[Mansoor Raza](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/mansoor-raza)

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**Planning the city**

No matter how industriously master plans of cities are made, because of the prevalent bureaucratic work culture the operationalization of these will always remain problematic.

The purpose of this article is not to discuss bureaucracy in the Weberian tradition, since a lot has been said and written about that, but to document a few observations as a bystander of the development planning in Karachi.

The consensus and the stated role of the bureaucracy is to serve, promote and safeguard the public interest – but, in reality, the entire effort of our bureaucrats is how not to lose their job and get due promotions.

Our bureaucracy is more higher-authority centric than people oriented. Sycophancy and how to please the boss compel our bureaucrats to extend personal favors. Both verbal and non-verbal communication is aimed to exhibit exorbitant subservience to those at higher grades; the focus is the boss and not the people.

The casualty in this is independent thinking and honest expression that often manifests itself in curbing dissent. Urban planning thrives in debate and dissent and this attitude of yes-man-ship usually proves counterproductive in the operationalization of plans in the form of projects and programs.

It is sad to note that there is a strong disconnect between communities and our bureaucracy. A typical bureaucrat is wary of public appraisals. The resentment of communities is rooted in their very experiences at various stages of life. For instance, getting a simple B form or obtaining a death certificate can be a day-long struggle or take even more than a day.

The exorbitant display of power by the driver of a ‘sahib’ with a government number plate on the car is a daily observation by commuters. The distance created between human beings through bureaucratic ways of organizing is potentially debilitating. This disconnect is one of the prime hurdles in operationalizing Karachi’s plans in a pro-people manner as the bureaucrat neither has the mindset nor the training to do that

The hemisphere of the authority of a bureaucrat is mostly the lower staff. It is a common complaint that the staff deputed and paid for public service is found at the ‘bangla’ of the sahib. The poor staff gets a certain level of job tenure security, the ‘sahib’ feels comfortable and the entire system remains functional. Sahib’s life goes well but the entire system suffers from human resource shortage.

Then there is a tendency of playing safe in decision-making. Any out-of-the-routine issue, if handled, is handled with utmost caution so not to be on the radar. Responding to simple day-to-day problems with administrative insensitivity and long procedures, to reinforce hegemony and power is perceived counterproductive by the people.

Complexity is the key word and to go round and round through paper trails to solve a simple problem is the method. A glaring example is the process to obtain a CNIC in any major urban center and if that’s not sufficient evidence, then one can try for property mutation to taste the pill. An ordinary person is heavily engaged with the essentials of life and the desire is to make processes simple for the sake of quick output; the bureaucratic culture is against the aspirations of the people as are bureaucracy conceived and initiated projects.

And modernity, technology and money-lending institutions are putting constant pressures on our bureaucrats to be soft. So, the new bureaucrat speaks the language of subjects but decides as per the dictates of those who are at the top of the ladder. The soft bureaucrat acts more as a Trojan Horse of decision-makers than the real servant of the people.

The exorbitant and obnoxious display of power, the procrastination on one pretext or another, the anti-poor culture by our bureaucrats not only jeopardize the implementation of well-made plans but also endanger the entire concept of citizenship.

After experiencing and observing all of the above, initially a common citizen gets disinterested in the state of affairs and the latter gets alienated from the system, culminating in paranoia. If the above-mentioned few observations are true, the bureaucracy and the bureaucrat have to decide whether they want to continue with the existing anti-people culture or wish to make people equal stakeholders in development plans. In the answer lies the future of the city.

The writer is a lecturer at in theDepartment of Architecture andPlanning at NED, Karachi.

Email: mansooraza@gmail.com