

DAWN



HOW DO KARACHI'S POOR SEE THEMSELVES?

While there exist a broad range of economic and academic metrics by which poverty is measured and defined, such classifications rarely reflect the challenges faced by those who are placed in these categories.

Arif Hasan | Amal Hashim | Published January 29, 2023

This article is a result of a study on how the poor view their poverty — unlike most studies where, on the basis of a survey, consultants decide what poverty is.

The most widely accepted definition, that of the World Bank (which has supported this study), looks at poverty only in economic terms (without all its social, political and cultural causes and consequences) and establishes that the poor are those who earn less than \$1.90 a day. The United Nations, too, adheres to this definition, along with the poverty statistics that result from its application. According to them, only about 10 percent of the world's population lived below the poverty line until 2015.

On the other hand, the World Bank's other, lesser known understanding of poverty encompasses a lack of access to health, education, affordable and clean housing, sanitation and clean water, and political representation. Reconciling this multidimensional definition with the \$1.90-a-day definition is difficult, and some studies have pointed out how unfair this economic definition approach is.

For instance, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has defined poverty as “when someone's material resources are not sufficient for their needs (especially material needs).” Most NGOs agree that poverty is multidimensional and can only be solved if looked at with all relevant factors, holistically.

To discover how various low income groups and those who are considered poor define poverty, and why, is the purpose of the study that we have carried out.

While there exist a broad range of economic and academic metrics by which poverty is measured and defined, such

classifications rarely reflect the challenges faced by those who are placed in these categories. How the poor themselves perceive their own circumstances is often remarkably different from how others see them. A study attempts to fill the gap...

The methodology of the study has been: (1) literature review, to find out wider pre-existing notions of poverty; (2) interviews of eminent planners and activists (Dr. Noman Ahmed, Younus Baloch, Farhat Parveen, Zahid Farooque, Mohammad Toheed, Ambar Ali Bai); (3) fifteen in-depth interviews of key respondents living in low-income settlements; (4) a survey of 100 individuals, residents of katchi abadis (Ghaziabad District West, Pahar Ganj District Central, Rehri Goth District Malir, and Umer Colony District East); and (5) 20 persons living on footpaths in different areas of the city.

What the Interviews and Surveys Tell Us: Denial of Poverty

One of the most pertinent findings of both the qualitative interviews and the quantitative surveys of key respondents was the high number of people living on unleased land or unapproved buildings who did not consider themselves to be poor. Fifty-six percent of the survey respondents who do not consider themselves poor think they earn enough to sustain themselves and their families while 23 percent consider themselves to be middle class.

Some of them are entrepreneurs who are a part of the upper middle class in economic terms and increasing in cultural terms as well. And although their relationship with the rest of the population, especially newer residents, is not a friendly one, they continue to live in katchi abadis [informal settlements] for historic reasons.

The most important issue that emerged from the study was related to education. Citizens have several schooling systems to choose from, even though public education is supposed to be free till the age of 16. However, there are a lot of hidden costs that have to be paid, such as books, fees for extracurricular activities, transport, and examination and admission fee, because of which many poor families struggle to send their children to

school. According to a UNICEF report, 44 percent of children of school-going age in Pakistan are not attending any type of educational institution.

Parents do not wish to send their children to public schools as their perception is that public schools do not impart quality education. There are private schools in low income settlements which they prefer, even though they may charge anything from 800 to 2000 rupees plus as a monthly fee.

Both professionals and activists highlighted the impact of education on an individual's ability to lift themselves out of poverty. However, Dr Noman Ahmed was critical about the proposition.

“Contrary to the belief that education is the panacea for all social evils, including poverty, it has been observed that the quality of education in low income settlements is not paving the way for upward social mobility en masse,” he says. “There might be a few success stories from rags to riches, but these are the exceptions to the rule and not the norm, and their enhancement and entrepreneurship ventures are the only way to address issues related to poverty in low income settlements.”

Almost all professionals and community activists emphasise the need for vocational training centres in low-income settlements. However, none of the key respondents brought up this need. One member of the group interviewed at Manzoor Colony, Samiullah Mazari, even went so far as to state that none of his neighbours or peers wanted their children to drop out of school and become mechanics or learn similar skills.

For most respondents, one of the key priorities was the provision of quality education for their children – which, for them, meant private, English-medium education rather than government or religious schools. According to Samiullah Mazari, “Karachi's schools have been destroyed by political parties. Poor children cannot be educated, since they can only afford government schools.”

According to qualitative interviews, Covid-19 had a major impact on the quality and provision of education in low-income communities. The number of school-going children dropped sharply during the pandemic, as most schools were unable to switch

inadequately to online education due to a lack of WiFi, laptops and mobiles. However, because of the need for information technology for educational purposes, mobile phones and laptops have increased.

The choice of settlement is also dictated by the pre-existence of the individual's ethnic or religious community, since that forms their social and safety net. The sense of security they felt within their own house far surpassed any fear of it being demolished by state authorities.

GOVERNANCE ISSUES

Urban governance in Karachi is poor, and one of its reasons is that it is an Urdu-speaking capital of a Sindhi-speaking province, which results in constant conflict between the Karachi Metropolitan Corporation (KMC) and the leadership of the province as a whole.

A significant source of conflict is the budget of the KMC. Karachi's annual GDP in 2018 was \$164 billion whereas the received KMC budget for the year 2018-2019 was just Rs2.5 billion. This was well below the KMC budget from the time of Naimatullah Khan, former mayor of Karachi, during whose tenure the budget had hovered around Rs5 billion.

Local governments are supposed to generate their own revenue to enhance their fiscal capacities, but much of their functions in Karachi have been taken over by the province and, in some cases, sublet to the private sector.

Residents of informal settlements regularly face problems arising from an increasing privatisation of municipal services and have to pay very high costs (as in the case of electricity provision) or be ignored (as in the case of solid waste management). Charged entry for parks and other recreation spaces and charged parking outside them has

resulted in many lower-income families not being able to access spaces of entertainment and recreation.



Renting and lack of tenure security made respondents poor more than anything else |
Mohammad Ali Addarsh/White Star

NO PLACE TO LIVE

Housing is a major issue in Karachi, with 62 percent of the city's population living in katchi abadis. The reason for it is simple. Formal planning has not provided land and infrastructure for the poor. These settlements have developed slowly over time and acquired water, gas and electricity connections by paying bribes to the relevant staff of utility departments and the police.

In addition to this, tens of thousands of built houses have been demolished, especially recently, as a result of the Supreme Court decision of bulldozing those settlements where land had not been "legally" acquired or was required for new and often unnecessary infrastructure. This has added to the homeless population of the city.

Respondents also voiced that Karachi's growth rate is also affected by internal migration from rural areas, not just from within Sindh but also other provinces.

In 2019, a report by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) reported that about nine percent of the population that they surveyed stated their reason for migrating as "returning home...indicating the role of seasonal and circulating migration." According to the respondents they do not know of any government policies for accommodating migrants, and nor do the existing institutions have the capacity or capability of managing this.

To accommodate the rising housing demand, single-storey houses in informal settlements, even on plots as small as 40 square metres, are being converted informally near the city centres into multi-storey apartments, and the informal housing market operators are investing in this process. Respondents believe that, as a result, and to their detriment, these apartment complexes are changing not only the physical but also the socio-economic nature of the settlements.

Because of the high densities, the absence of open spaces and walking tracks and the number of persons per room in most low income areas, Covid-related SOPs (standard operating procedures) could not be followed, and people were forced to continue living as they had before.

In addition to the above, there are a large number of persons who sleep on the footpaths and under bridges. Some of the respondents said that they had permanent homes, far away from their work areas in the city, and it was expensive commuting to and from them. So they slept in the streets, took a shower in the nearby mosque or hotel, for which they paid and had their clothes dry cleaned, and went back home on weekends and holidays.

The other group consists of persons who have no homes or are circulating migrants. They also have their clothes dry cleaned and obtain water from nearby hotels or filter plants, and use public or mosque toilets. Many of them go to shrines and temples that provide langar [communal food] free of charge.

In addition there are also footpath hotels which offer a bed, washroom and toilet facilities and bedding at a cost. Their number is increasing rapidly. According to one of the footpath hotel owners, most of the people who use these hotels come to Karachi for business purposes from the rest of Pakistan.

PERCEPTIONS AND REALITIES

Most respondents stated that earning a monthly income between Rs 35,000 and Rs 40,000 was not enough to sustain household expenses, and they had to borrow money from creditors or relatives to be able to finance their expenses, especially during religious festivals and for other rituals. The failure to repay these loans kept them permanently in debt.

Renting and lack of tenure security made them poor more than anything else. In fact, respondents at Manzoor Colony stated that if renting a living space was included as a criterion for being poor, “the number of really poor-poor would increase to at least 50 percent of the population of the settlement.”

Activists also stated that dislocation increases poverty. Dislocation can have many causes, but one that is not often discussed is because families cannot pay their utilities bills. So they move to other areas, where informal means of acquiring electricity and water are available.

Densification is also considered an important indicator of poverty, because space and income for an expanding family are not available and can result in entire families living in one room, which serves as a kitchen as well and up to 20 people can end up using one toilet.

Interviews tell us that it is common that minors who are enrolled as full-time students are also working as domestic servants after coming home from school, so as to supplement their family’s monthly income.

All key respondents complained that they experienced long hours of gas (10-14 hours) and electricity (8-20 hours) ‘load shedding’. Only 24 percent of survey respondents reported K-Electric’s service provision as “good”. All of them also reported that they had

to supplement their water needs by buying from private tankers or neighbourhood filter plants every few days. This costs them a significant chunk of their incomes, with per-tanker costs ranging between Rs 1000 to Rs 4000.

In addition, almost all professionals and community activists emphasised on the need for vocational training centres in low-income settlements. However, none of the key respondents brought up this need. Dr Noman Ahmed has defined this as a difference between the old and the new poor, in which the former considered poverty to be their destiny whereas the latter (or younger generations) “are aware of social change...and are making targeted attempts to change their socio-economic position.”



To accommodate the rising housing demand, single-storey houses are being converted into multi-storey apartments | Mohammad Ali Addarsh/White Star

HEALTH AND NUTRITION

A number of respondents reported that health issues such as skin diseases and stomach problems were prevalent in their settlement. Many key respondents from different low-income settlements stated that the sewerage system in their area was bad as the pipes

were old, not maintained properly, or non-existent. Sewage was identified as a major source of disease.

All said that their settlement had only small health clinics, while most of them stated that they did not trust the clinic doctors serving them and considered them to be quacks without qualifications. Government health facilities, including maternity clinics, are at a distance of about five kilometres or more for most of them, making accessibility difficult.

Eighty-eight percent of survey respondents revealed that government health and ambulance services did not exist in their settlements, and they had to rely on other means, even in cases of emergency. As a result, cheap homoeopathic medicine (46 percent of all survey respondents) or going to religious scholars (43 percent of all survey respondents) seems a better option to most.

Children, and particularly girls (according to a gymnastics trainer), had trouble performing in their gymnastics classes because of the low nutritional value of their food. According to her, “the lack of proper food is leading to physical weakness. They’re older now and get periods regularly and that plays heavily into how they perform in school.” She also mentioned that the boys “are sharp” and do not experience the same types of fluctuations in their performance over the course of the month.

URBAN MOBILITY

Transport and its accessibility plays an important role in the lives of people. Seventy-one percent of survey respondents stated that they had chosen their current place of residence on the basis of proximity to their workplace.

The element of transport is so important that one of the key informants mentioned that the settlement’s socio-economic and commercial importance increases if public transport links are available. It is because of these factors that 83 percent of the respondents were in favour of bringing the qingqi [Chinese-manufactured motorbike-pulled vehicle] back, since it was cheap and affordable, but which has been banned by the courts in Sindh since it was considered unsafe for travel. As a result of the ban, Karachi lost over 300,000 transport seats per day.

Among the respondents, there were also those who used public transport to commute to work, despite it being expensive and time-consuming. They often had to change multiple buses or forms of public transport – from bus to rickshaw or walk 20-30 minutes to the bus stop and then change buses multiple times for a one-way commute.

Motorbikes, by virtue of design, usage and tradition, are skewed towards men and, as such, have only recently started to be used by women. Other key respondents also mentioned that they cannot afford to send their children to school or colleges because the cost of public transport is too much for them to afford.

Having no dispensary or government school within their settlement, residents of Manzoor Colony have to spend large sums of money on transport to be able to access health and educational facilities. Because of the heavy concentration of facilities in the city centre, the poor prefer living within or close to the centre. Living on the periphery of the city, therefore, is much more expensive and acquiring space near the city is difficult and expensive, except in a multi-storey katchi abadi.

SECURITY AND COMMUNITY

The choice of settlement is also dictated by the pre-existence of the individual's ethnic or religious community, since that forms their social and safety net. The sense of security they felt within their own house far surpassed any fear of it being demolished by state authorities.

A resident of Machhar Colony stated that she moved out of renting a pakka house to a katcha house that she and her family had built out of their savings on reclaimed land. They preferred their own home as, here, they would be free from the pressure and bullying of the landlord.

The field work also revealed that all respondents, or at least most of them, preferred to live in a house rather than an apartment. This is because floors can be added to the existing house and this becomes a source of additional income as well as space for an expanding family.

Migrants who have come to Karachi as a result of getting married or for work often live in a very cramped environment, sharing a single room with the rest of their family members, and do not share the same interest in upgrading their living conditions as those who consider Karachi to be their home.

As a result of migrants, non-migrants and different groups living together, traditional community governance systems no longer exist. New community organisations that emerge in their absence deal with specific settlement-related matters, such as water or electricity, and die once their objectives have been met. Participation in this process often requires pooling of financial resources, which means the poorer individuals are inevitably left out of the organisation.

The prevalence of drug use and abuse, domestic violence and child abuse, divorce and a deteriorating law and order situation, resulting in increasing violence, seem to be the common ailments which the respondents have identified. Young girls running away to marry men of their choice, usually of a different ethnicity to their own, or divorce, have been blamed by the respondents on the growing use of smartphones and easy access to the internet.

There are no parks or recreational facilities close to or within most low-income settlements. Recreational activities, usually going to Sea View with the family, are unaffordable, and most struggle to even go once a year.

THE GENDER ISSUE

Depending on the ethnicity of the key respondent as well as their level of education, their attitude towards women and their role in society varied from wanting them to be educated, to ensuring that they did not leave home without a male family member.

Many women respondents reported that their families prefer for them to work in factories and offices in which they are provided with transport. This, it is believed, is to control their movement, since women should only go to work and come back home with no detours and no freedom.

Respondents also reported that there is significant income inequality between the genders, despite the same designations in most cases, and that women's salaries are often used by male members to finance their drug and alcohol addiction. Where women do get higher education and finally jobs, some respondents believe that they gain confidence, groom themselves and go up in professional lives, since the market today demands girls who can speak English and are good in mathematics, and because of which they can work in departmental stores and money exchange offices.

Family planning methods are usually out of reach of the women respondents. They are either not aware of them or do not use them as a result of social taboos. Control over socialisation and television and mobile use, together with a deteriorating financial situation, results in many problems, which affect the lives of women more than those of men.

After analysing the responses of the respondents, it is felt by the authors that women's participation in public spaces and the life of the community would change even the internal dynamics of these women. How this can be achieved would require a study similar to this, focused on the younger generation of Pakistani men and women.

It is rumoured that a new master plan for the city is being prepared. It is hoped that the issues that the respondents have identified in this study will be considered, especially those related to gender and poverty.

Without being addressed, an equitable and peaceful city that is desired by the poor, or a "World Class City" as desired by the elite and the World Bank, cannot even begin to be achieved.

Header image: From transport to education to housing, Karachi's poor are facing a host of issues which prevent their upward mobility | Arif Mahmood/White Star

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