

# Erecting shelters for urban poor

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The government's decision to regularize the slums (katchi abadis) set up before 1985 will be a welcome relief for have-nots, who have been rotting in cities' ghettos facing the hardships of nature in the open.

Existing slums having 40 or more houses set up before March 23, 1985 would be regularized and upgraded at their present sites.

Urbanization in Pakistan over the last 20 years has seen the cities overflowing with population too much to be housed. Due to various factors that led to slump in the performance in the agriculture sector along with increasing population, rural population migrated in large numbers towards cities from 1980s onwards.

The Soviet invasion and subsequent infighting in Afghanistan poured refugees into Pakistan, adding to the teeming population in cities, with slums cropping up everywhere in cities.

As the slums are without any planning, their growth threatened the civic set up in the cities, health and management problems have plagued the cities' administration.

The slums not only add to the civic problems but also became hideouts for criminals, and impinge on the regular government schemes.

In 1990s, anti-encroachment drives became order of the day in many of the big cities. The anti-encroachment campaigns, however, have proved to be short-lived solutions. Such campaigns only highlighted the need for long-term solutions — solutions that should be based on humanitarian grounds, and not forcing people to change their habitats and set up another slum in some other place.

Using anti-encroachment campaigns as an opportunity to get their prime land vacated, some land owning agencies, especially Pakistan Railways, started evictions of katchi abadis in Punjab. The evictions were not only resisted by the affected people but there was wide spread resentment against such actions.

They only proved to be juicy matter for the press, as it splashed pictures of women and children grieving outside the demolished houses.

It was in this background that Umer Asghar Khan, the minister for environment, local government and rural development, took up the issue of slums in a federal cabinet meeting, besides organizing a brain-storming session with stakeholders in Islamabad.

It emerged that the mushrooming of the katchi abadis — the low and under service areas — is the failure of the state to provide feasible land and housing options to the urban poor.

No doubt the plan for arranging something caring for the urban poor is a daunting one. One option is to ignore it and let it fester, as the past governments have done. The problem demanded a

policy based on possible areas of cooperation between the state and urban poor.

The Chief Executive, General Pervez Musharraf, formed a body on July 20, 2000 to prepare a national policy on katchi abadis and upgrading. It comprised representatives of the federal government: Planning Commission, National Housing Authority, the Ministry of Environment, Local Government and Rural Development, the Directorate General Military Lands and cantonments of the Ministry of Defence, and the Capital Development Authority, besides the provincial governments along with the development authorities of Faisalabad, Peshawar and Quetta, and a research professional from the private sector.

The body studied emergence of katchi abadis and low and under serviced settlements in the context of urbanization, and the policies and strategies to regularize, upgrade and improve katchi abadis, including legislative and institutional framework.

According to the 1998 census, Pakistan's urban population is 42.5 million, representing 32.5 per cent of the total population, which is growing at 2.5 per cent per annum — a substantially high growth rate.

Over the past 30 years the urban growth due to migration has varied between 19-20 per cent. The figure nearly remains constant for the census period 1972-81 and 1981-98.

Under the government's new definition of poverty, the urban population proportion living under the poverty line — Rs 50 per capita per day — is rising at an alarming rate. An estimated 50 per cent of the urban population lives below the poverty line.

The economic development of urban areas is key to economic development. A review of the urban-rural sectors in national economic growth indicates that the urban sector has contributed a disproportionately higher amount to the national economy than its share of population.

The estimates for the urban population living in katchi abadis and low and under service areas range from 35-50 per cent. The unchecked growth of katchi abadis on public land and the growth of low and under service settlements is the direct result of the shortcomings in the housing delivery system and lack of access to affordable tenure by the poor.

In metropolitan cities of Karachi, Lahore, Hyderabad, Peshawar, and Quetta, nearly 40 per cent of the population is living in katchi abadis and low and under serviced areas.

On the basis of the 1998 census the optimal demand for housing works out to be 21.92 million units and the backlog to be 2.22 million units. This is likely to grow at about 0.5 million housing units each year to meet the incremental demand including 0.3 million units in

urban areas. At least 65 per cent of the demand is likely to be in the lower income groups.

It was in 1985 that a government policy about slums was announced promising to provide shelter to shelter-less in urban and rural areas as well as regularization of katchi abadis. However, the Katchi Abadis Improvement Programmes have suffered from the lack of public participation, delays in grant of propriety rights and poor standard of works.

The Musharraf government's policy for the slums includes granting of the propriety rights, sharing of the cost by the beneficiaries and an integrated approach for infrastructure as well as social sector provision. The security of tenure will be a stimulus to residents to invest more of their savings into their house construction and infrastructure. The government's role will be of facilitating these improvements.

The government has also made it compulsory for all housing schemes to include one sector for low cost housing — a decision that will help check mushrooming of the slums — along with protection against "ad hoc evictions" of katchi abadis.

In future land would be earmarked in each government's housing schemes for allotment to low income groups. This step would help low income groups to get their own houses, discouraging the policy of previous governments under which rich people were gifted with valuable land on subsidy rates.

The decision to provide shelter to poor inhabitants by upgrading their slums throughout the country, besides allocating land at affordable prices to those who would be displaced from such localities will help regulate urbanization in Pakistan.

Shelterless would be provided plots on affordable prices along with financial assistance from Zakat, Bait-ul-Maal and loans on easy installments from Khushali Bank and other banks, for construction of their new houses.

The provincial governors and land-owning agencies would identify state land for establishment of these localities by March this year. The government would spend a share of its Poverty Alleviation Programme for provision of water, electricity, roads and other modern facilities to such localities.

Model pilot projects would be set up at Islamabad and the provincial metropolis.

The slums' inhabitants would be resettled in properly developed and planned localities built on the basis of 'Khuda ki Basti' established by Dr Tasnim Siddiqui in Hyderabad.

The effort to regularize the slums would go a long way in improving civic management in mega-cities. If on the one hand, it is a huge and noble task, on the other it is aimed at bringing order in our cities' life.

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