

Pakistan: New evictions?

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THE poor of Machhar Colony should prepare for another disaster. On Sept 25, the federal government announced its grand initiative — the Karachi Coastal Comprehensive Development Zone — which is directly linked to CPEC investments and apparently set to attract Chinese investment of \$3.5 billion.

Spread over 640 hectares (1,581 acres) of prime coastal territory, the proposed development is meant to upgrade port facilities, create a new fisheries port and have connecting links with Manora and Sandspit. Machhar Colony, a typical katchi abadi, will no longer exist.

Apart from the environmental fallout, the proposed plan will dislocate half a million people. Given Karachi's track record, promises of resettlement and rehabilitation do not materialise. Thousands of hapless households uprooted by the 'removal of encroachments' and cleaning of nullahs are waiting to be resettled. Large-scale real estate developments along the Superhighway have also caused thousands to lose their homes and livelihoods — without being compensated. It appears that the federal and provincial governments, despite their political discord, both agree that Karachi's poor should be evicted — out of sight. Only promises are made for surveying, upgrading and leasing katchi abadis. Nothing moves on the ground.

Not too long ago, the Sindh chief minister directed the Sindh Katchi Abadis Authority (SKAA) and senior officials to prepare a plan to upgrade 100 katchi abadis in the province to the level of townships. An official presentation apprised the chief minister about the current situation of katchi abadis. Nothing practical followed. Many government officials are averse to the idea of such upgradation. Some quarters believe that katchi abadis are scars on our urban face and must be replaced with 'neat' and 'orderly' structures. The local political elite in urban Sindh consider katchi abadis as vehicles for in-migration to cities, particularly from KP and now Afghanistan. Realtors view them as potential goldmines and lobby for allowing high-rise development.

Machhar Colony is next on the list of demolitions.

Katchi abadis have emerged due to faulty and inadequate land supply for housing the urban poor. At independence, millions of newcomers opted for urban locations, jhuggis (non-permanent shacks were allowed in open tracts). Several such settlements grew rapidly. The government then came up with rehabilitation schemes but these were not commensurate with the number of refugees. Soon economic compulsion forced millions to move towards the cities that offered employment in industrial enterprises. Left helpless by the state, they helped themselves, though in an unsystematic manner. The banks of the Lyari and Malir rivers and the edge of the Gujjar Nullah and other drains became desirable locations for the poor due to the low cost of making a home. The government initially tried to bulldoze the settlements but soon realised that it was a difficult task.

Learning from planned settlements, katchi abadis adopted grid iron rectilinear layouts. Many government functionaries developed clandestine links with this process for hefty monetary benefits. In addition, some pilot projects and the individuals behind them became a catalyst for improving

physical conditions. Dr Akhtar Hameed Khan and Arif Hasan evolved pilot initiatives for the social and physical uplift of katchi abadis that delivered replicable outcomes. The NGO Saiban came up with the option of targeted land supply to stem speculation and corruption. Popularly called Khuda ki Basti, the model schemes were developed in several areas and cities by different organisations.

Katchi abadis extend perhaps the only option of housing to the urban poor. Instead of being demolished, most merit a technically viable and socially acceptable regularisation. Besides, upgrading katchi abadis should not be seen as a project. With rising urbanisation and the high cost of formal city housing, this phenomenon is likely to intensify. Transformations are being experienced in the context of katchi abadis. Replacement of low-rise housing with informally developed high-rises is visible in settlements close to the city centre in Karachi. The rising cost of water supply through tankers is a common mode of service delivery. Electricity and gas supply is also increasing for the poor. Whereas some think that the poor enjoy free services, the reality is that they pay many times more than residents of planned neighbourhoods. But these transactions are done in a completely informal manner.

The SKAA can learn from available sources of information, and the staff and leadership of Saiban and similar organisations. The authority should formulate short- and medium-term plans with community involvement at all levels of work. This is the only approach that has delivered credible results in our katchi abadis.

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