

DECENT HOUSING FOR DECENT LIVING: THE DISCOURSE OF SLUM FREE CITY IN COLOMBO

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In fact, the urban poor are seen as a serious development pathology in the process of neoliberal reconstruction of city. In this exercise, demolishing slums and resettling the displaced in high-rise apartments is widely approached by urban architects and planners. However, studies note that high-rise housing is still a controversial resettlement option since many such alternatives have either failed or had limited success. In this background, this examines the discourse on slum demolition and high-rise housing with reference to an urban housing project, implemented in Colombo under the city beautification project (CBP) during the 2009-2014. The study reveals that the state used various discursive fields to support construction of high-rise housing and legitimize its anti-slum policy. While labeling the slums as undesirable and unliberated areas, the project leaders strongly claimed that the slum community will be assimilated into middle class through high-rise living. Their main slogan was that 'the decent house will bring a decent life to the poor'. Facilities of new housing apartments such as attached bathrooms, commodes and comfortable bedrooms are used as nonverbal symbols to communicate that the re-housing project will bring upward social mobility to the urban poor. Moreover, the global policy discourse of MDGs has been a popular discursive field the state used to legitimize its anti-slum policy. Finally, the project leaders have used strategies such as creating emotions, a hypothetical future, rationality, voice of experts and altruism to create the discourse of 'slum free city'. Though the project has brought social mobility for some poor families, it has increased housing dissatisfaction among the majority of the re-settlers. Many residents face the issue of inadequate space in new apartments. Break up of communities and destruction of their livelihoods are serious adverse impacts that dragged the poor from frying pan to fire. The study concludes that upgrading living standard has become an attractive slogan for the state to implement its market oriented urban restructuring policies in the name of ensuring social sustainability.

Keyword: Re-housing of urban poor, Discourse of slum free city, Anti-slum policy