each other, they have become more susceptible to social and economic shocks. The absence of community relationships and social support has also led to higher poverty, inequality, and social exclusion. The sudden urbanization of Abbottabad has had a significant effect on community bonds in the city. The breakdown of traditional community institutions, the expansion of individualism and social segregation, and the effects of new technologies have all

served to weaken community bonds and social cohesion. These challenges will need to be addressed through a wide-ranging and multifaceted strategy, one that emphasizes community participation, social inclusion, and community development.<sup>11</sup>

### **DECLINE OF TRADITIONAL COMMUNITY INSTITUTIONS**

The rapid urbanization of Abbottabad has triggered a profound social transformation, eroding longstanding community structures that once fostered solidarity. As the city's population grows and diversifies, traditional frameworks like the Mohalla system a cornerstone of neighborhood-based social cohesion have deteriorated. Migrants from rural areas, bringing diverse cultural practices, have inadvertently contributed to the fragmentation of these localized networks, which historically facilitated collective identity and mutual support. This shift has left many residents disconnected from their immediate communities, with once-vibrant neighborhood gatherings and shared rituals now increasingly rare. Compounding this decline is the rise of individualism, where personal ambitions increasingly overshadow collective welfare. Residents, prioritizing individual goals, have grown less engaged in communal initiatives, leading to a cycle of social disengagement and weakened civic participation. Concurrently, socioeconomic stratification has deepened spatial divides, with affluent groups clustering in exclusive enclaves while lower-income populations remain marginalized in overcrowded areas. This geographic segregation has stifled cross-class interactions, further fragmenting social cohesion.<sup>12</sup>

Technological advancements, while enhancing virtual connectivity, have paradoxically diminished in-person community ties. Reliance on digital platforms and media consumption has reduced face-to-face engagement, altering how residents interact and weakening the organic bonds nurtured through physical proximity. Additionally, high migration rates have introduced transient populations whose primary affiliations often remain tied to rural origins rather than urban neighborhoods, leaving urban social networks fragile and underdeveloped.<sup>13</sup> The erosion of these communal ties has amplified vulnerabilities, exposing residents to heightened economic precocity and social exclusion. Without robust community support systems, marginalized groups face entrenched inequalities, exacerbating cycles of poverty and alienation. Addressing these challenges demands a holistic strategy centered on inclusive urban policies, grassroots civic engagement, and initiatives that bridge socioeconomic divides. Revitalizing social capital in Abbottabad will hinge on fostering participatory governance models and reimagining public spaces as hubs for collective interaction, ensuring urbanization aligns with equitable community-building rather than fragmentation.

### **RISE OF NEW FORMS OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

The rapid urbanization of Abbottabad has precipitated a decline in its foundational community institutions, destabilizing the social fabric that once thrived on localized solidarity. Central to this erosion is the collapse of the Mohalla system a network of tightly interconnected neighborhoods that historically functioned as hubs of collective identity, mutual aid, and cultural exchange. As the

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*city's population swelled and diversified, rural migrants introduced heterogeneous social norms, diluting the homogeneity that sustained these neighborhood bonds. The Mohalla, once a space where residents regularly gathered for festivals, communal decision-making, and shared rituals, has now fragmented, leaving many disconnected from the immediate social environment. Interactions that once animated daily life impromptu conversations, collaborative problem-solving, and collective celebrations have dwindled, replaced by anonymity in an expanding urban landscape.<sup>14</sup>*

*This institutional decay is compounded by a cultural shift toward individualism, where personal aspirations increasingly eclipse communal obligations. Residents, navigating the pressures of urban life, now prioritize private goals over collective welfare, weakening participation in local initiatives. The decline is starkly evident in communal spaces like the masjid (mosque), which once served as more than a religious site it was a nexus for education, dispute resolution, and civic organizing. Today, even this pillar of community life has receded in influence, with dwindling attendance and a diminished role in fostering social cohesion. The masjid's retreat mirrors broader trends of disengagement, as residents gravitate toward privatized routines rather than shared public endeavors.<sup>15</sup>*

*Technological advancements have further reconfigured social dynamics. While digital platforms offer virtual connectivity, they often substitute rather than supplement face-to-face interactions. Screen-based engagement has reshaped how residents allocate time and attention, reducing opportunities for spontaneous neighborhood exchanges. Concurrently, persistent rural-urban migration has created transient populations whose loyalties remain tethered to ancestral villages rather than their new urban surroundings. This transience strains the formation of stable, trust-based local networks, eroding the social capital necessary for resilient communities.*

*The consequences of these shifts are profound. Weakened institutions have amplified socioeconomic vulnerabilities, leaving marginalized groups with scant safety nets during crises. Poverty and exclusion deepen as communal support systems atrophy, while political and civic disengagement undermines collective advocacy for equitable development. Restoring social cohesion demands intentional strategies: revitalizing public spaces as sites of interaction, incentivizing participatory governance models, and bridging divides through policies that prioritize inclusion. By reinvesting in grassroots institutions and fostering hybrid spaces where tradition and modernity intersect, Abbottabad could counterbalance urbanization's fragmenting forces reclaiming community not as a relic of the past, but as a dynamic pillar of its urban future.<sup>16</sup>*

### IMPACT ON SOCIAL COHESION

*While traditional institutions like the Mohalla and masjid have waned in influence, Abbottabad's urban transformation has catalyzed innovative forms of civic engagement, driven largely by a younger, tech-savvy generation seeking to reimagine community bonds. Grassroots collectives, NGOs, and digitally*



networked initiatives are filling the void left by eroded systems, channeling energy into localized problem-solving and collaborative action. Community-based organizations, for instance, now target hyper-specific challenges from environmental conservation to literacy campaigns creating platforms for residents to collaborate across socioeconomic divides. These groups often operate outside traditional hierarchies, prioritizing participatory decision-making and fostering a renewed sense of agency among citizens.<sup>17</sup>

Digital platforms have emerged as unexpected arenas for civic mobilization. Youth-led social media campaigns, Whats-App groups coordinating neighborhood clean-ups, and crowd-funding drives for public projects illustrate how technology is reshaping community participation. These virtual spaces not only bridge physical divides but also amplify marginalized voices, enabling residents to advocate for shared priorities in real time. Online activism frequently spills into offline action, as seen in volunteer-driven initiatives like urban gardening cooperatives or after-school tutoring programs endeavors that blend digital coordination with hands-on community work. Volunteerism has become a cornerstone of this new civic ethos, particularly among educated youth. A growing emphasis on social responsibility has spurred skill-sharing workshops, mentorship programs, and disaster response networks, often structured around reciprocal learning rather than charity. This shift reflects a broader redefinition of "community" itself no longer bound by geographic proximity or cultural homogeneity but by shared goals and collaborative spirit. Local NGOs are nurturing this trend through capacity-building programs, equipping volunteers with tools to address systemic inequities while fostering intergenerational dialogue.<sup>18</sup>

Critically, these emerging models underscore the adaptability of social capital in urbanizing contexts. By decentralizing leadership and leveraging technology, they challenge top-down development paradigms, emphasizing grassroots ownership. Community gardens, recycling drives, and digital advocacy campaigns are not just solving immediate issues but rebuilding trust in collective action a counterbalance to the alienation bred by urbanization. However, their long- term impact hinges on institutional support. Without equitable access to resources or recognition from municipal authorities, such initiatives risk replicating existing inequalities, particularly if marginalized groups remain excluded from decision-making. The rise of these hybridized forms of engagement signals a potential pathway for reconciling urbanization with social cohesion. By blending digital innovation with localized activism, Abbottabad's residents are crafting a new civic playbook one where community is defined not by tradition alone but by adaptive, inclusive collaboration. Yet sustaining this momentum demands systemic change: policies that legitimize informal networks, investments in digital literacy, and platforms that bridge grassroots efforts with formal governance. In this evolving landscape, the city's social fabric may yet find resilience not in recreating the past, but in redefining what community means in an urban future.<sup>19</sup>

## **INCREASED SOCIAL SEGREGATION**

The shifting social dynamics in Abbottabad reveal a paradox: while rapid

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urbanization has fractured traditional institutions like the Mohalla system, it has also spurred inventive forms of civic participation that reimagine community bonds in a modernizing context. Grassroots projects from recycling drives to urban gardens are gaining traction, driven by residents who blend a sense of collective ownership with pragmatic problem-solving. These initiatives often emerge organically, rooted in localized needs, and reflect a growing emphasis on social responsibility, particularly among younger, tech-literate demographics. Digital platforms amplify these efforts, enabling residents to coordinate clean-up campaigns or crowd fund educational resources, thereby merging virtual collaboration with tangible neighborhood impact.<sup>20</sup>

This evolution underscores three critical insights for urban governance. First, community ownership acts as a catalyst for sustainable development, transforming passive residents into active stakeholders. Second, technology serves as both a bridge and a tool facilitating connections across fragmented neighborhoods while democratizing access to civic engagement. Third, hyper-local responsiveness is key; projects succeed when they align with the specific aspirations and challenges of Abbottabad's diverse populations, rather than imposing top-down solutions. Yet, these promising trends coexist with persistent vulnerabilities. The erosion of traditional solidarity mechanisms has left many residents particularly marginalized groups exposed to economic precocity and social isolation. Without the safety nets once provided by the Mohalla or masjid, crises like unemployment or public health emergencies risk deepening inequalities. Moreover, while digital activism fosters new connections, it cannot fully replace the trust built through face- to-face interactions, which remain vital for long-term resilience.<sup>21</sup>

The duality of Abbottabad's urban transition simultaneously fostering innovation and fragmentation demands a policy framework that balances preservation and adaptation. Strengthening social cohesion will require hybrid approaches: revitalizing public spaces as hubs for intergenerational dialogue, integrating grassroots NGOs into municipal planning, and leveraging technology to scale local solutions without eroding interpersonal ties. Equally critical is addressing structural inequities such as spatial segregation that undermine collective solidarity. By recognizing informal networks as complementary to formal institutions, Abbottabad can cultivate a more inclusive urban identity, one where tradition and modernity coexist to rebuild social capital in an era of relentless change.<sup>22</sup>

### GROWING INCOME INEQUALITY

Abbottabad's rapid urbanization has entrenched social segregation along economic, educational, and cultural lines, creating a fragmented urban landscape where inequality is both visible and systemic. The city's economic boom, rather than fostering shared prosperity, has deepened divides, with affluent groups retreating into gated enclaves while lower-income residents remain clustered in underserved neighborhoods. This spatial segregation mirrors broader societal fractures: private schools and elite universities cater to the wealthy, perpetuating cycles of privilege, while underfunded public institutions struggle to meet basic needs, trapping



marginalized communities in intergenerational poverty. Similarly, labor markets reflect this duality, with stable, high-paying jobs concentrated among the urban elite and informal, precarious work dominating lower-income areas. These disparities are not merely economic but are reinforced by urban planning choices that prioritize commercial and residential exclusivity over inclusive development. Cultural and ethnic tensions further compound this division. Abbottabad's diversity, once a source of social richness, has become a fault line under urban pressures. Minority groups like the Hazara community face systemic discrimination, exacerbating their spatial and social isolation. Such exclusion is not incidental but structural, rooted in political neglect and a lack of policies to protect vulnerable populations. The result is a city where identity increasingly dictates opportunity, eroding the shared civic identity that once bridged differences.<sup>23</sup>

The consequences of this segregation are profound. Diminished social cohesion weakens collective resilience, leaving communities ill-equipped to address shared challenges like public health crises or economic downturns. Trust in institutions erodes as marginalized groups perceive systemic bias, fueling alienation and, at times, conflict. For instance, youth in underserved neighborhoods, denied quality education and employment, may turn to informal or even illicit economies, deepening cycles of disenfranchisement.

Addressing these divides requires a multi-pronged strategy.

- Redistributive Policies such as progressive property taxes or investments in affordable housing could disrupt the spatial concentration of wealth.
- Overhauling the education system to ensure equitable resource distribution and vocational training partnerships with local industries would create pathways out of poverty.
- Fostering intercultural dialogue through community-led initiatives such as mixed-income housing projects or shared public spaces could rebuild trust across divides. For example, repurposing underutilized urban areas into community centers or multicultural markets might encourage interaction between segregated groups.<sup>24</sup>

Critically, any solution must confront the political economy driving segregation. Elites benefiting from the status quo may resist reforms, necessitating grassroots advocacy to amplify marginalized voices. Digital platforms, which have already enabled new forms of civic engagement, could be leveraged to organize cross-class coalitions demanding equitable policies. Ultimately, Abbottabad's future hinges on whether urbanization can be reimagined as a force for integration rather than division a challenge that demands not just policy innovation but a reclamation of the city as a shared, inclusive space.

### **CHANGING SOCIAL NORMS AND VALUES**

The rapid urbanization of Abbottabad has intensified socioeconomic disparities, with economic growth disproportionately benefiting affluent populations while leaving lower-income groups struggling to meet basic needs. This widening wealth gap stems from structural shifts in the city's economy, including the decline of labor-intensive sectors like manufacturing and textiles, which historically provided

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*stable livelihoods for working-class communities. Concurrently, emerging opportunities in knowledge-based service industries have primarily advantaged those with higher education and financial capital, exacerbating stratification. Compounding this dynamic, urban expansion has inflated housing costs and essential goods, marginalizing disadvantaged residents while wealthier segments capitalize on rising property values and economic privileges.<sup>25</sup>*

*The erosion of economic equity poses significant risks to social stability and collective progress. As disparities grow, trust in shared societal institutions diminishes, fostering polarization and fragmenting community networks. Furthermore, entrenched inequality perpetuates intergenerational poverty traps, limiting upward mobility for marginalized groups and reinforcing cycles of disenfranchisement. Addressing these challenges demands a holistic approach: revitalizing inclusive economic sectors through targeted investments in education and vocational training, implementing progressive welfare policies to cushion vulnerable households from inflation, and fostering civic engagement to rebuild social solidarity. Only through equitable resource distribution and participatory governance can Abbottabad balance growth with justice, ensuring prosperity transcends narrow economic elites to uplift all citizens.<sup>26</sup>*

### CONCLUSION

*Abbottabad's rapid urbanization has profoundly reshaped the fabric of social relations, eroding traditional community networks while simultaneously generating both challenges and opportunities for rebuilding collective ties. The fragmentation of longstanding institutions, compounded by stark socioeconomic divides and shifting cultural dynamics, has weakened trust and shared identity among residents. Yet amid these disruptions, innovative forms of civic engagement such as hyper-local organizations and digital platforms are redefining how individuals connect and collaborate. Grassroots mobilization around pressing issues like public health and environmental sustainability has further demonstrated the potential for shared challenges to unite diverse groups, fostering solidarity through collective action. For such efforts to counterbalance urban fragmentation, however, intentional policy and leadership are imperative. A sustainable strategy must integrate socioeconomic equity with participatory governance, ensuring marginalized voices shape initiatives addressing housing, education, and employment. Investing in community hubs and skill-building programs can revitalize social infrastructure, while inclusive urban planning processes where residents co-design solutions strengthen ownership over communal futures. Existing successes, such as youth-led vocational cooperatives and citizen-driven conservation projects, underscore the viability of bottom-up approaches in bridging divides. Crucially, sustaining these gains demands institutionalizing mechanisms for ongoing dialogue and resource-sharing, centering the priorities of those most affected by urbanization's dislocations. By framing social cohesion not as an abstract ideal but as a deliberate outcome of equitable development, Abbottabad can cultivate resilience against polarization, transforming urban growth into a catalyst for inclusive civic renewal rather than division.*



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