**Poor, poorer, poorest**

[Kamila Hyat](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/kamila-hyat)

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It is easy to draw up schemes on pieces of paper and respond to problems listed on other pieces of paper. The orders delivered by the Supreme Court in 2018 to remove encroachments in Karachi were indeed most likely intended to restore the city to what is being termed its former status or aesthetic quality in the eyes of those delivering the verdict. But the result for those who already struggle to earn even a basic living has been devastating.

Over 3,500 tiny shops owned by vendors have fallen under the force of bulldozers in Empress Market and other bazaars, leaving 17,500 workers without jobs. If we consider that each of these workers supports a family of around seven people, the number of affected people totals over 140,000. The number of encroachments that have taken place in Karachi is even larger, moving outside large markets and to other areas.

In human terms, the cost is devastating. Families report there is no longer food to place before children, because there is no earning. It has been argued by the commissioner of Karachi that these tiny shops, set up some 45 years ago, had originally been allocated a space of four-by-four square yards, with each vendor handed over a small slip permitting them to keep a small table in the space to sell their items. Over the span of over four decades, these spaces had grown into shops measuring eight-by-twelve or even twelve-by-twenty square feet and illegal roofs placed over them.

This is indeed perfectly true. The problem is that even if the vending businesses are illegal, people cannot be literally left to starve by knocking down their only means of livelihood in order to ‘beautify’ the city. There is much else that needs to be done in Karachi to make it a better place to live, by clearing piles of rubbish and renovating parks or other open spaces. When the cost of ‘improving’ public spaces is so high in human terms, perhaps other tactics should be adopted.

As the vendors have suggested, perhaps they could have been asked to pay taxes in order to meet the criticism that they do not contribute to the formal economy. The size of their shops could also have been reduced and limited to a specific area or converted into small cabins such as those that line roadsides in almost all major cities. There seems to be little justification in simply knocking down enterprises which have taken years to build and leave families with no choice but to remove children from school, send them out to push carts on the roads or beg or desperately attempt to seek help from courts or other persons. So far, few have stepped forward to help these thousands of affected people.

Those who were already poor have been made poorer still. In the meanwhile, it seems to be impossible to deal with those who are wealthy and powerful in the same manner. A mall in Pindi is allaged to have encroached on no less than 40 kanals of CDA land. The Supreme Court has dismissed CDA claims that this land has been taken back by placing its own grilles around parking spaces and stating that they now belong to the federal capital. The reality is that it has proved impossible to shift such privileged encroachments. This is also true in the case of other wealthy owners who encroach upon government owned land or turn public spaces into their own.

Instead, it is those unable to defend themselves who become the target of anti-encroachment drives, which have taken place before Karachi in other cities as well. In Karachi, the demolishing of the Empress Market vending businesses has also badly impacted the flow of goods into parts of the city and to other shops in the area. The vendors who have been removed point out that even if they are given some location on a faraway piece of land, customers will not visit their stalls or buy their goods. A more logical plan to rescue them is required.

There can be no sense in worsening the lives of people who already live just barely above the poverty line and struggle to support a large number of dependents in this time of high unemployment and poor trade. In Lahore, we have seen houses demolished to build the Orange Line train which still does not run along its allocated route. Again, we must consider if removing people from homes they had inhabited since before Partition is justified to build a transport system which could have been altered to spare them their suffering and also prevent the damage that has occurred to key heritage sites in this city of history.

It is always worth making adjustments which help humans, especially those who have no other means to help themselves. The stand put up by people along the Orange Line route was eventually torn apart by paying them money to shift to new locations, in many cases far away from their workplaces. People who accepted the money felt they had no other option. Those who did not wish to do so were simply forced to leave.

Removing encroachments is not just a matter of making areas look better. In every business which stands on a roadside in Lahore, Karachi, Faisalabad or other cities, selling food, clothing, plastic items or other goods, there are stories of people and families attached. These need to be respected. So does every citizen and their right to exist and earn a living. By taking away their means to earn, the authorities are simply turning a bad situation into an even worse one.

Certainly, in this time of high inflation and massive job cuts across the country, we cannot afford to support more people who are unemployed and cannot manage to feed or educate their children.

There are plenty of innovative solutions that can be found. There are experts around the country who would be able to come up with these and negotiate a deal with vendors and house owners who must be considered key figures in any plan involving city ‘development’. This principle should always be kept in mind. Otherwise, we are simply doing a huge disservice to the citizens of the country and further reducing what little they have.

In turn, the wealthy such as the owners of huge real-estate businesses cannot be touched at all or the lands they have captured and stolen from people taken back. This is certainly not justice. It is just the opposite and reflects the kind of state we have become.

The writer is a freelance columnist and former newspaper editor.

Email: kamilahyat@hotmail.com