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Evictions and Shattered Dreams by Public Servants: Is it an Oxymoron?

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Evictions and Shattered Dreams by Public Servants: Is it an Oxymoron?

Inherent in their name, public servants exist to *serve the public*, right? So, why is it that in certain circumstances, they are the ones responsible for shattering citizens' dreams? What could be worse than getting forcefully evicted from one's home? It seems that this is a recurring phenomenon on a global level, where public "servants", supposedly there to do just that, serve, are sometimes the culprits.

Highways are often a necessity to solve traffic congestion, to connect different parts of a city together and to streamline the transportation of goods. However, when the process to make room for these new highways/infrastructure projects requires evicting citizens from their homes, blatant disregard is shown for human rights.

The scene along the highways in Cairo of apartment buildings under demolition is one spectacle that embodies the notion of shattered dreams. In order to widen Cairo's Ring Road, more than 1000 buildings had to be demolished. Designated cross-sections were physically cut through the buildings along both sides of the highway that to allow for the expansion. One young colleague wryly commented that for the first time she was able to visualize what the term "cross-section" meant. Shown in the picture above, the cheerfully painted rooms filled with butterflies and bright colors, symbolized the hopes of a better future the apartment's previous tenants held onto, despite the dull and unfinished state of the building itself.

People may have different perceptions of the scene above. Some are not bothered by the sight of the demolished apartments, be it colorful or plain, and see it as a necessary measure taken by the government in the public interest. What bothers me is that we do not know what happened to the original citizens that once inhabited those rooms. We do not know their stories. Where did they go? How were they evicted, and were they given a choice? In the case above, and according to official government sources, all evicted citizens were financially compensated according to the size of the room, apartment or shop that was demolished. Still, this matter is about more than finances.

The right to adequate housing is a part of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights ratified by all 192 member states in the United Nations. Forced evictions are perceived as a gross violation of human rights. According to an informative U.N. Habitat study in 2018 discussing alternative solutions to forced evictions and slum demolitions, evictions and relocations should only occur when absolutely necessary and only after all other options have been exhausted—consulting with the community, sharing needed information and providing them with sufficient notice.

Are governments everywhere allowed to be this tough with their citizens? Unfortunately, it seems that this answer is yes. This happens in the name of "public benefit", but at different levels of aggression.

- In 2002 in **Pakistan**, the government decided to demolish nearly 10,000 houses in Karachi City to build new highways. No compensation or notice was given.
- In 2008 in **India**, the Bangalore government had to evict farmers from their land to build a toll-based highway that would serve "the good of the nation", paying them little to no compensation.
- In 2018 in **Kenya**, according to Amnesty International, the homes of nearly 10,000 citizens living in slum areas in Nairobi were demolished overnight to make room for a new highway. This also occurred without any prior notice or compensation. The bulldozers reportedly showed up and flattened all homes without even giving the people a chance to gather their belongings.
- In 2020 in the **Cote D'Ivoire**, to modernize the capital city of Abidjan and build more highways, at least 22,000 citizens were rendered homeless.

In Egypt, in the case pictured above, the original homeowners were entitled to financial compensation. However, regardless of the compensation, it's very likely that they were not given a choice in the matter at all, forced to move out and comply with the eviction orders. One can only hope that after relocating, they were able to once again paint their walls bright and colorful.

Regardless, more consultation is needed. Greater care must be taken to ensure that the financial compensation evicted families receive will enable them to buy substitute property, at least comparable to that which they have lost. In other parts of the world, the situation is oftentimes much harsher. Under the pretext of public benefit, homeowners find themselves spending nights in the streets. This should never be the case.

Public servants need not adopt a purely utilitarian approach, focusing solely on the needs of the people who may be happy using new highways. They must cater to the needs of *all* citizens. Eviction from one's home—a home of walls filled with butterfly painted hope—should never be sudden, by force or without ample provisions needed for smooth relocation.