

A Small Island State's Perspective on Urbanization: The British Virgin Islands' Experience

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Growing up and living in a small island state, I have come to appreciate that size matters.

It matters because it gives one a more microscopic view of things, than that of larger nations. Indeed, smaller countries have similar issues to those of bigger countries, but often our experience has a twist.

I take you on this reflective look at the issue of urbanization in the British Virgin Islands (BVI), and similarities between the concerns related to this phenomenon and that of another form of movement of people - emigration.

From an academic view, it can be debated that the BVI does not have any urbanization activity. Urbanization pertains to the shift in population from rural areas to urban areas. The International Growth Centre cites three main factors behind urban population growth: endogenous population growth or urban natural increase, in-migration from rural areas, and the transformation of previously rural settlements into urban ones or reclassification.

But if these phenomena are used to measure the rate of urbanization in the BVI, then the statistic would be very low. This has very much to do with the geography, population density and distribution and culture of the BVI. There is no noticeable movement of persons from the countryside to the town centres. The population sizes are naturally small and the distances are very close.

The BVI is an Overseas Territory of the United Kingdom. (See Map of the Territory – Slide 1).

It comprises of about 32 islands and cays spread over 52 square miles just east of Puerto Rico and the United States Virgin Islands in the Caribbean. The four larger islands, Tortola, Virgin Gorda, Jost Van Dyke and Anegada, have general population totaling about 30,000 residents. About 20 of the smaller islands are uninhabited and a few are privately owned.

With a total area of 24 square miles, Tortola is considered the main island and is home to the capital of Road Town where most commercial activity takes place and where the Government and many services are based.

Virgin Gorda is eight square miles, located about 6.5 miles from Tortola, and has a population of about 4,000.

Jost Van Dyke is about three miles away from Tortola and has a population of below 300.

Anegada is about 24 miles from Tortola and is also home to about 300 persons. More than half of the residents of the BVI are expatriates, from over 120 different nationalities who have come to work in a wide range of industries; from financial services, education and marine jobs to construction, hospitality and government services.

These persons find residential accommodation in apartments that are distributed across the main islands, the distribution of which has been relatively static over the years.

They represent the only real change to the population distribution as they enter and exit the Territory based on work.

Persons come to the BVI at two basic levels.

As highly skilled professionals, accountants, lawyers, wealth managers, fund managers, medical practitioners and those that come in support of the financial services sector.

Or as middle to low wage personnel in support of the Tourism industry and render services as bartenders, waiters, store clerks etc. and construction workers.

The local population is also distributed across the main islands, mostly occupying generational lands inherited from their forefathers. In some areas, settlements and villages have formed, and, except for the access to modern technology, life and the landscape in those communities have not changed much over the years.

This could be due to the fact that the residents of those areas are happy to remain living in their home communities, around family and the neighbours they have grown up with. They are deeply connected to those spaces.

On Tortola, where, more than the other islands, there is a distinct urban centre and sprinklings of small villages and settlements, the question arises of how important distance is in determining that a place is rural.

Just about three miles wide by seven miles long, with the Capital roughly in the middle, nowhere is more than 15 to 30 minutes away. (See pictures of Road Town with countryside in the background)

There is no real need to give up the serenity of country life, with its picturesque ocean and mountain views, to come closer to the town. Nothing is inaccessible or difficult to access due to distance.

On outer-lying islands like Anegada and Jost Van Dyke, those who have remained are not moving to Tortola any time soon. They have weighed the opportunity cost and are not moving – sometimes not even for a hurricane.

The benefit of this is that there is no real threat to loss of culture or shrinkage of agriculture on those Sister islands. That threat, however, does exist to some extent on Tortola which is fast becoming a melting pot of cultures from around the world due to the intake of migrant workers.

It is an issue of which everyone is acutely aware.

The Preamble to the Constitution of the Virgin Islands describes the principles, values and characteristics of a Virgin Islander. This is a definition which embodies the essence of the people of the Virgin Islands.

The Preamble also acknowledges the larger population of Virgin Islanders who chose to reside outside of the Virgin Islands, but maintain their links to the islands and to their ancestral heritage. It also highlights the desire of the people of the Territory to attain a full measure of self-governance in accordance with dominant characteristics of being self-reliant.

Preservation of the BVI's culture and heritage has been a serious concern to successive BVI governments, which have ensured that as far as possible, efforts are made to keep those ties alive.

Last August, the BVI held its 65th Annual Emancipation Festival – this is a one-week celebration that is linked to remembrance of the 1834 abolition of slavery.

This is important because the forefathers of native Virgin Islanders were Africans, who were brought to the Caribbean during the slave trade era as labourers on the sugarcane and cotton plantations.

The activities commence with the reading of the Emancipation Proclamation at a historical site, and include preparation of traditional meals, folk songs and dances.

Activities are fully supported by the Government and is coordinated by a committee that is comprised of stalwarts who are familiar with the history and traditions.

The people of the BVI also observe Territory Day in July. This is another occasion to reflect on the sacrifices and struggles of the founding generations of Virgin Islanders, in pursuit of rights, such as suffrage and internal self-governance. These activities help to recharge the patriotic spirit and to buffer the small indigenous population against outside influences.

At the last Territory Day observance, the Premier of the Virgin Islands, the Hon Andrew A. Fahie, committed the Government to documenting and publishing the stories of the heroes of the BVI. Reason being, so that the general population, especially young people, will be inspired by the triumphs and achievements of those individuals so that those stories will be kept alive.

These issues, solutions and responses, as described here, apply to issues that have been associated with population shifts due to urbanization, albeit, the BVI's does not fit into the neat definition of urbanization as offered by scholars and theorists. The fact is that they simply apply to the complications that arise from the general movement of people - migration, or, more accurately, the movement of people out of their home country - emigration.

If the two concepts of urbanization and emigration were to be looked at side by side, small countries and small island nations could be considered to be rural and the big bright cities in developed countries as urban, and the population movement not at all dissimilar.

Urbanization is merely the localized or domestic internal version of emigration within a country. People move to seek opportunity. Whether it is the opportunity of safety, shelter, economic benefits or life experience, they go where they can get the things they are in need of.

Many Virgin Islanders migrate out of the BVI to other more developed countries because they believe that they will get opportunities for professional advancement and have a better life for their families.

When they go, the BVI suffers a brain drain. We lose capable, competent Virgin Islanders who can help to build our Territory closer to our own image, and who can help to strengthen our heritage.

This human capital flight is one of the drivers of immigration into the BVI, and this poses the greatest threat to preservation of our heritage. Certainly, all of this also applies to the countries, whose citizens are migrating into the BVI for work.

Movement of people from small countries or unstable land spaces to large countries and large foreign cities, present some of the same infrastructural strains and complications as movement from countryside areas to urban areas in a single country.

The question therefore, as we observe with the issue of urbanization and which pertains equally to emigration, is how do we get people to want to stay in the countries of their birth, so that their own culture and values can remain strong and so that their communities do not weaken, shrink, disappear or become swallowed up?

Does the solution not lie in helping to create opportunities or to improve the quality of life in those countries that people are fleeing from, in the same way that we would propose to find ways to encourage persons to remain in rural communities?

How many of the drivers that send people packing, are often linked to globalization, large corporations, environmental degradation, encroachment by development, climate change, conflict, economic hardship and social decay?

For example, In September 2017, following the passage of two powerful Category 5 hurricanes, about 80% of the Territory's housing stock was devastated. Essential road, sewerage and water infrastructure of the Territory were also severely damaged.

In an effort to facilitate the massive rebuilding efforts which were being undertaken in the Territory, immigration rules were relaxed to allow construction workers from neighbouring islands to work in the Territory.

These are factors that contribute to loss of opportunity and increase in discomfort, and thus press individuals to leave their homes in search of new opportunities.

In the urbanization context of the movement of people, parliaments can enact legislation to promote a high quality of life for persons in-migrating to urban areas.

They can pass laws to protect sensitive areas from the impacts of natural population increase. And in the case of rural areas, they can create laws to control reclassification of lands that are of heritage value, or which are designated for agriculture so that they are not converted into housing developments and industrial zones.

There is no shortage of options for parliaments to curb the negative impacts of urbanization.

With emigration, however, is it not so clear-cut. The parliament in one country has no power over that in another sovereign jurisdiction, so it may not be able to do much about the pull factors that draw people into a country.

Recently, the BVI amended the Territory's immigration legislation to provide a one-time mass regularization of persons who emigrated to the Territory, at least twenty years ago, and have been working and living in the Territory consistently. This action was taken as a means of fostering more cohesion in the society and in an effort to curb the level of discontent in society expressed by the emigrant population.

This action however brought to the forefront profound expressions of concern and displeasure from members of the indigenous population, who felt that their security was being threatened.

This was due in part to the unsavoury sentiments often publicly and indiscriminately expressed about the BVI and BVI Islanders without regard for the views, or feelings of BVI Islanders.

Parliaments certainly have the power to enact laws to discourage those things that push people out of their homes and out of their home countries.

In this regard, I wish to submit that the time is drawing nearer when it may no longer be useful or practical to distinguish between urbanization and emigration, owing to the similarity of their causes and effects.

Parliaments need to start looking at the movement of people in general, especially where they are fleeing an environment that is threatened or lacking in search of shelter and opportunity, and act to curb those forces.