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‘DS View’, an academic activity in which students, researchers and faculty are encouraged to write short academic essays on the Development discourse, aims to generate discussion on issues concurrent to the times we are living in. The topical range may include academic debates on issues such as poverty, inequality, gender, conflict and human security. The essay for DS View can be expository, argumentative, persuasive or analytical.

The topic of tenth DS View is ‘**The Housing Societies of Islamabad**’ authored by Shanza Sohail.

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The Housing Societies of Islamabad

Shanza Sohail

The rise in urban population of Asia has sent governments scrambling to provide housing for their citizens. South Asia has been predicted to grow the fastest, as stated in a 2011 report by UN-HABITAT, with the possibility of hosting a massive urban population of around 1.4 billion in the near future.

Pakistan has not been immune to this rising urban population either. The country has been seeing a rapid rise in its overall population over the past decades. A 0.7% increase of urban population within a year, as mentioned by Ministry of Finance in 2015, has made Pakistan one of the fastest growing countries in terms of urbanisation. This has fuelled a number of concerns; namely the housing of citizens.

This ever increasing demand of housing has been prominent in the capital city of Pakistan as well. The natural rise in population along with migrants arriving from rural areas in search of a better life has put a noticeable strain on the housing market. As a result, severe shortage of housing has occurred. To cater to Islamabad's housing demand, housing societies have sprung in various areas of the city over time.

Housing societies are similar to gated communities. Like other researchers Touman (2005) believes that deciding on an exact definition of a gated community is difficult. He gives a general definition of a gated community, as an urban community encircled by walls and having several entrances managed with gates and security guards (at times video surveillance). For the most part residents and their guests can only get access to these communities. Moreover, commercial centres, recreational services and other facilities are normally present in these communities.

The desperate demand of adequate housing has caused many housing societies in the capital to develop with the aim to lure the people into purchasing plots and houses in order to seek profit. Although considered as one of the world's most planned cities, there exists around 105 illegal housing societies in the federal capital according to the CDA. 16 illegal housing societies are found to be operating in Zone II, III and the sector E-11, while Zone IV and Zone V hold 60 and 29 illegal housing societies respectively.

The profit culture has spread in the real estate market with the development of private housing societies. The promises of providing a good standard of living by most housing societies have not been fulfilled. Few exist that with efficient management have provided their residents with a diverse range of high quality community facilities; Bahria Town being the best example. However, such housing societies do not allow most citizens to afford their standard of living as the prices of housing and other facilities and services are out of their reach. The rising prices in the real estate market have also affected the price of housing in cooperative societies that competes with some private housing societies, though their prices are still lower than in private housing societies targeting the upper middle class and wealthy. The cooperative societies operate on a no profit-no loss basis but the lack of efficiency in management is painfully evident. A limited variety and declining quality of community facilities showcases poor maintenance by the elected management, depicting what the ordinary citizen of Islamabad can afford.

The private housing societies attract their residents by promising to provide a high standard of living at the price of a house. The offer of a harmonious social community with like minded neighbours, a clean and peaceful green environment, recreational facilities, basic infrastructure and security to people with purchasing of a house shows the commodification of needs and desires. The marketing and promotion inculcates the idea that good places can be bought at a price. This can further instil the idea among the population that the good life can only be bought and that too at a high price. Those citizens who cannot meet the expense of 'a good life' are considered to tolerate the lower standard of living provided by cooperative housing societies. This brings forward segregation within the society; widening the bridge between the rich and the not so rich classes.

The lack of a good standard of living in a housing society also has a negative effect on the well-being of residents. The increasing gap between promise and reality can lead to decreasing satisfaction of the residents, bringing about an unsustainable community. As mentioned by Zainudin et al. (2012), sustainable housing does not only discuss sustainability in housing designs, but is also linked to sustainable communities which consider the sustainability of economic, social and environmental elements of residential surroundings including the use of land, and satisfaction with communities and neighbourhoods. The presence of such unsustainable communities in the form of housing societies is seen to be high in the capital.

The provision of adequate housing and good quality community facilities are needed at affordable rates for the growing citizens of Islamabad. The respective departments need to hold housing societies responsible for the standard of living they provide to their residents if the growing demands of the urban population are to be met effectively and sustainable development in the housing sector is to be achieved.

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