

Residential Land as Social Protection- a Review of Pakistan¹

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Residential security is universally regarded as the cornerstone of social protection. Moreover, the right to adequate housing is part of the UN's human rights charter, and has been ratified by Pakistan. In Pakistan, residential security remains a relatively neglected area of research and policy-making. This is despite wide evidence of the linkage between residential security and freedom from other forms of vulnerability such as forced labour. Statistical data report that nearly nine-tenths of the households "own" their homes. Closer scrutiny on the basis of micro-studies reveals, however, that home "ownership" rarely extends to individual formal title. A range of social arrangements govern access to residential land, and most of these are hierarchical. The debate on land redistribution has been heavily influenced by the agrarian reform agenda at the expense of attention to residential land security – which affects many more people, and has more realistic solutions.

Our study on Residential Land Security as Social Protection examines the extent to which government interventions for residential land security for the poor were successful in empowering vulnerable groups, as well as the role that social mobilization and collective action played in the process. The specific interventions examined are: the Marla schemes in rural Punjab; the Sindh Goth Abad Scheme; and the Sindh Katchi Abadi Authority's regularization programme in Karachi.

Preliminary empirical research was carried out in selected settlements in rural Punjab and both rural and urban Sindh and in order to arrive at an understanding of the factors that determine access to residential land. In Punjab, the presence of the colonial legacy is difficult to miss, and plays an important role in the creation of social hierarchies and distribution of resources. Social hierarchies are created along the lines of cultivator/ non-cultivator, owners/ non-owners of villages, caste and kinship group structure. These hierarchies affect access to power and resources – significantly access to residential land – and have been perpetuated through agrarian reforms in Pakistan.

For example, in rural Punjab, the degree to which an individual or group enjoys residential land security is correlated with their social, economic, political and occupational status. The large disparity between the access to land enjoyed by landholding castes and non-proprietor castes has created relations of dependency between the two, both in terms of living conditions, as well as in the form of coercive and constraining labour market arrangements. As 'leaders' of the village, landowners often emerge as political representatives of the village population. The state – itself a major landholder – is a key player in the mediation of conflict between the landowners and the landless, and has historically moved to entrench the power of the former.

Similar to Punjab, however, arrangements of coercive labour between the landless and the landholders are also found in Sindh. Once again, the contest is over land ownership and

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perceptions of what ownership means. There are contesting claims on who owns the residential land and the common land, as well as what property rights are associated with any 'ownership'. As opposed to the legal sanction to own (or not own) land in Punjab, individual ownership or tenure of residential land is ambiguous in Sindh, and does not feature in the contest over land. More salient in the region is the idea of collective ownership of a village by an entire group, and conflict over land based on the idea of collective ownership has affected entire villages and hamlets in both positive and negative ways.

Urban settlements in Karachi's Katchi Abadis are also vulnerable to demolitions and evictions. Essentially, residents of these settlements and various government agencies compete with each other and among themselves to be recognized as legitimate owners of the land on which they are settled. Settlements are formed along ethnic lines- as affiliation with ones ethnic group mitigates vulnerability of new migrants and settlers.

As was the case in rural regions of both Punjab and Sindh, the state is a key player in the process through which residential land security is (or is not) achieved by marginalized groups in Karachi. Manifestations of this are various – residents feel more secure of the permanency of their settlement and of the legitimacy of their occupancy when public services are provided to a Katchi Abadi. More overtly, in most Katchi Abadis, residents' security is tied to patronage by a powerful state representative, political party or local strongman.

Preliminary research on the implementation of residential land schemes reaffirmed some of our prior findings and provided new ones as well. An expected finding was that gender is one dimension of social marginalization that cuts across all other issues in residential land security. In answer to our question on the nature of social mobilization, we discovered that social networks based on kinship, ethnicity and religion facilitate collective action as do affiliating with political parties or state officials. These political processes play a critical role in gaining access to residential land and ensuring security of tenure and property rights.

With respect to the question of what residential land security means in the context of Pakistan, we learned that it is primarily about security of tenure over land rather than the security of housing. Also, there are numerous shades of security of tenure, possession and ownership, which do not always correspond with formal title. Security is contingent on social and political networks, and does not always follow from right of possession.

Preliminary results show a two-way relationship between residential land security and marginalisation – people are excluded from access to residential land because they are socially marginalized, and their residential vulnerability is a frequently used instrument for maintaining social and economic power over them. In the next stage of the project, emerging issues outlined above will be further investigated to gauge how social mobilisation and collective action results in social transformation.

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