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Migration and development dynamics in Ketī Bandar, Pakistan

The Indus River Delta has shaped lives and livelihoods in Ketī Bandar, a once-prosperous fishing port where the impacts of climate change and debt in a global, fishery-based economy are pervasive.

Many young adults reported feeling a strong connection with Ketī Bandar, and a sense of peace and safety there.

Migration – both internal and international – is not a widespread occurrence, nor an aspiration. The majority of young adults (95%) expected to stay in Ketī Bandar in the next five years.

Ketī Bandar had been experiencing internal in-migration, increasingly from nearby islands that became uninhabitable due to rising sea levels.



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Photo: Prithvi Raj for MIGNEX.

Keti Bandar is a coastal town on the Indus River Delta, located in south-east Pakistan, in Thatta district, Sindh. As a long-standing fishing port, for centuries the sea and the river have shaped the lives of those inhabiting the area.

During MIGNEX fieldwork in July 2021, the multiple impacts of climate change – including land erosion, rising sea levels and a severe lack of fresh water for agriculture – were impacting all aspects of life in Keti Bandar. At that time, many livelihoods relied on the unique ecosystems of the Delta, including for sea

fishing, crab farming and the harvesting of jellyfish. Over one-third (36%) of surveyed young adults worked in farming, fishing or rearing animals. Most (76%) considered it difficult to earn a living and feed a family.

Adaptive measures for the combined negative impacts of climate change and other adverse developments in Keti Bandar have supported the community to continue living in the area. This includes mangrove nurseries, an improved system for the delivery of clean drinking water and the reliance on new livelihoods.

In August 2022, torrential rain led to extreme flooding across Pakistan, with areas along the river Indus particularly impacted.¹ This case study brief offers an insight into the challenges faced before the floods, and the long-standing impact of climate change on this local community.

This case study brief is based on fieldwork and survey data. The MIGNEX team also conducted research in Chot Dheeran and Youhanabad, and carried out a review of migration-relevant policies in Pakistan.²

Migration from Keti Bandar

Overall, at the time of the fieldwork, outflows of migration from Keti Bandar were low and the majority (95%) of young adults expected to stay in Keti Bandar in the next five years.

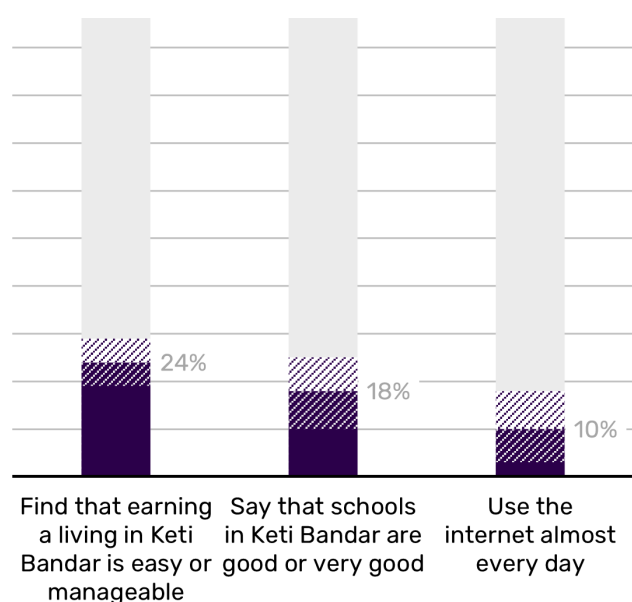


Figure 1. Indicators of development

Source: MIGNEX Survey. Hatched area: confidence interval.

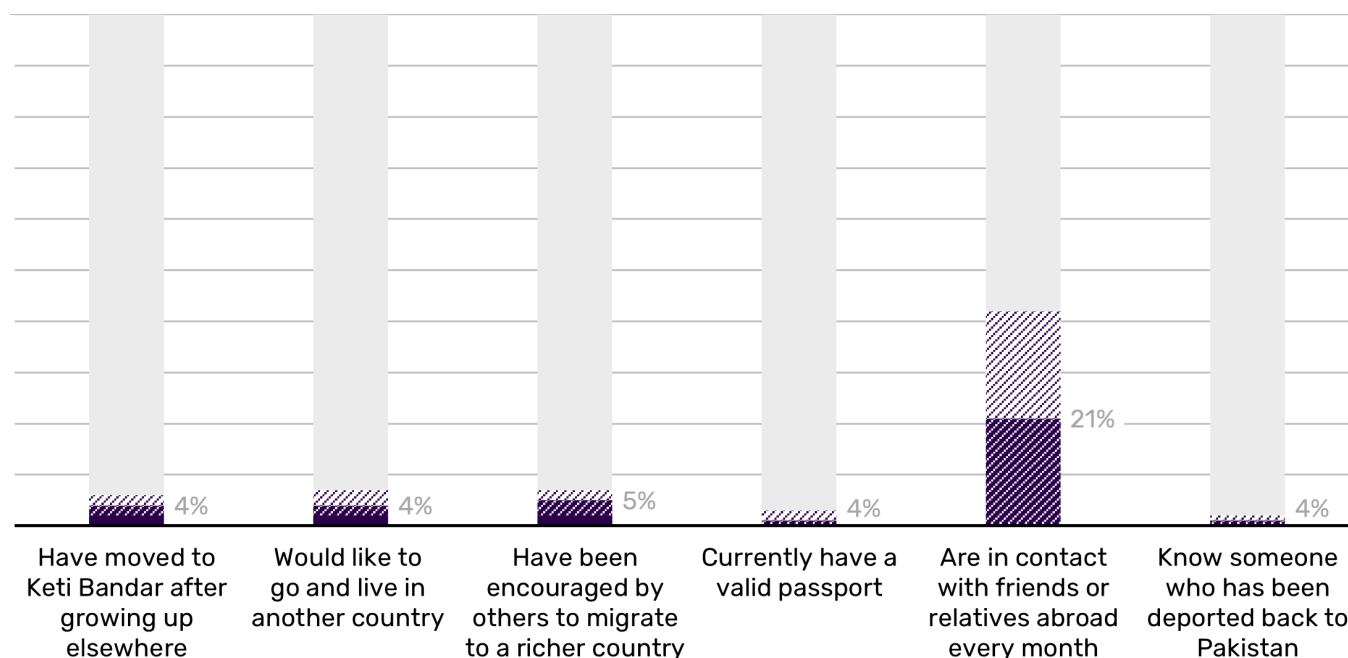


Figure 2. Indicators of migration dynamics

Source: MIGNEX survey. Hatched area: confidence interval.

However, there were some instances of internal out-migration among young people. Women were more likely to migrate for marriage. Both men and women would move for education: often to Thatta, sometimes to other cities, or even to Karachi. Some moved for work in factories and fisheries, often close to Ketī Bandar, in the wider region, or to Karachi or Ibrahim Hyderi – though the types of work and modes of migration would vary between men and women.

Around one in ten (11%) of surveyed young adults knew of someone from Ketī Bandar who had migrated internally in the past five years. This included short-term and return migration, with frequent mobility between Ketī Bandar, Karachi, Ibrahim Hyderi and Thatta.

Instances of international migration were low, and not widely discussed: 3% of young adults had migrant family, friends or relatives living abroad. No young men or young women who participated in the survey had lived abroad for at least one year. While many young adults were aware of the options for relocation to areas with better livelihood opportunities, the risks – including of life-altering change – were perceived as too high.

It is also important to note the immobility of some fishermen, who, caught up in a debt cycle within a leasing system, feared they

could not leave Ketī Bandar without risk to their loved ones.³

Migration aspirations

Overall, migration – both internal and international – was not a widespread aspiration or occurrence in Ketī Bandar. Many young adults expressed a strong connection with the area – the sea, the rhythm of life that their families had – as well as a sense of peace and safety. Of those young adults who preferred to stay in Pakistan over the next five years (95%), 8% reported that they would rather leave Ketī Bandar and migrate internally.

However, a lack of opportunities was a reality for many people, who expressed distress at being trapped in debt. In contrast, some – particularly the younger generation – were hopeful amid recent infrastructural developments, namely improvements to water pipes and access to electricity via solar panels.

Everyone wants their kids to become a doctor or engineer, but what do they actually end up doing? Catching crabs and fish.

Focus group participant

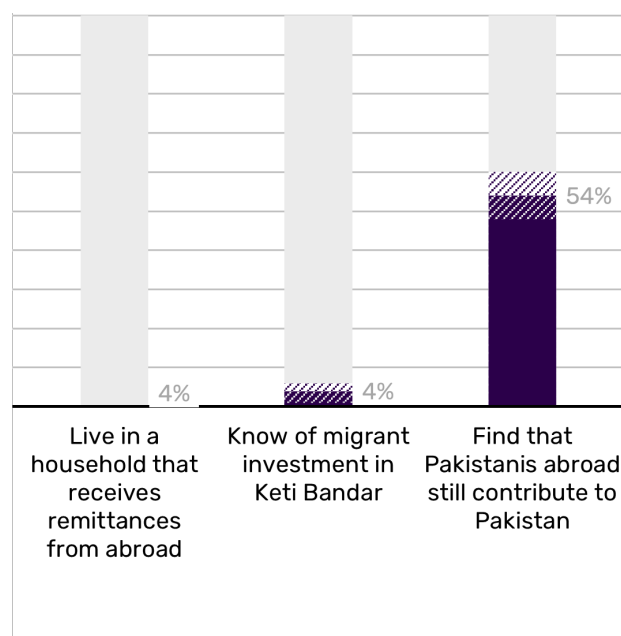


Figure 3. Migration-development interactions

Source: MIGNEX Survey. Hatched area: confidence interval.

Yet the solar panels were set up by the community themselves, in response to a lack of infrastructure provided by the state, which has implications for how such advancements can be interpreted as a sign of development.

Internal in-migration

Keti Bandar had been experiencing internal in-migration, increasingly by people from nearby islands that became uninhabitable due to rising sea levels. These in-migrants were permanent residents – often living alongside others who had relocated – in hamlets based within Keti Bandar. They viewed themselves as part of the area, yet distinct from the centre, where long-standing residents lived.

Links between migration and development

Due to low instances of international out-migration from Keti Bandar – with only 3% of

young adults reporting friends, family or relatives abroad – transnational ties in this sense were low.

More prominent were growing Chinese investments and involvement in the fishery sector. Keti Bandar it is now a part of the global fisheries market. This requires local fishers to make significant investments in equipment and working capital – increasing their risk of greater debt to brokers. The long-term implications of the connection between this small fishery community and the global economy, as well as the impact on the environment, were not yet evident.

Despite the precarity, exploitation and vulnerability reported by residents, feelings of resilience and hope for the future remained at the time of the MIGNEX fieldwork in July 2021.

In the context of the extreme flooding in August/September 2022, Keti Bandar is among the highly affected areas on the Indus River Delta. How the current crisis will impact local communities remains to be seen. It is largely dependent on the speed, extent and nature of disaster relief and recovery investments. A possible future prospect that needs to be recognised is that, due to its location and related vulnerability, Keti Bandar becomes uninhabitable if submerged by the sea.

Notes

1. At the time of publication, Pakistan is experiencing extreme flooding. The level of loss, damage and forced displacement in Keti Bandar, Thatta, and across Pakistan is extremely high.
2. Fieldwork consisting of key informant interviews, focus group discussions and observations was carried out by Marta Bivand Erdal, Furrukh Khan, Rashid Memon, Sehr Nisar, Prithvi Raj, Neha Ramchand in November–Dec 2021. A face-to-face survey of 500 randomly selected residents (aged 18–39 years) was conducted by Gallup Pakistan in July 2021.
3. Hope and despair in the Indus river delta. MIGNEX Insight, December 2021. <https://www.mignex.org/publications/hope-and-despair-indus-river-delta-navigating-treacherous-waters-capitalism-climate>

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MIGNEX – Aligning Migration Management and the Migration-Development Nexus – is a five-year research project (2018–2023) with the core ambition of creating new knowledge on migration, development and policy. It is carried out by a consortium of nine partners: The Peace Research Institute Oslo (coordinator), Danube University Krems, the University of Ghana, Koç University, Lahore University of Management Sciences, Maastricht University, ODI, the University of Oxford and Samuel Hall.

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