PRESS RELEASE

Civil Society Raises Alarm Over Secretive Amendments to Karachi Building Regulations

KARACHI: April 25, 2025 — Urban planning experts, architects, and civil society members voiced grave concerns over the recent and largely consultative amendments to the Karachi Building and Town Planning Regulations 2002 during a consultation 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-CBE, and the Urban Resource Centre.

Senior town planner and renowned architect Arif Hasan criticised the current state of housing and land use in Karachi, 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 the unchecked commercialisation in areas such as 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.

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

Architect Fazal Noor warned that while commercial activity is a natural outcome in a city like 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.

Abeera 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.

Ex-chief of Citizens Police Liaison Committee (CPLC) Jameel Yousuf said in 1995 we had established Neighbourhood Watch and we handled all civic facilities by ourselves. The idea was to replicate it in other areas. We wanted the KMC to multiply it in other areas. He suggested that KMC should take over all societies that are collecting funds from residents and confiscate all their funds.

Ms. Zeenia Shaukat, Director of The Knowledge Forum, who introduced the speakers, emphasised that the consultation aimed to address concerns over amendments that were made quietly during long public holidays, without public or stakeholder 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 5 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."

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.

Zahid Farooque of Urban Resource Centre, Chandan Mali of National Commission for Human Rights (NCHR), Ms. Shazia Nizamani, advocate, Saeed Baloch and Ayoub Shan of Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum, Researcher Sadiya Siddiqui, journalists Sohail Sangi, Aslam Shah and others also spoke on the occasion.

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