

DAWN

A forest or more?

27 September 2019



According to a report, the KMC has 152 parks — rather plots earmarked for parks, most of them undeveloped — under its control. District South alone is said to have 71 amenity plots that include parks and open spaces. Amber Alibhai, secretary general of Shehri, gives me details of District South. She says that KDA's idea was to develop this district as a natural recreation area for the citizens of Karachi who visit the adjoining sea beaches. The KMC failed to do its job.

This failure led to the idea of mobilising the private sector to fund projects which were fundamentally the responsibility of the city fathers. Thus the Sindh Public-Private Partnership Act, 2010, was conceived and adopted.

This law has created space for citizens who care to make a contribution towards the uplift of the city. That is how Shahzad Qureshi, an industrial engineer, entered the scene. A highly educated professional and a passionate lover of nature and greenery, his interest has also led him to study the Akira Miyawaki method developed by a Japanese botanist. By planting saplings very closely in a small area specially prepared by mixing soil and biomass, one can grow a small forest even in the heart of a city. The plantation is indigenous and very dense.

The pioneer claims that a forest matures within 30 years when a regular natural forest requires centuries. The idea sounds exciting, especially to people who find Karachi too barren and deprived of vegetation. Shahzad signed an agreement with KMC's DG Parks in May 2017 for five years. It should have been smooth sailing thereafter. Unfortunately, it wasn't.

The KMC has been rather whimsical in its approach to the matter that has created a trust deficit. According to Shahzad, the KMC never allowed him to work concertedly on his

project. He managed to get 9,000 donors, including big companies, to support him financially but was distracted from working on the project due to constant interruptions by the KMC which was either putting obstacles in his way — such as dumping garbage in the three-acre park — or requiring him to run from pillar to post to meet procedural requirements. In October 2018, the agreement was cancelled on flimsy grounds, Shahzad complains. It was restored a little later when there was a hue and cry.

Matters came to a head recently when the mayor cancelled the agreement yet again. Worse still, he sent his staff to the park to more or less vandalise it. They brutally destroyed some vegetable plants alleging they were not authorised. That was the ‘enough is enough’ moment when Shahzad resorted to social media in a really foul mood. Activists rallied round him. The matter could no more be ignored and the mayor revoked the cancellation order again.

It is back to normal, so I am told. But this style of working is not the way any healthy partnership can be successfully sustained. Shahzad admits that he did not study the conditions laid down in the agreement meticulously because he believed that his work would speak for itself. He says he is disappointed at the criticism that has been heaped on him by some quarters, especially the KMC.

This unpleasant experience would deter others. I visited the park and found the urban forest to be taking shape. Of course, it wasn’t possible for me to count the 15,000 trees that Shahzad claims he has planted but there are many tall trees there along with a filter plant to draw sewerage water to irrigate the forest. The ambience connected me with nature and I sat on one of the benches and relaxed.

Yes the work shows. But in such projects that are built on public land with donors’ money — of course, willingly given — certain basic principles have to be observed. Amber Alibhai insists on transparency, which is a basic requisite to safeguard credibility. She says, Shahzad has been ‘silly’ in this matter from the start. By not making the agreement and the accounts public before the controversy erupted, he undermined the case of all other groups like hers who may want to take up similar enterprises. She also insists that the DG Parks who signed the agreement did not have jurisdiction which was with the DMC South’s Park Department. The commissioner Karachi, however, says all parks come under the DG Park.

Source: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1507602/a-forest-or-more>