

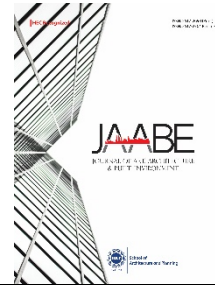
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Culture of Poverty and Sustainable Development: Case of Machar Colony in Karachi

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the intrinsic relation between two key indicators of development; sustainability and poverty. It specifically focuses on culture of poverty and sustainable development. Sustainable development envisions a balanced growth of human societies, meeting the current needs without compromising the required natural resources for future generations. The idea of culture of poverty is put forward in social theory, and the idea revolves around ideals of people experiencing poverty and how it may play an important role in preserving their disadvantaged situation, thus maintaining a cycle of poverty across generations. They may be resistant to considering sustainable choices while taking advantage of economic opportunities. So, the question posed is whether the culture of poverty acts as a hindrance or a facilitator for sustainable development. Given that culture forms an intrinsic part of sustainable development principles, this paper reviews the case of a marginalized low-income community in Karachi, exploring the everyday choices they make within the culture of poverty and the interface they have with the larger framework of sustainable development. Case study methodology has been employed, with qualitative interviews, observation and mapping used as research tools. The results of the research reveal a sense of disempowerment that residents of Machar Colony face, leading them to focus on short-term survival rather than long-term sustainable development objectives. The prevalent culture of poverty impedes progress and development, failing to pave the path for sustainable livelihood.

Keywords: Bengali population, culture, citizenship rights, upward mobility

Introduction

Poverty is generally considered as non-compatible with sustainable development (Glasmeier & Farrigan, [2003](#); Thomas, [2006](#)). This is because

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people with low income have limited resources and for basic survival, they may end up exploiting natural resources. On the other hand, with an established culture of poverty within a community, the residents are satisfied with their standing and lack motivation to work towards upward mobility (Bourgois, [2001](#); Spencer-Wood & Matthews, [2011](#)). This scenario is often coupled with various hindrances enforced by formal sector agencies in terms of facilitating upward mobility for the low-income members of the society. At times, damaging the natural environment may be least of their concern when it comes to livelihood sustenance of low-income earners of the society. Furthermore, in many cases, the sites on which low-income communities are situated are areas where natural resources are exploited, not just by the local residents but by larger interest groups operational within the urban context (Gmelch & Kuppinger, [1996](#)). Although in principle these areas are away from the vigilant eyes of the formal sector, but in reality, the agents of formal sector are aware of and complicit in the informal processes taking place within these settlements as they have a financial cut, or other benefits (Small et al., [2010](#)).

Values of sustainability endorse an equilibrium between environment, development, cultural, economic and social resources, in a manner that misuse of any of the resources does not take place and sufficient assets are present for utilization of future generations (Griggs, et al., [2014](#); Lee & Stokes, [2009](#); Matthew & Hammill, [2009](#); Perveen, [2004](#); Sustainable Development Solutions Network, [2012](#)). The culture of poverty presents a significant obstacle in taking advantage of economic opportunities, as they continue living a life of poverty, accepting it as an engrained way of life (Howe, [1998](#)). Taking the case of Machar Colony in Karachi, this paper reviews the intrinsic relation between the two concepts of sustainability and culture of poverty, and questions their co-dependency and symbiotic facilitation. The precarious situation faced by residents of Machar Colony resonate with stateless people in other parts of the world as well, like the seaside tribes of Thailand who struggle for acknowledgement of their identity, or the Rohingya refugees in different parts of the world or the Moken tribes of Burma.

Machar Colony or Machera (Fishermen) Colony, is located in district West of Karachi, in Kemari Town. Covering approximately 352 acres, it includes around 88.6 acres that encroach on the mangrove forests towards the sea. The location of Machar Colony has great importance because the

country's main port is located in its neighborhood, which is the main source of trade for the country. It is one of the main sources of providing fish in Karachi too. The land of Machar colony is owned by the government and is owned by Karachi Port Trust (KPT). Its real estate value is quite high at present. Machar Colony is the largest unregulated neighborhood of Karachi (from amongst the five hundred and fifty unregulated neighborhoods) and has an estimated population between 700,000 to 1.2 million. It spreads across an area of 4.5 kilometers. It has an interesting ethnic mix which is abode to migrant population. Karachi Fisheries and the harbor are centripetal and a binding force for majority of the residents of Machar Colony. Despite being an old settlement, the land use and housing in Machar Colony, initially inhabited by port laborers, continue to evolve. Most of the land of Machar Colony has been formed through reclamation of the sea via dumping of debris, garbage and stone. This has resulted in a jagged surface, organic and rough streets with piles of garbage being burnt everywhere. According to its official status, the settlement is an 'illegal slum'. Therefore, the government is not interested in providing any basic facilities like provision of water, infrastructure or sanitation. Thus, the residents are facing serious health issues. Many locals of Machar Colony are Bengalis by origin, who have been denied rights of citizenship in Pakistan. This situation sets them up to get trapped in a culture of poverty, which eventually becomes deep-rooted in their outlook of life. In such a scenario, any effort towards upward mobility is limited. As a result even when an economic opportunity arises, any workable development option is least of their concerns often leading the dwellers to opt for unsustainable living choices. The inadequate access to resources aggravates the situation further. To analyze this dilemma, this study highlights the interrelation between sustainability and poverty in general, with a focus on the role of culture of poverty as a facilitator or hindrance towards sustainable development.

Literature Review

Sustainability- the Three Corners: Economic, Environment, and Society

Sustainable development is the concept that societies must live in harmony with nature, meeting their current demands in a way that the future is not compromised and the generations to come can easily meet their needs (Sustainable Development Solutions Network, [2012](#)). Specifically,

sustainable development is a way of organizing society to ensure long term viability, utilizing both renewable and non-renewable resources responsibly, while respecting the natural eco systems, natural flora, fauna and ecological assets (Griggs et al., [2014](#)). The development theory based on sustainable principles, calls for raising the standards of living for the people, especially the under privileged and marginalized communities, without adversely affecting the natural eco system or causing any environmental damage that is irreversible. The three pillars upon which sustainable development relies are economics, environment and society, with culture being imbedded within society (Gmelch & Kuppinger, [1996](#)). Culture offers investigative, probing and critical insights for approaching the challenges faced by society in general. It nurtures the skill to recognize and examine existing and multilayered challenges that need transversal and cross disciplinary approach to be understood and represented. Thus, culture within the social paradigm of sustainability is important for the value it creates through collective history and its narration, as this becomes the fundamental pillar on which communities are consolidated, their approach towards sustainability is understood and diversity (if any) is addressed. Culture has transformative power, which if understood and addressed can help approach sustainability with non-conventional practices to address many of the problems associated with development and resulting in distress for communities (Small et al., [2010](#)). However, the question arises whether the concepts of sustainability can realign the power dynamics and claims to natural resources, or does the peculiar culture of a society (in this case the culture of poverty), exacerbate natural resource depletion and impede development, ultimately hindering sustainability efforts.

Culture of Poverty

The culture of poverty is a concept in social theory that proclaims that the ethics of people going through scarcity of resources has a substantial role in prolonging their penurious state, leading to the cycle of poverty across generations. The idea or theory around ‘culture of poverty’ has received heavy criticism (Bourgois, [2001](#); Gmelch & Kuppinger, [1996](#); Small et al., [2010](#)). Critics of the earlier ideas of culture of poverty insisted that descriptions of scarcity must scrutinize how operational influences interrelate with and result in the shaping of individual characteristics (Gmelch & Kuppinger, [1996](#); Small et al., [2010](#); Valentine, [1968](#)). As put by Small et al. ([2010](#)), "since human action is both constrained and enabled

by the meaning people give to their actions, these dynamics should become central to our understanding of the production and reproduction of poverty and social inequality." The concept came back to limelight in early twenty first century as explanation for why poverty persists in certain neighborhoods and urban contexts, despite poverty reduction programs. It was argued that either these programs are fundamentally flawed in design, or lack understanding of the people and communities or their social and cultural beliefs and ethics for whom these programs are designed. Thus, these programs do not meet their objectives and do not result in poverty eradication or reduction. One theoretical explanation offered towards this end relied on the understanding and addressing the idea related to 'culture of poverty'. This research explores the application of the culture of poverty concept in the context of sustainable development and its implications for achieving developmental objectives.

Culture of poverty as an idea was initially coined by Oscar Lewis in 1959 (Bourgois, [2001](#)), as an attempt to understand the modern city life, distinct from other approaches focusing on the city in relation to social relations and spatial arrangements (Berger, [2018](#)) or in terms of density, size, population and human associations (Ivo, [2008](#); Wirth, [1938](#)). The critique Lewis got was also based on the idea that social life is not a mass phenomenon and in order to understand social performance including culture, a micro lens needs to be used, and small groups and their everyday practices need to be understood. Lewis grouped the characteristics of culture of poverty into four categories; 'lack of participation and trust in formal organizations and lack of commitment to the institutions and values of mainstream society; low level of local organization; different and deviant family and sexual practices; and attitudes of dependency, fatalism, apathy' (Lewis, [1966](#), p. 24). A counter argument, a supportive literature to the whole notion of culture of poverty was put forward by Harvey and Reed ([1996](#)), where the argument was around the dominant class asserting a set of values on society where the requirements and needs of the marginalized people are not considered, and many a times results in inferiority complexes and a feeling of inadequacy of individuals belonging to low-income strata. This argument leads towards conceptualizing culture of poverty as a sub culture, rather than a dominant force. It becomes a driving force where the marginalized people adapt and adopt to prevailing trends, and a general feeling of hopelessness towards the probability of achieving success within the larger realm where definition of success is defined via capitalistic gains.

Many of the characters of the culture of poverty can be observed as home-grown, impulsive efforts to address the requirements not obliged by the establishments and actions of the larger society. Eventually the marginalized people are emotionally unprepared to take advantage of any opportunity that might arise to improve their living standards.

People stuck within the culture of poverty often lack the capacity, knowledge and vision to see the larger ideology of a society and their role within society or to advocate for their rights. Such is the example of hunter-gatherer populations in Southeast Asia, the seaside tribes of Thailand and the Mokens of Burma who have made the sea their home (Human Rights Watch, [2015](#); Yoko, [2006](#)). They do not also see connections between their everyday struggles and of other similar members of the society, or of their counter parts. Thus, they are not able to organize themselves at a level where they could have a voice. They cannot comprehend any solutions around basic structural changes in society or any revolutionary ideas that can help them get out of this vicious circle.

The two mainstream ideas around culture of poverty have different views/ ideas about role of indicators like economics and political structures and their co-relation. One stream views the role of economics in the fore front and its impact on culture being the main driving force behind the assimilation of notions of culture of poverty, whereas the other stream views culture as an autonomous entity with both economics and politics taking a back seat. When these ideas get linked with notions of sustainability, the three cornerstones on which sustainability relies on, become equally vital, and the preference of one over the other is not justified. Here the need to untangle the reasons behind cycle of poverty, and the resultant culture need to be understood. A major reason behind people being entangled in the culture of poverty is absence of trust in formal sector organizations, nonexistence of commitment towards institutions and low level of self-organization. These aspects are also evident in the case of Machar Colony, and point towards the fact that these issues need to be highlighted in the main stream formal sector policy making. Aspects like non-issue of citizenship identity numbers results in culture of poverty to prevail and these people to remain below poverty line.

Research Methodology

The methodology employed in this research consists of three main methods. The research started out with a desk review of the literature, to gain insight into the core arguments and theoretical threads around culture of poverty (Bourgois, [2001](#); Small et al., [2010](#); Valentine, [1968](#)) and sustainable development (Glasmeyer & Farrigan, [2003](#); Matthew & Hammill, [2009](#); Sustainable Development Solutions Network, [2012](#)). Subsequently, literature review shifted focus on overlaps, if any, in the indicators outlined for both these theoretical thrusts. The review was then focused on the study of Karachi, converging on various aspects of culture of poverty and choices made by locals within the sustainable realm. This part of the review was based on a 2017 Report by IIED and some policy documents related to Master Planning and coaster development of Karachi (Hasan et al., [2017](#))

During the second phase of the research, visits were conducted to the case study area between November 2020 and February 2021. These informal visits helped establish some contacts in the area with key individuals within the community, which were used at a later stage for conducting twenty qualitative interviews in the locality. The snow balling method (Biernacki & Waldorf, [1981](#)) was used in identifying key respondents for the qualitative interviews which were conducted as the third step of the research. The second phase of the research, besides making inroads into the case study area and identifying potential people for qualitative interviews, also focused on informal talks with area residents, personal observation, photographic documentation and identification of socio-physical aspects and practices of the locals. In this phase, besides the local residents, community workers, shop keepers and business owners in the locality were also informally interviewed. About fifteen respondents were spoken to in all. The objective was to comprehend the social structure of the settlement, their everyday experiences and urban processes adopted on a daily basis.

The third component of the research, was identification and interview of ten community leaders, social activist and professionals involved with the local of the case study area in some capacity. Questions were designed to explore the daily choices made by individuals in the community, and the driving forces behind them. The objective was to understand the role culture of poverty plays within these decisions and the consideration and understanding the locals have with regards to sustainable practices.

Additionally, the interviews aimed to uncover the limitations faced by the locals on a daily basis in making decisions which could qualify as sustainable practices.

The three types of methods used for data collection helped triangulate the results. In the analysis phase, content and narrative analyses methods were used to scrutinize the informal and qualitative interviews (Bryman, 2008). The aim was to develop evolving themes by identifying categories that linked up to the notion of culture of poverty and its role in decision making within the larger realm of sustainable development.

Findings

Introduction to Machar Colony

Figure 1

Depletion of Mangrove Forest by development of Machar Colony between 2002 and 2023



Machar Colony is a very densely populated low-income settlement that continues to expand toward the mangroves (Figure 1). Due to the presence of a huge shrimp peeling cottage industry within the locality, the area holds significant economic importance. However, being an informal settlement, the area lacks basic infrastructure resulting in vulnerability during the times of heavy rain and floods. The narrow streets are often littered with garbage, rotten fruit and animal carcasses, attracting flies and mosquitoes. Originally, the houses in the settlement were constructed using mud, bamboo and plastic sheets. Now people are making *pucca* (reinforced cement and concrete roof) houses (Figure 2). The plinth level of the houses keeps rising with time, as the settlement stands on unconsolidated grounds and faces a major issue of settlement, with some of the houses sunken even below the road levels. The plot sizes in the settlement range from 40 to 200 square yards, with an average household accommodating eight persons.

Figure 2

Photographic Documentation of Machar Colony



Note. Source: Qureshi ([2015](#))

The Moosa lane nalla is a natural drainage channel running through the settlement and is currently acting as the southern boundary of the Machar Colony. All roads within the settlement are made of debris due to which they are very soft and unlevelled. Their width varies from 12' to 15'. Spaces on the sides of nalla are used as dumping area. Usually, any open spaces are used as garbage, *thallawala* (construction yard) or as parking. The planning and growth of the settlement does not respect the natural ecology of the area, or its context, neither is the land use decided on the basis of environmental and social deliberations.

Machar Colony is an exceptional informal settlement within Karachi. The variance of the locality from the rest of the informal settlements in Karachi is in terms of the ethnic mix. The majority of the dwellers of Machar Colony are Rohingya and people who speak Bengali. These people come from an underprivileged and rural background. The formal welfare programs at city and state level have never been accessed by these people because they are not recognized as citizens. Thus, education and jobs, and access businesses is not possible for them. This has resulted in stunting of their new generation, rendering them disconnected and isolated from the outside world.

In contrast to Afghan refugees, who are also migrants, have managed to engage in trade, businesses and commerce, simply because of their networks within Pakistan. On the other hand, the residents of Machar Colony depend on fishing, so during the period when fishing is not viable, they face income shortage. Additionally, the settlement's infrastructure challenges, such as houses built on infilled land prone to sinking, inadequate sanitation facilities, and continuous water crises due to low priority for water allocation, further contribute to the residents' hardships. As a result of their marginalized status and lack of resources, the residents of Machar colony live in poverty due to lack of trust in formal sector organizations and mindset of day-to-day survival instead of long-term development goals. As a result, they dwell in poverty, and application of ideas, theories and concepts associated to sustainability and progress is not of prime concern for them. Although implicitly sustainable development is not desired, but the question emerges if this status quo leads to negating adverse impacts of development overtly?

Machar Colony, being the one of the oldest informal settlements of Karachi and having the status of illegal settlement is always under threat of

eviction. This prevents locals to adequately sustain their homes as they do not have sufficient financial means to buy a leased piece of land or to build a house. The infrastructure is poorly laid and is not looked after by the government, leading to narrower streets, further encroachment and illegal commercialization. These aspects result in overcrowding and stress on housing. The incapacity of the ruling authorities to address these matters has given rise to an illegal and informal self-help inclination in both commercial and residential segments. With the swift expansion of squatters (inhabited by residents seeking to live in immediacy to their areas of employment) the vulnerability and depletion of the mangroves has amplified. This is a threat to the ecology of the city in particular, and the region at large.

Basic Survival and Environmental Degradation

As per the Sindh Coastal Community Development Project, the mangrove swamps of Sindh spread over 100,000 hectares. The black mangrove, is the most common species. It has aerial roots which grow out of mud. The mangrove swamps, mudflats and creeks serve as a breeding ground for a varied diversity of marine life along the Sindh coastline. These include mussels, fish, shrimp and oysters. These species move offshore as they grow. Some species of migratory birds also use the swamps as winter grounds. Sindh's mangroves vast ecosystem is not just used by vegetation and animals but by humans as well. The hundred thousand people living along the northern edge of the Indus Delta use an estimated eighteen thousand tons of mangrove firewood annually. Furthermore, the shoots and leaves are utilized as livestock fodder. The residents of Machar Colony also depend on the mangrove forests, as the poorer sections of the society use the wood as fuel for their stoves, and as construction material for their houses. Some sections also fish in the forest to catch shrimps.

There is general environmental degradation of the locality because of unplanned development, with land uses not complimenting the ecology of the locality, lack of healthy green public spaces and absence of flora and fauna. The locality lies on a lower level from the rest of the city, since it is built on reclaimed land and keeps sinking. As a result, in the event of urban flooding during the monsoon period, the locality becomes a catchment area for rain water discharge. Some of the lanes within the locality are not connected to the main Lyari River, thus have acquired the status of a sewerage *nalla* (drains), with open areas around them being dumping

grounds. What the locality requires is a master plan for the infrastructure and a zoning and land use plan which is compatible with the ecological and environmental assets of the area in order to make the locality progress towards sustainable development. But the residents don't acknowledge the need to develop the area and are unaware of the environmental degradation and hazard faced.

Basic Survival and Socio-economic Development

The main source of income, as mentioned previously, for the residents of Machar Colony, is from the fisheries. Other forms of occupation that they are involved in are working as domestic helpers in nearby high-income areas, hawkers, quacks, laborers, Para transit drivers and shop keepers. The reason for diversifying is the stagnation in the availability of jobs in fisheries. There are still however, a large number of people, especially youth, who are unemployed, especially during the months that there is a ban on fishing and the sea is not accessible. This leads to the youth engaging in unhealthy activities and in other instances there are people who are willing to work for minimum wages, their families often living hand to mouth.

From fishing industry, the estimated income per person is only Pak Rs. 300- 500 (USD 0.67-1.35) per day. Therefore, often for added income the residents get involved in fish cleaning and shrimp peeling (usually women and children) or in the ship breaking industry (e.g., fishermen, during the breeding season of fish) (Figure 3). This way people end up earning Pak Rs. 200 (USD 0.9) extra per day from shrimp peeling business, and up to Pak Rs. 1000 (USD 4.5) per day from involvement in ship breaking industry. The system of daily wages however indicates a certain level of uncertainty and becomes a hindrance in attaining a better standard of living. Hence, there is almost no concept of extra financial assets or savings for emergency, and people resort to taking loans from neighbors and shop owners. Furthermore, there is no concept of family planning and the average family size is up to nine members per household. For them, larger family means a greater number of bread earners in the family. This ties in with one of the indicators as pointed out by Lewis (1966), Howe (1998) and Valentine (1968) when analyzing culture of poverty where having large number of family members is the norm.

Figure 3

A Worker in a Shrimp Peeling Warehouse



Social exclusion is also a big problem faced by the residents of Machar Colony. The Bengalis and Burmese face the brunt of this problem. They are omitted from any decision taken by the other residents of the Colony with regards to their settlement. As often they do not possess national identity cards (NIC), thus their access to basic facilities, like health and education, is limited. This social gap was very evident in the recent COVID-19 pandemic, as for the administration of vaccine shots possession of NIC was essential. The Bengalis of Machar colony also continually live under the threat of eviction, as their houses are built on informal and reclaimed land. Thus, the residents of Machar Colony are generally suspicious towards the residents of the city in general, especially of people from other ethnic groups, leaving them in a state of hopelessness and despair (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Example of Ethnic Discrimination in Machar Colony

One such case is of Nasira's little brother, Amjad, who is facing issues while making CNIC. His case has been rejected without any reason three times already, even though he was born in Pakistan like all his other brothers and sisters. Nasira, the eldest has a CNIC but her brother is facing issues and he is now thinking to give up trying and start working in the fishery as a fisherman like his father and grandfather as he cannot study further without a CNIC. Amjad had hoped that he could study and improve his family's living conditions by getting a white-collar job. His dream is close to being shattered.



Nasira and her brother

Discussion

According to the literature review, culture has the power to transform and change circumstances and situations. When put in practice, culture can help achieve sustainability, or in the very least point towards acknowledgement and development of practices based on sustainable ideals. Culture of poverty, as per the literature reviewed, does not have any transformative power and is conceptualized as a subset of culture, rather than a dominating force. With respect to Machar colony, it is evident that the residents are trapped in the brutal loop of paucity, and do not feel any obligation towards taking any step to enhance their livelihoods and conditions of dwelling. The residents are also clueless about any possibilities or strategy related to improving their standard of living. Furthermore, their belief in grass root level government and formal organizations is negligible and any sense of obligation towards formal institutions is almost nonexistent.

As a result, disempowerment leads people to endure on a daily basis, rather than working towards any long-term development goals. This means if cutting down mangrove trees can help them obtain clear land to construct a house for themselves, they would go for it. In such a scenario, the residents would not give much thought to any long-term sustainable development ideas and notions.

On the other hand, the question arises if ideas of sustainability can help rearrange the ideas of power, and if these notions can assist create a sense of enablement amongst communities facing culture of poverty. Furthermore, can ideas related to sustainability transform the impacts of neo liberal developments, especially in scenarios where neo liberalism as a theory has negative impacts on people living in poverty? These basic questions and debates stem from the notions put forth by Lewis (1966) and tie up with the concepts propagated by sustainable development.

One does see self-initiatives and concepts of bottom-up approaches in locals of Machar colony. However, any such initiative towards upward mobility is hindered by the absence of approachability in the larger public realm. This is mainly because the locals are deprived of their rights to citizenship. The social exclusion that the residents of Machar Colony face results in lack of development of their locality, as environment, society and economics are all pillars of overarching ideas of sustainability.

Finally, a balanced and sustainable environment can also result in economic possibilities and general uplifting of cultural norms. For instance, a tidy street, with suitable solid waste collection and disposal systems in place can result in a sense of well-being and eventually lead to economic prospects, upward mobility and enablement. Thus, culture of poverty may hamper progress and development, inhibiting the road to sustainable livelihood.

Conclusion

In the global south, there are numerous examples of unsustainable urban growth of a similar vein. The situation of Machar Colony highlights the difficulty of attaining sustainable growth because of social and ethnic issues. This emphasizes how closely social and cultural values and ethnic affinities influence physical development. Denying people access to resources inculcates a culture of poverty and forces them to make unsustainable decisions about how to live when resources are scarce. In light of this, it is necessary to reassess the three pillars of sustainable development—the culture, economy and environment—because governance, politics, and policy are still neglected in this framework. Machar Colony features a predominately economic and ethnically based culture, as well as a low income economy. Objectives for sustainable development are seriously hampered by the general sense of helplessness, as outlined in this paper. Furthermore, in Machar Colony, the issues are further complicated by the involvement of outside parties, such as non-resident property owners, some of whom make money for shady or unlawful activities in the neighborhood. Law enforcement and government representatives have financial stakes in these operations as well because they want to keep things as they are in order to keep their jobs. The mangrove forest also acts as a haven for criminal activity and criminal activity. Ignoring this area creates social issues with the environment, safety, and security all being compromised. These aspects must be addressed in order to achieve any form of sustainable development in the locality, and to address larger ecological issues that the city of Karachi faces.

Conflict of Interest

The author of the manuscript has no financial or non-financial conflict of interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

The data associated with this study will be provided by the corresponding author upon request.

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