

Karachi Circular Railway (KCR) concerns

Arif Hasan

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Urban Resource Centre

A-2/2, 2nd Floor, Westland Trade Centre,

Commercial Area, Block 7 & 8 Shaheed-e-Millat Road, Karachi Pakistan

Tel: +92 21 – 3431 5656 E-mail; urc@cyber.net.pk, Web Site: urckarachi.org

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THE Karachi Circular Railway (KCR) is arguably the most important project in the pipeline since it connects the four areas where over 45 per cent of Karachi's jobs are located with important low- and middle-income settlements. However, its right of way along 72pc of its length is encroached upon by many 'legally' built formal-sector constructions such as housing colonies, factories and warehousing and about 28pc is 'encroached' upon by katchi abadis. Without removal of much of these encroachments, the KCR cannot be built.

The government has not announced the measures it will take regarding the formal-sector encroachments but it has produced a plan for the removal and rehabilitation of the katchi abadis. They are to be shifted to Juma Goth, about 25 kilometres away from the city centre, where each household will be given an 80-square-yard plot and Rs50,000, a sum not even enough to transport one's belongings to the Juma Goth site.

Surveys of the settlements carried out by the Urban Design Research Cell of the NED University show the majority of children in these settlements walk to school; most of the men work within the settlement or in neighbouring industrial areas; and many women work in the neighbouring middle-income settlements as domestic help.

Sindh must pay heed to the projected plight of KCR affectees.

In addition, there are small- to medium-size businesses and workshops in the settlements which provide jobs, not only to residents but also to outsiders who service their transport, financial and skill-related requirements. Shifting them to a faraway location where they will have to build their homes (all over again) for which they have no finances; bear additional costs and time to travel to work and back, and to school; face the difficulty involved in participating in family festivities or visiting places of entertainment and recreation with their children, and accessing healthcare; will make

them far poorer than before. The majority will come back to their old neighbourhoods as insecure renters. This is what has happened to many affectees of the Lyari Expressway rehabilitation project on which the government's KCR affectees' relocation is modelled.

The Urban Resource Centre has been in dialogue with the KCR-Affectees Action Committee. One of the possibilities that has been explored with them and which they cautiously seem to support is that the affectees, irrespective of whether they have a lease or not, should be divided into four broad categories — one, those with pucca houses and full utility connections; two, those living in makeshift shacks; three, those in between the above two categories; and four, those who are owners of businesses.

It is suggested that households should be paid between Rs2.5 million and Rs300,000, depending on the category they belong to, after which they should move out and find their own accommodation. Other considerations such as the period of time that the affected household has been residing in the settlement can also be taken into consideration. A committee consisting of representatives of civil society, the affectees and government departments could develop the criteria for compensation and supervise its implementation.

The cost of the KCR project in 2012 was worked out at just below Rs150 billion of which the affectees' rehabilitation cost was worked out to about Rs2.5bn or 1.6pc of the total cost. If what is being proposed is accepted, the cost would increase to Rs7.5bn or 2pc of the total cost of the project. It has to be understood that the government plan will also require years to implement (while the communities remain in limbo) and its cost will go up by at least 100pc during the course of implementation. In the case of the Lyari Expressway, the rehabilitation costs increased by 3.5 times — from Rs2bn in 2003 to Rs7bn in 2012. The process is still incomplete and the resettlement colonies have been abandoned by the government with incomplete or non-functioning physical and social infrastructure.

If the proposal given here is accepted by the government and the communities, then most of the affectees will be able to make arrangements of their own choice in which many of the households will opt for finding accommodation in formal settlements. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this is what happened in the case of the Kati Pahari road project where the market price was paid to the affectees and there was no protest or disagreement from their side regarding the decision.

Adding to the misery, class segregation and poverty, and actually spending well over Rs2.5bn to make that happen makes no sense. It will only add to the existing conflict and sense of alienation in an already divided city. Putting political and bureaucratic considerations aside, the Sindh government should consider, in conceptual terms, the proposal discussed in this article.

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