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## Urban Encroachment and Governance Failure: Legal and Environmental Implications of Informal Settlements in Karachi

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*The manuscript has not been previously published elsewhere and is not being considered by any other journal. The authors read and approved the final version of the respective manuscript.*

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**Note: The authors have no conflict of interest to declare**

### **Abstract**

One of the urban problems in Karachi is illegal encroachment, which interferes with city planning, infrastructure, and the environment. The uncontrolled increase in population, rural migration, and poor governance have contributed to the proliferation of illegal settlements, roadside stalls, and the development of unlawful construction on public and government property. These intrusions obstruct roads, diminish social areas, and overload the basic amenities like water, electricity, and garbage disposal. Despite the anti-encroachment drives by the authorities, the issue has remained a problem because of corruption and interference by the political actors, as well as the coordination failure among departments. In addition, the eviction activities usually impact the low-income neighborhoods, which is socially and humanitarian problematic. The sustainable solution would involve equal application of urban laws, better land management systems, and affordable housing for people experiencing poverty. Illegal encroachment is a major issue

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that needs to be addressed to bring back the Karachi city structure, environmental security, and to offer a structured and habitable city to the expanding Karachi population.

**Keywords:** challenges, historical context, laws, opportunities, theoretical context

## Introduction

Lawlessness in Karachi has developed into a great urban governance crisis, A mirror of the collusion of lenient regulatory frameworks, unofficial housing demand, and political favors (Ibrahim & Nasir, 2024; Kaker & Anwar, 2024). Researchers observe that the unplanned growth of urban areas, along with a very loose approach, has provided both the powerful communities and the disadvantaged groups with an opportunity to settle on the state-owned land illegally (Arif et al., 2023). Such activities have transformed the spatial fabric of Karachi and have minimized the open spaces and worsened the environmental deterioration (Khaskheli & Weiping, 2023; Wasim et al., 2022).

As Yasir et al. (2022) indicate, a lot of the land that has been encroached is near the drainage channels, roads, and government plots, within which eviction has been conducted without resettlement. These activities unveil the conflict between the law and survival in the city that is characterized by speed in formalization (Rehman & Khan, 2022). Encroachments on the environment and their infrastructural effects have become even more noticeable (Malik et al., 2022; Waheed, 2025). To resolve this urban crisis, there is a need to have open land administration, community-based planning, and housing strategies that consider enforcement and social justice (Khurshid et al., 2022).

## Research Justification

The problem of unauthorized encroachment in Karachi is a sharp topic of study as it has a direct impact on urban planning, the sustainability of the environment, and social stability. Karachi, being the largest and fastest-growing city in Pakistan, is experiencing a lot of strain on land resources, which causes unauthorized use of both public and private spaces. These incursions not only corrupt a carefully designed land use but also disrupt the effectiveness of infrastructure, such as drainage systems, transportation systems, and green areas. The significance of the study of this matter is to examine the relationship between weak governance, high population growth rates, and informal urban activities to form long-term developmental problems. Moreover, the studies of illegal encroachment are very important to policy formulation and social justice. Most of the anti-encroachment activities have brought in ethical and humanitarian issues, especially when evictions have hit impoverished communities.

A thorough investigation can contribute to the development of measures that would bring harmony between law enforcement and social justice, as well as sustainable resettlement. This paper shall provide evidence-based recommendations to the policy makers, urban planners, and civil society groupings by analyzing the causes, effects, and attribution to poor governance of encroachment. Lastly, the issue of Karachi's illegal encroachment is not only a

repossession issue but also promotes fairness in the usage of the urban space, increasing institutional accountability, and urban space resilience and inclusiveness.

### Research Methodology

This study employed a systematic review methodology, with research objectives established accordingly. A comprehensive literature review was conducted (Komba&Lwoga, 2020). Research findings were categorized based on their content (Hiver et al., 2021; Petticrew& Roberts, 2006), and classified information was incorporated into the study by organizing it into headings (Gan et al., 2021; Pawson et al., 2005). The evaluation of classified information and titles formed the basis of the study (Page, 2021; Rahi, 2017), ensuring the integrity of the research subject and its contents (Egger et al., 2022; Victor, 2008). The criteria for selection are listed.

1. **Relevance:** Research that directly addressed the questions posed by this study is included.
2. **Quality:** Studies that meet a certain quality threshold (e.g., methodological rigour, bias risk) are included. Most of the research is from Scopus-indexed and Clarivate Analytics journals and reputed publishers.
3. **Recency:** Consideration of the publication date to ensure that the review reflects the most current evidence. Most of the studies are from the last three years.
4. **Language:** Only studies published in English are included.
5. **Data Completeness:** Previous studies must provide sufficient data on outcomes of interest for practical synthesis; this is also ensured in this research.

This study did not use primary data from human participants; therefore, no ethics clearance letter from the ethics committee was required.

### Literature Review

The problem of Karachi's illegal encroachment, focusing on the fact that it is socio-political, economical, and institutional (Khurshid et al., 2022). The growth of informal settlements and unauthorized constructions is attributed to poor urban governance and the inability of the institution to plan for the rapid population growth (Waheed, 2025). More broadly argues that encroachment is an opportunity and necessity where the urban poor are desperate to buy land and the elites to seize the administrative shortcomings by land grabbing within public roads, green belts, and drains (Rehman & Khan, 2022).

Recent studies have also targeted the impacts of encroachment on urban infrastructures and the environment, discovering that unlawful development along the *nullahs* has increased the risk of floods, especially during monsoon seasons, as it blocks drainage networks (Yasir et al., 2022). Indicate that the encroachments lead to congestion and the access to the public spaces is decreased, which worsens the livability of the city (Wasim et al., 2022). In addition, posits that these effects can only be dealt with by an appropriate governance model through which environmental management and social inclusion are combined because punitive actions have not been very effective in preventing re-encroachment (Ibrahim & Nasir, 2024). Academic attention also focused on the social consequences of anti-encroachment actions, particular note that evictions impact low-income populations more frequently than other groups, displacing thousands of people without proper resettlement or compensation efforts

(Khaskheli & Weiping, 2023). Point out that the criminalization of informal settlements is an attempt to overlook the structural inequalities that contribute to urban informality. Argue that sustainable urban reform in Karachi should leave behind the eviction-based approach to reform and introduce participatory planning with open land governance (Arif et al., 2023). All these studies are united by the same fact that illegal encroachment is not a simple legal question but a socio-political and developmental problem with deep roots on the Karachi street map (Kaker & Anwar, 2024).

### **Historical Context of Illegal Encroachment in Karachi**

The history of Karachi encroachment is particularly related to the rapid urbanization of the city and migration tendencies after independence. The growth of the population in Karachi was extraordinary following the year 1947 (Wasim et al., 2022). The intensive demand in land and housing that significantly exceeded the formal provision, note that poor governance and divided institutional control enabled the appearance of informal settlements on the state land in Karachi, and its modern urban structure highlights (Yasir et al., 2022). The former is that since the period of the 1960s, there was no affordable housing, and the low-income migrants had to settle down in places that were not controlled, resulting in the emergence of *katchiabadis*' informal settlements (Kaker & Anwar, 2024).

Equally, claim that encroachment became a systematic process of the city development due to political patronage and land speculation (Arif et al., 2023). As of the 1980s and 1990s, the issue of encroachment became deeply rooted in Karachi, not limited to informal housing, but also commercial land grabbing and unlawful building (Ibrahim & Nasir, 2024). Communicating with many administrative units, including KDA, KMC, and cantonment boards, also made land regulation complicated (Khaskheli & Weiping, 2023). To encroaching jurisdictions, it can be observed that the 2000s were associated with the intensification of both encroaching and anti-encroaching activities, which are characteristic of the processes of the informal occupation and forced eviction repeated over time (Rehman & Khan, 2022).

### **Theoretical Context of Illegal Encroachment in Karachi**

The Karachi phenomenon of illegal encroachment can be explained using various theoretical perspectives of urban studies, governance, and social justice. In terms of urbanization, encroachment is a natural reaction to the high population increase, poor housing policies, and unequal distribution of land. In cases where formal planning systems fail to offer affordable housing, the urban poor usually turn to informal modes of acquiring land and thereby establishing a parallel system of settlement, which does not follow official rules and regulations. It is representative of the informal urbanism theory at large, in which marginalized groups bargain for existence by constructing their own space.

In terms of governance, the example of illegal encroachment shows the imperfection of the state institutions and the disintegration of the urban authority. The presence of several authoritative institutions in Karachi leads to duplication of jurisdiction and inconsistency in its implementation, thereby allowing the introduction of small-scale and politically motivated encroachment. Furthermore, the theories of political economy describe the way in which land

turns into the source of power and wealth, and the encroachment can usually be a means of clientelism and corruption.

The theory of social justice also places the problem in the scenario of inequality, stating that the impact of punitive eviction actions is disproportionate on poor people. Thus, theoretical conceptualization of encroachment should incorporate spatial, institutional, and socio-political aspects to come up with a comprehensive and fair approach to the city and management.

### **Laws Regarding Illegal Encroachment in Karachi**

1. **Cantonments Act, 1924:** This law can be applied in the cantonment areas of Karachi to allow the Cantonment Board to evict any encroachments on roads, parks, and any other defense lands. It also details the fines to be applied to illegal construction and land use in the territory controlled by the military.
2. **Karachi Development Authority Order, 1957:** The order formed Karachi Development Authority (KDA) to plan, control, and conserve land in the urban areas. It provides KDA with the power to stop and eradicate illegal occupations in its territories.
3. **Sindh Public Property (Removal of Encroachment) Act, 2010:** This legislation gives the legal basis for evicting unlawful occupancies on the government land in Sindh, including Karachi. It grants the power to issue notices, perform demolitions, and reclaim state-encroached property to the designated authorities.
4. **Sindh Building Control Ordinance, 1979.** It is the law that governs the land use and construction of buildings in Karachi. It also gives the Sindh Building Control Authority (SBCA) the power to demolish buildings without authorization as well as punish those who ignore the approved plans or zoning regulations.
5. **Sindh Local Government Act, 2013.** Under this act, the local councils and the municipal corporations are held in charge of preventing encroachments, control of public property, and enforcing lawful land use in coordinated enforcement mechanisms.

### **Challenges for Illegal Encroachment in Karachi**

1. **Poor Law Enforcement:** Despite the existence of several laws, poor enforcement, poor land records, and poor monitoring of the laws, re-encroachment is a possibility. Constant enforcement is one of the biggest challenges to the urban authorities.
2. **Political Interference:** Land grabbers are shielded by political patronage, and they affect the implementation process. Land management encourages falsified certificates and allotments through corruption, lack of accountability, and confidence.
3. **Social Impact:** Poor families are usually displaced without proper care through eviction campaigns. It intensifies poverty and leads to conflict between the government and the locals.
4. **Urban Pressure:** The high population increase and scarcity of affordable housing have compelled a number of low-income dwellers to settle on the public land informally. Lack of housing policies that are inclusive perpetuates this encroachment process.
5. **Weak Governance:** The governance system of Karachi is fragmented between a number of agencies, which results in duplication of authority and low-level coordination.

This institutional mishmash is a hindrance to proper planning and the prompt elimination of illegal occupations.

## **Opportunities for Illegal Encroachment in Karachi**

- 1. Affordable Housing Plans:** A Close community relationship is likely to be experienced among informal settlement dwellers. They can be involved in land management and city planning as a way of promoting responsibility and sustainability.
- 2. Community Involvement:** Legalization can also transform the illegal settlements into residential areas. The provision of utilities and infrastructural facilities will improve living standards and help increase municipal revenue.
- 3. Housing Regularization:** The issue facilitates land records renewals and transparency. Modernization of the land systems cannot enable an individual to be corrupt, and encourages fair distribution of land in the city.
- 4. Land Reforms:** Local businesses that sustain the local economy are likely to be found in encroached areas. These markets can be incorporated in the formal sector, generating employment and alleviating poverty.
- 5. Local Economic Growth:** Local businesses that sustain the local economy are likely to be found in encroached areas. These markets can be incorporated in the formal sector, generating employment and alleviating poverty.

## **Discussion**

Unlawful encroachment in Karachi is one of the urban crises in the city, which has a perfect reflection of governance, socioeconomic, and planning problems. High-speed population increase, inaccessible affordable housing, and poor institutional alignment have transformed public grounds into slums and trade intrusions. Although the purpose of anti-encroachment is to reclaim the areas of the public, they do not consider the humanitarian element, as thousands of people may be displaced without being rehabilitated. It shows that there is a disparity between law enforcement and social accountability. Nonetheless, when encroached in a strategic manner, encroachment can open up the opportunities of urban reforms like better land records, regularization of the settlements, and inclusive housing.

There must be a controllable balance between control and compassion in the long-term stability of the city. Illegal encroachment, which has been an endemic issue in Karachi, could be converted into a source of viable city planning and sustainable development through effective governance, open land management, and community participation.

## **Conclusion**

Deterioration of Karachi is still a huge problem for sound governance and long-term city development. It is the by-product of the deep flaws in the city design, housing policy, and institution coordination. In order to contend with this problem adequately, the authorities must exceed the temporary demolition actions and institute long-term and extensive plans. Illegal settlements can be mitigated by making land governance stronger, providing transparency in property records, and coming up with affordable housing. In addition, the community involvement and the systematic implementation of the law should be the way to restore the responsibility of the public spaces. Balanced response involving both a legal



response and a social sensitivity can turn Karachi into a more organized, equal, and strong city.

## Recommendations

- 1. Encourage Community Participation:** It is also advised that the local communities should be actively engaged in the identification and reporting of illegal encroachments to enhance cooperation between the people
- 2. Enhance Public Awareness:** The government ought to carry out sensitization programs to make people aware of the adverse effects of unauthorized intrusions on urban living and creation.
- 3. Enforce Existing Laws:** It is suggested that the government should be strict in implementing land and building laws and prosecute any violator.
- 4. Ensure Rehabilitation and Resettlement:** Ensure equitable relocation and assistance of the affected families during anti-encroachment operations to balance the society.
- 5. Improve Land Record Systems:** Land record systems are to be computerized and updated on a regular basis to provide transparency to avoid manipulation.
- 6. Introduce Regularization Programs:** The governments must initiate reasonable regularization to offer legal accommodation to the low-income settlers.
- 7. Promote Affordable Housing:** Establish affordable housing for low-income earners to pressure informal settlements.
- 8. Strengthen Anti-Corruption Measures:** Create cells of monitoring that will ensure that bribery and misuse of power in land and building departments are noticed.
- 9. Strengthen Urban Governance:** Combine the layering of overlapping jurisdictions like KDA, KMC, and SBCA into one coordinated center in order to have good planning and execution.
- 10. Use Technology in Monitoring:** The real-time monitoring of illegal encroachments in Karachi through the use of GIS, drone, and satellite tools should be used by authorities to identify all illegal activities.

## Research Limitations

This study of unlawful encroachment in Karachi had a number of constraints. To begin with, the absence of government data on land records and cases of encroachment was not reliable and up-to-date, which limited the precision of results. There was a high number of official reports being incomplete or not consistent within the various departments (KDA, KMC, and SBCA). Secondly, secondary data were used because of the sensitivity of information in politics, where access to factual information available to the officials and communities concerned was restricted.

Third, the lack of time did not allow for conducting in-depth field observations and interviews with stakeholders. Moreover, most of the published literature was about general urban development and not specific issues of encroachment in Karachi, to do a comparative analysis. Lastly, the fact that real-time spatial data was not available meant that it was not easy to quantify all the illegal occupations. Irrespective of such challenges, the study offers

some useful information regarding the root causes and policy loopholes that have led to the illicit encroachment in Karachi.

#### Research Implications

- 1. Future Research Opportunities:** The paper helps to open the research around socioeconomic effects of encroachment, community-based urban planning, and sustainable land management models in Karachi
- 2. Housing Strategies:** Findings indicate that affordable housing programs could go a long way in eliminating informal settlements and encroachment pressures.
- 3. Legal and Institutional Framework:** The study recommends the need to revise land statutes, computerize documentation, and improve legal transparency to discourage corruption and unlawful possession.
- 4. Policy Development:** The paper proposes that there is an urgent need to have clear and integrated urban policies to curb unlawful land use and have equitable city planning.
- 5. Urban Governance Reform:** This highlights the need to enhance the coordination of KDA, KMC, and SBCA to enhance enforcement and accountability.

#### Future Research Directions

- 1. Socioeconomic Impact Studies:** The study ought to examine the impact of illegal encroachments on livelihoods, housing affordability, and social equity, especially in disadvantaged communities in Karachi.
- 2. Sustainable Urban Planning:** The solutions to the problems, such as affordable housing and inclusive zoning, should be researched in order to minimize encroachments and encourage balanced development of cities
- 3. Technological Integration:** Further study can look at how GIS mapping, satellite monitoring, and digital land records can be applied in preventing and tracking encroachments effectively in the future.
- 4. Urban Policy Evaluation:** Subsequent research must examine the success of the current urban and land-use policies to detect the gaps and suggest viable solutions in terms of controlling encroachment.

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