

# Experts seek urban land reforms, halt to unregulated commercialisation

**'Quiet' tweaks to building regulations termed threat to Karachi's culture, environment**

By Shazia Hasan

KARACHI: Urban planning experts, architects and members of civil society voiced their concerns over the recent amendments to the Karachi Building and Town Planning Regulations 2002 during a dialogue held at the Karachi Press Club on Friday.

The event titled "Amendments to the Karachi Building and Town Planning

Regulations 2002, and the Future of the City", was jointly organised by The Knowledge Forum, Shehri-Citizens for a Better Environment (CBE) and the Urban Resource Centre (URC).

Town planner and architect Arif Hasan criticised the current state of housing and land use in Karachi while emphasising the urgent need for urban land reforms in Sindh.

"The absence of low-income housing is forcing people to develop informal settlements or *katchi abadis*," he said. "The government must fulfil its responsibility in ensuring planned and affordable housing."

Arif Hasan said there are land limitation laws in many countries, under which a family cannot keep more than a piece of land, which ensures proper utilisation

of the land. This will ensure land reforms.

Highlighting unchecked commercialisation in areas such as PECHS Block 6, Arif Hasan stated that while commercial activities are necessary, they must be well-planned and regulated. "Without planning, we cannot move forward. Karachi's urban needs are complex and must be addressed through comprehensive strategies," he asserted.

Amber Alibhai of Shehri-CBE pointed out that amendments to the Sindh Building Control Ordinance 1979 and related bylaws are being carried out without public knowledge or input. "The Sindh Building Control Authority [SBCA] has centralised control over master planning, regulations and town planning, and they are making changes quietly," she said. "Major shifts in land use,

building heights and parking norms are being made without transparency."

Alibhai also highlighted historical context, noting that when the Karachi Development Authority (KDA) was established, it was entrusted with housing development for the city, which had its laws and regulations for various residential societies. Over time, this framework has deteriorated. "The protected nature of the construction industry and state patronage of utilities have led to poor enforcement and increasing violations," she added.

She said with the growth in population a continuous body should be there for planning for a city. This is not happening in Karachi. "Our city has become a chess

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board and powerful people play with pawns," she remarked.

Architect Fazal Noor warned that while commercial activity is a natural outcome in a city such as Karachi, "regularising violations is not a solution to inability to enforce rules".

He emphasised that commercial areas should not be broadly defined and called for a rethinking of planning criteria, particularly how land use is determined. "We must move from land area-

based formulas to those grounded in population density and environmental impact, including smog, noise, sewage and drainage issues," he said.

Civil activist and lawyer Abira Ashfaq lamented the absence of a system to compensate those displaced by commercialisation or illegal development.

"The affected are left without remedy, while power has increasingly shifted from technical experts and regulators to bureaucrats serving business interests," she said.

The former chief of the

Citizens Police Liaison Committee (CPLC), Jameel Yousuf, said that in 1995 they had established a neighbourhood watch and they handled all civic facilities themselves. "The idea was to replicate it in other areas. We wanted the KMC to multiply it in other areas," he said while suggesting that the KMC should take over all societies that are collecting funds from residents and confiscate all their funds.

Earlier, while introducing the speakers, the Director of The Knowledge Forum Zeenia Shaukat emphasised that the consultation aimed to address concerns over amendments that were made quietly during long public holidays, without public or stakeholders engagement. "Civil society must speak up. The culture and environment of Karachi are at stake," she said.

She drew attention to environmental consequences, stating that Karachi's temperature has risen by 2.5°C in recent years. "The city's per capita floor area is

below five square meters, far lower than the UNESCO standard of 20," she noted, urging policymakers to align planning decisions with climate commitments. "Pakistan is preparing its updated Nationally Determined

Contributions (NDCs), and Karachi, as part of the C40 cities network, must play its role."

The participants called for the immediate halting of unregulated commercial expansion and demanded a participatory

approach to city planning that prioritises people, the environment and inclusive urban development. They urged for transparency, accountability and meaningful public consultation in all future planning decisions.