**Created homelessness**

BY A R I F H A S A N 2021-03-16

IN the last 40 years no social housing has been developed in Pakistan except for small schemes by community organisations and NGOs, which is not even a drop in the ocean.  
  
Grand plans made by the PPP and PML-N governments during their tenures did not materialise.  
  
So one is forced to ask as to how the poor manage to house themselves? This process in Karachi has been well-documented. Comparatively cheap land is available on the city`s fringe. Living there is unaffordable because of costs involved in travelling to work, absence of education and health facilities, and work for women.  
  
As a result, the old katchi abadis, which are within or nearer to places of work have densified and so have houses along the nullahs.  
  
Densification is achieved by building upwards, increasing the number of families in one house, or simply moving part of the family to the street. The more ecologically dangerous places have the cheapest land and so most of the poorest families live in areas subject to flooding or landslides.  
  
There was a time when katchi abadi residents were confident that their settlements would be regularised. However, for the past 15 to 20 years the regularisation process has been abandoned and under the 2014 Sindh Special Development Board Act, katchi abadis can be handed over to developers for demolition and multistorey reconstruction on `modern` lines. Infrastructure projects have also displaced over 200,000 people in the last decade; as a result, most displaced families are heavily in debt and their children out of school. This has led to extreme insecurity in all low-income settlements in Karachi, which is a major impediment to upward mobility.  
  
As a result of the 2020 floods, the government has decided to bulldoze about 12,000 homes along three nullahs (demolition along other nullahs will follow) that they claim are disrupting the flow of water. In addition, 2,948 commercial units are also to be removed.  
  
There are a number of issues that arise out of this situation. The houses being demolished almost always contain more than one family but compensation is being paid per house. Then the notice given for demolition is too short. These houses have been built over time and have been financed primarily by women through BC committees, savings from household expenses, and sale of dowry items such as jewellery. Once demolished, the owners have no place to store usable items from the rubble or have no space to cook, so many families stay hungry. Given Covid and inflation, and a change of culture, moving in with friends and relatives is no longer an option.  
  
Meanwhile, rents have increased due to inflation and a six-month advance is demanded bylandlords. The money offered by the government is not even a small fraction of what is required even for renting purposes.  
  
These low-income settlements have an economy that serves the local population and generates jobs. By the removal of commercial activity, this economy and the population it serves are adversely affected.  
  
Surveys of the affected population show that most of them have either lost their jobs or that their businesses have suffered due to Covid. In most cases, one finds one family of six to eight persons living in one room with of ten one toilet seat for 20 persons. These conditions are enough to shame any Pakistani with a minimum of conscience. With the construction of ML1 (the rail link between Karachi and Peshawar), evictions will increase manifold and will take place all over Pakistan.  
  
One is forced to ask if infrastructure projects have to create homelessness,loss of jobs, debt, and out-of-school children. The construction of Karachi`s Malir Expressway isdemolishing a large number of old goths including archaeological sites, water reservoirs, and green cover. In the opinion of some experts,there could have been an alignment whereby these goths remained unaffected.  
  
It is imperativethat in the future, infrastructure projects should aim at minimising evictions, and either a lump-sum compensation or a housing alternative should be offered to the affected population. This should be a part of the government`s current housing programme. At a modest estimate over one million population will have their homes demolished in Pakistan as a result of the ML1 and related infrastructure projects. This population is both poor and homeless. Imran Khan does not have to look for the poor. They are staring him in the face. Also you cannot keep punishing people for the f ailure of previous governments.  
  
The present demolitions are a watershed in Pakistan`s history. They have been supported by Supreme Court judgements. There has been no effective civil society movement opposing them. They are not a hot subject for the media, human rights organisations or political parties. Meanwhile illegal construction by the elites of this country is routinely regularised. It seems that we are happy being an apartheid state. The writer is an architect.  
  
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