

# Inclusive Gentrification: Presenting the 'Absent' in the Urban Development of Karachi

*Considering the recent demolition of shops surrounding Empress Market in the Saddar area of Karachi, the article examines the ideas driving urban development in the city. Shafaat Saleem argues that current development plans and subsequent gentrification will only benefit a specific class of capitalists and exclude the urban poor from the urban scape by displacing them and dismantling their livelihoods.*

Urbanisation in the Global South has often been perceived as transition to progress. It features capital accumulation, facilitated by land possession for industrial development and megaprojects, as has been [explained earlier](#). However, capital-driven urbanisation unveils various forms of urban injustices such as dispossession, ecological degradation, and exclusion of the urban poor from 'development'. Echoing [David Harvey's concept of Accumulation by Dispossession](#), the current model of urban development seeks to benefit a certain class of capitalists and overlooks the experiences of marginalised communities by dispossessing them of their rights, land, and livelihoods.

In Karachi, one of the megacities of the world, the gentrification of social spaces to allow capital-driven 'development' has led to many such urban injustices. For instance, urban planner and architect Arif Hasan has noted that the [gentrification of Karachi's coastline](#) for the commercialisation of land serves elite interests whilst destructively impacting the poor and their livelihoods. Similarly, demolitions of informal settlements in Karachi in the name of 'development' demonstrate that the exclusion of urban poor from urban planning remains a persisting problem in the city. Considering Boaventura de Sousa Santos' [Sociology of Absences](#), the urban poor, although crucial to the city's economic and cultural webs, remain absent from the development-focused thinking of policy-makers. This phenomenon was exemplified with the [demolition of street-vendors shops](#) surrounding the famous Empress Market during anti-encroachment drives in Karachi in 2018.

Karachi's informal markets are what keeps it going; its informal economy counts for [30-40% of its total economy](#). Empress Market served as one of the oldest informal settlements where thousands had their shops and carts, selling all sorts of things. In 2018, these markets were demolished as [Pakistan's Supreme Court ordered anti-encroachment drives](#) for the removal of illegal occupants of the land. However, encroachment and illegality remain contested concepts as they are mostly targeted at the urban poor. Elites often tend to slide off from cases of encroachment and land-grabbing as the façade of [Bahria Town](#) is unraveled. The matter of demolitions and evictions of the poor thus veils politics beyond the anti-encroachment agendas.

The 2018 demolitions were to facilitate the [\\$100m 'Karachi Neighborhood Improvement Project', in association with the World Bank, to revitalise the public spaces and 'improve livability and inclusiveness'](#) in Karachi. The Master Plan includes zoning of the area: recreational, educational, commercial zones, etc. Ironically, the Plan, which seeks 'inclusiveness and livability', explicitly excludes people who make the most of the city's socioeconomic fabric — the urban poor. The demolitions dismantled thousands of kiosks and livelihoods of people who inhabited the area for decades. This not only threatened their lives but also challenged their right to the city, and to national notions of 'progress'. The issue at the heart of this is, therefore, critical as it is one of exclusion of urban poor from urban planning leading to exacerbation of socioeconomic inequalities in the name of progress.

The new Plan claims to revitalise social spaces through capital investments but deprives thousands of people of their heritage, livelihoods, and rights. The bigger question, though, is whether the urban poor will even have access to these newly revitalised spaces? Will the planned revitalisation rehabilitate those who were displaced and dismantled in the first place? If not, then who exactly is this revitalisation benefiting, and why? Since the concern here is the restoration of the city, the stakeholders also need to pay attention to the restoration of the [city's oldest livelihoods that are threatened because of this gentrification](#), one which goes beyond monetary compensations and incentives.

[The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan](#) has said that 'Protecting people's fundamental right to a livelihood must always take priority in urban planning. The sheer scale at which shopkeepers and hawkers have been evicted from Saddar — putting thousands of low-income families at risk of almost immediate poverty — should be a cause of serious concern among planning and development policymakers.' The solution to exclusion and massive displacement of the poor should always consider not just their employment and resettlement (which remains a distant task) but also the restoration of their livelihood, and equitable inclusion in development plans. Considering this argument, re-creation of employment opportunities and bringing back the vendor-market within the new zoning Plan of the area should be taken into consideration. This could be done by allowing space for vendors in the surrounding areas, be it in a more regularised manner. Further, new avenues in the region — for example museums or restaurants should prioritise employing those who were affected and displaced to restore their economic sustainability. This would alleviate the impact of the destruction in the following ways: first, the reallocation of street vendors within the new Plan would prevent unemployment and poverty to some extent; second, it would provide equal access to 'new and revitalised' spaces for the urban poor, ensuring their inclusion and rights to the city; and third, the creation of opportunities in the new plan will prevent the destruction of diverse social landscapes and livelihoods.

The technical aspects of this plan need to be laid out in consultation with social and urban planning experts. The wider idea suggested here is to accommodate, for example, tea shops or bird markets alongside museums and art galleries, to keep the traditional settlements within the new urban development plans of the city, and work towards 'inclusive gentrification', if that is a possibility. Inclusive gentrification, ideally, will not displace the poor with the influx of the affluent; rather, it would encourage the amalgamation of diverse communities and socioeconomic interactions between them. It will allow an exchange of opportunities and the creation of a just and equitable neighbourhood for all. [As mentioned](#) by Arif Hasan and Hamza Arif, 'was it not possible that Saddar could be gentrified while keeping its 70-plus years-old culture, its economy, and those who created it, alive? This still is a great challenge for the architects who along with others such as the UN and the World Bank believe in equity and the development of multi-class spaces.'

To conclude, in capitalist models of urban development, the urban poor has remained absent from development thinking, producing urban injustices such as exclusion and displacement of the poor. Yet, development or progress is unachievable or continues to be questionable if the poor are constantly assumed to be 'non-existent' and undesired to be seen. Therefore, alternate models of development should be produced that provide space for those who continue to exist despite being non-existent in urban planning strategies.

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*This post gives the views of the author and not those of the 'South Asia @ LSE' blog, the LSE South Asia Centre or the London School of Economics & Political Science.*