**Public choices**

BY N O M A N A H M E D 2021-02-10

GOING by talk shows, it seems there is little common ground when it comes to debating politics. However, those that matter in the corridors of politics and power have the same ideas when it comes to urban development.  
  
All believe that large-scale and high-visibility projects are the real essence of development. There is consensus on promoting highend and supply-driven real estate schemes.  
  
All authorities, including the judiciary, agree on clearing `encroached` lands of the urban poor but stop short of knocking down illegal construction by the rich and powerful.  
  
Some time ago, the prime minister inaugurated the Ravi Riverfront Urban Development Project in Lahore. His confidants announced a similar scheme for Karachi`s islands. High-visibility expressways along a Karachi river and the coastline comprise newly approved projects. The establishment is not lagging behind. Its obsession with acquiring, packaging and selling land is not a clandestine enterprise.  
  
Besides, a judicial verdict is seen as having given a new lease of life to one of the biggest land grabs in May 2018. So how can the working classes exercise their right to democracy and choose or influence development options? Once in five years, the public is invited to cast their vote. But after that, government institutions, service delivery bodies, infrastructure utilities, etc. remain inaccessible.  
  
There is no consultation. Development schemes and major initiatives related to infrastructure are generally undertaken through consensus among government, private-sector operators and investors. It is not the interest of the public but that of other stakeholders that is kept in mind while endorsing development decisions which have hardly any input from the public. This is of no benefit to ordinary folk.  
  
Take housing. Affordable and accessible land supply for the urban poor and underprivileged is the basic condition. But land is being liberally supplied for high-end real estate development. Agencies with clout lead this procurement race. If one follows commercials on the media, it is evident that large tracts of land along regional highways and motorways get sold out either as approved/ unapproved land sub-divisions or preferential land transfers from provincial governments to influential agencies.  
  
An agency mandated to manage security at the airports now boasts a real estate enterprise along the M-9 motorway (Karachi to Hyderabad). No land access provision exists for the thousands of low-income households as no f acilitation for housing and urban development is given.  
  
The federal government`s housing initiative may have opened up a few options forhousing credit, but they are only valid for those who own land. Housing finance prudential regulations do not allow the use of banking credit for the purchase of land. Thus the poor are left out. The poor have neither the power nor capacity to change the development discourse and convince provincial governments to deliver af fordable land.  
  
There is a perception that by allocating large funds, development will take place automatically. This is not correct. Time and again, packages are announce d for cities with little success. There are many reasons for this failure. For example, an ongoing project or scheme can be quietly included in the development portfolio to render it high-value and visible. The Karachi Circular Railways was included in the recently announced Karachi Transformation Plan. More often than not, projects finish after substantial cost escalation. The Lyari Expressway was initially estimated to cost Rs5.1 billion. It was finished beyond the scheduled time at an expense of approximately Rs23bn.In contrast to such expensive undertakings, development preferences of ordinary folk do not cost a lot. For example, they may require the rehabilitation of intercity bus terminals or the provision of runningwater for passengers, decent toilets, waiting and service spaces. Regarding water supply and sanitation, the monitoring and repairs of filtration plants is important to enhance the quality of water being supplied to homes. An aggressive public health awareness campaign can work wonders in convincing house owners and apartment associations to periodically clean their storage tanks.  
  
Most of our cities require properly planned and strategically located sanitary landfill sites and garbage transfer stations for solid waste management. These f acilities could be envisionedaswaste-to-energyenterprisesfor adding more electricity to local and national grids. Our cities require demarcation of municipal/ metropolitan boundaries to limit the urban sprawl and loss of farming land.  
  
Digitisation of property and ownership details and posting this information on departmental websites can reduce the illegal disposal of land.  
  
Finally, the procedures for environmental impact assessment need to be revisited to safeguard our ecological assets. The writer is an academic and a researcher based in Karachi.