PRESS RELEASE

Civil Society Calls for Unified Platform to Address Karachi's Urban Crisis, emphasizes Monitoring of the Karachi Climate Action Plan

KARACHI: Civil society activists and human rights advocates from across Karachi city gathered at a local hotel on Saturday to honor Professor Dr Noman Ahmed for his recent appointment as Acting Vice Chancellor of NED University of Engineering and Technology.

The reception, hosted by The Knowledge Forum, brought together prominent activists, academics, and community leaders who paid glowing tribute to Professor Dr Noman Ahmed for his contributions to the city's development and support to the civil society. They emphasised the urgent need for collective action to address Karachi's deteriorating civic conditions and climate change challenges.

"NED is a prestigious university that has played a significant role in shaping the Karachi city's development by way of the technical capacities of its faculty and creating opportunities for research and dialogue. It is extremely critical for such an important university to have a leadership that can demonstrate commitment to positive action attuned with the emerging realities of the city, primarily climate change, and non-representative and exclusionary development.

"The civil society of Karachi is of the view that with Professor Dr Noman, we have that kind of leadership who brings in the depth, the commitment, and the gentle nudging towards positive action that can help work in favour of a pro rights, pro communities and pro environment development."

Speaking at the reception, veteran human rights activist Anis Haroon and a member from Sindh for the National Commission for Human Rights (NCHR) painted a grim picture of the city's current state, citing widespread load-shedding, unprecedented inflation, and deteriorating living conditions. She pointed to the cost of living crisis forcing people to violence and destitute.0 "People who used to eat one loaf of bread are now eating half of it. No city can prosper if its citizens struggle for basic necessities," she said, warning that rising poverty and frustration could lead to increased violence.

Uzma Noorani, human rights activist and member of Women's Action Forum recalled major successes of civil society in the city, including the People's Resistance movement to support lawyers movement in 2007, and the Sahil Bachao Tehreek that pushed back eco destruction in the name of development that was being planned by the government.

Amber Alibhai from Shehri organisation stressed the importance of leveraging technology and data to address urban challenges. "Civil society's has built considerable data on city's issues in

the past two decades. This is our strength. We need to take our knowledge and use this data to mount pressure on institutions to reform in accordance with citizens' wellbeing," she said, criticising government actions to convert parks into commercial spaces through public private partnerships, blocking access of citizens to public spaces to build health and recreation.

Environmental journalist Zofeen Ebrahim echoed the call for research-based solutions, noting the need for comprehensive studies to understand Karachi's problems systematically rather than working "haphazardly."

Activist and Vice Chairman of Human Rights Commission of Pakistan Kazi Khizar presented alarming statistics about Sindh's education sector, revealing that out of 49,300 schools in the province, 7,000 are without proper shelter, 18,000 operate from single rooms, and 10,000 have only two rooms. With 4.5 million students enrolled, he cited conflicting figures showing between 3.5 to 7.8 million children remain out of school.

Dr Raza Gardezi criticised the fragmentation within civil society, calling for NGOs to unite and revisit their collective agenda.

Yasir Hussain of Climate Action Centre raised concerns about climate change impacts, sea intrusion threatening agricultural land. He emphasised the need for monitoring Karachi's Climate Action Plan by following on its projects design and resource allocation.

In his response, Dr Noman Ahmed expressed gratitude to pioneering urban planners, including Dr Akhtar Hameed Khan, Arif Hasan, Tasneem Siddiqui, and the late Parveen Rehman. He emphasized the need for a permanent civil society platform beyond issue-specific initiatives to facilitate dialogue and catalyze civil society action on the city's development challenges. He recalled multiple initiatives by the civil society in the past, including collectives on Lyari Expressway, and others that facilitated community's voice in development plans. However, those were disbanded once the issue was closed. "It is important that civil society works in a coherent, long term way so that it can use the capacities built over time for effective intervention in the city's development."

Pointing to the need for youth involvement in civil society's work on the city's development challenges, he stressed the need for civil society to broaden its approach towards youth and devise a students' engagement strategy. "Students from not only social sciences department, but those from information technology also have meaningful solutions to contribute to the city's challenges. Karachi's civil society must think of ways to use their creative expressions and technical skills which are most certainly beneficial for civil society's advocacy and resistance for the city development."

The gathering highlighted both the challenges facing Karachi and the potential for unified civil society action to address the metropolitan area's complex urban problems through data-driven research, community and youth mobilisation, and sustained advocacy efforts.

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