
LAND, POWER, AND GOVERNANCE: RETHINKING RAVI URBAN DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

Labelled as the world's largest riparian development, The Ravi Urban Development Project (RUDP) prompts serious implications for governance and land rights in Pakistan. The research examines the project's governance framework, by focusing on the Ravi Urban Development Authority Act (RUDA Act) and the controversial amendments that follow. The aforementioned legislative measures, effectively bypass the local tier of government and raise concerns about constitutional compliance, centralization of authority, and transparency. Taking careful note of the land acquisition practices, which have sparked widespread protests and legal challenges. Reports from the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan reveal patterns of forced evictions, inadequate compensation, and coercive tactics against landowners, highlighting systemic violations of constitutional rights and international norms. The analysis contextualizes these practices within the broader governance challenges in South Asia when it comes to urban development, highlighting substantial risks posed to landowners or marginalized communities.

The following research advocates that the RUDP represents a rather urgent case for rethinking urban governance and inclusive development. It intends to emphasize the need for robust legal safeguards, participatory decision-making,

and transparent compensation mechanisms to ensure that large-scale urban projects uphold human rights and align with constitutional values. By and large, the research hopes to push forward the discourse on equitable and inclusive urban development in Pakistan.

KEYWORDS

Urban Governance, Land Acquisition, Human Rights, Equitable development

JEL Classifications

R50: Regional Government Analysis

R52: Land-Use Regulations

K38: Human Rights Law

R11: Growth and Development

INTRODUCTION

Urban development often brings both opportunities and challenges, particularly in balancing progress with social, economic, and environmental concerns. RUDP, launched in 2020, represents a large-scale initiative to transform the desiccated Ravi River into a modern urban corridor. Planned for over 40 km along its banks and labelled the world's largest riparian development project (Ali, 2024), the project by and large hosts promenades and riverfront gated communities, primarily through private real-estate investments. However, it has faced significant challenges, including governance issues and disputes over land acquisition, highlighting the ongoing struggle to align urban growth with fairness, legality, and sustainability.

The story of RUDP unfolds with an ambition to address Lahore's numerous and growing urban challenges through a meticulously planned city sprawling over 110,000 acres (Shah, 2024). Since its inception, RUDP has faced significant backlash from farmers and small landowners, who have accused the authorities of using coercive measures to acquire their land. Reports of destroyed crops and forced evictions have further exacerbated the tensions (Hasnain, 2022), with landowners launching protests against the government and the Ravi Urban Development Authority (RUDA). While the Lahore High Court initially declared the project illegal (Yasif, 2022) due to violations such as the absence of a master plan and irregularities in land acquisition, but a week later, the

Supreme Court suspended the ruling and allowed a conditional continuation of the project (Hussain, 2022). Despite that, reports persist regarding the destruction of crops and forced possession of land, highlighting the ongoing conflict between large-scale urban development and the rights of local communities.

Central to the concern of governance is the RUDA Act, which empowers RUDA to oversee the project. This legislation, while ambitious, has drawn criticism for sidelining the local tier of the government (Punjab, 2020), a constitutionally mandated component of governance under Article 140-A (HCRP, 2023). By centralizing authority, the RUDA Act not only undermines democratic principles but also erodes the social contract between the state and its citizens. Critics have argued that this approach signals the broader governance trends in Pakistan, where large-scale projects often bypass participatory frameworks in favour of top-down decision-making (Raza, 2020). Land acquisition has emerged as the most contentious aspect of the RUDP. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) has documented numerous cases of forced evictions, coercion, and inadequate compensation (HRCP, 2021). Farmers in the affected regions have consistently voiced concerns and protested against losing their livelihoods without fair compensation. Allegations of collusion between government officials and private developers have further tainted the project's legitimacy, with reports suggesting that land is being acquired at minimal rates and resold at exorbitant prices to private parties. Reportedly, that are almost 4000 acres under dispute (Niazi, 2023).

The legal framework governing land acquisition in Pakistan adds another layer of complexity. Rooted in the colonial-era Land Acquisition Act of 1894, the process completely lacks transparency and bypasses democratic fairness (Dawn, 2021). The HRCP's fact-finding mission noted several procedural violations in the RUDP, including the initiation of land clearing before Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) approval, proving a clear breach of legal requirements. Such practices not only undermine the rule of law but also exacerbate the vulnerabilities of affected communities, as well as neighbouring territories.

The governance issues tied to the RUDP are symptomatic of broader systemic challenges in Pakistan's urban planning landscape. The exclusion of local governments from decision-making processes reflects a centralization of power

that contradicts constitutional principles. In the landmark case of Lahore Development Authority v. Imrana Tiwana, the Supreme Court emphasized the importance of empowering local governments to ensure meaningful participation in urban development (Gilani, 2019). However, the RUDA Act's amendments have stripped local authorities of any role in the project, setting a troubling precedent for future initiatives.

Equally significant are the socio-political dynamics underpinning the project. Urban development in Pakistan has often been driven by speculative real estate ventures rather than genuine public interest. Quite notable scholars and socio-environmental activists have described the RUDP as a classic example of commodifying space for commercial gain, with little regard for its social or environmental implications (Ahmad Rafay Alam, 2021). This critique resonates with the experiences of affected communities, who view the project as a mechanism for enriching elites at their expense.

Despite its controversies, the RUDP also represents an opportunity to rethink governance and legal frameworks in urban development. The project's scale and impact make it a critical case study for examining how constitutional rights, particularly those related to property and participation, can be safeguarded in large-scale initiatives. By addressing the systemic issues highlighted by the RUDP, policymakers can pave the way for more inclusive and equitable urban planning practices. The research argues that the governance and legal challenges posed by the RUDP underscore the urgent need for reform. A robust legal framework that ensures transparency, accountability, and participatory decision-making is essential for balancing development with justice. Furthermore, equitable compensation mechanisms must be established to protect the rights of affected communities and uphold the principles of sustainable development.

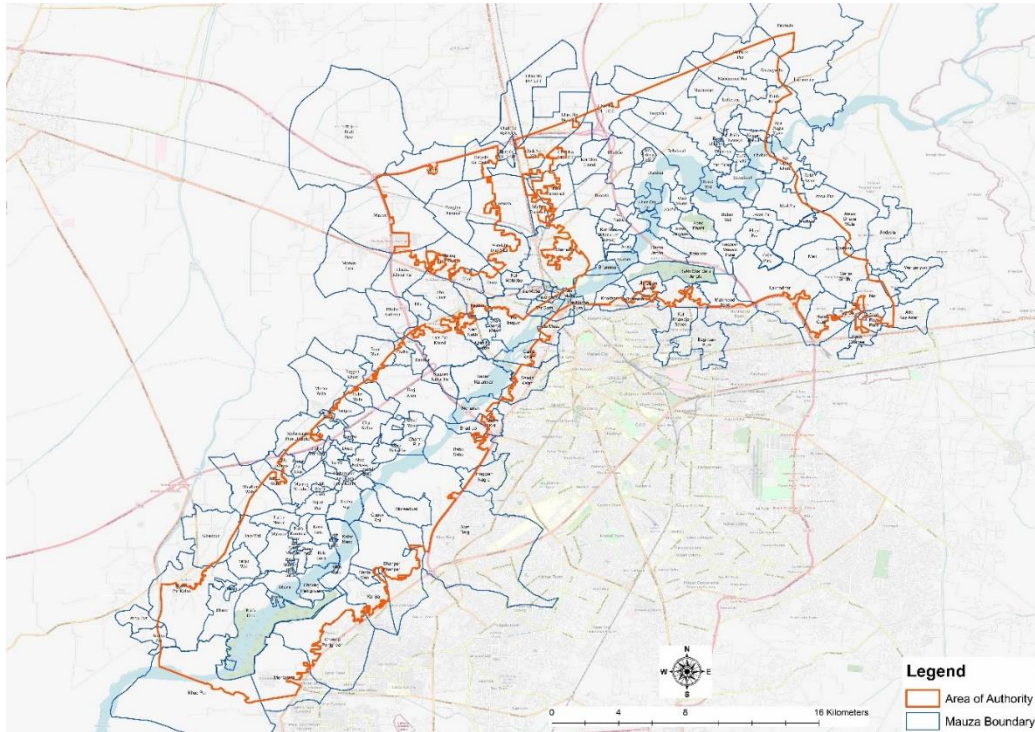


Figure 1: Mouzas in RUDA's Authority
Source: ruda.gov.pk

The following sections dive deeper into the governance structures, legal frameworks, and socio-political dynamics of the RUDP. By analyzing the aforementioned dimensions, the study aims to contribute to the discourse on urban development in Pakistan, offering insights and recommendations for fostering a more inclusive and bottom-up approach to growth.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative approach to critically analyze the governance and land acquisition practices in the RUDP. The study primarily draws on secondary data sources, including government legislation, policy documents, legal frameworks such as the RUDA Act, and reports by organizations like the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. Additionally, academic articles, news reports, and comparative studies of mega-projects in South Asia are reviewed to situate the RUDP within a broader regional context.

The methodology includes an extensive document analysis to assess the governance structures, legal frameworks, and socio-economic impacts of the project. This analysis evaluates procedural practices, stakeholder participation, and legal compliance in land acquisition. To ensure a holistic understanding, the research incorporates insights from case studies and firsthand accounts of affected communities, sourced from reports and media articles.

By synthesizing these diverse sources, the study aims to identify systemic governance gaps, highlight best practices, and propose actionable reforms. The methodology also includes a critical review of public-private partnerships in the RUDP, examining their role in balancing efficiency with accountability. This qualitative framework provides a robust basis for exploring the intersections of governance, land rights, and equitable urban development.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How do centralized governance frameworks under the RUDA Act impact constitutional mandates for local government participation in urban development?
- What are the key challenges and socio-legal implications of land acquisition practices in the RUDP, and how can they inform equitable policy reforms?

LITERATURE REVIEW

As the introduction suggests, RUDP has prompted a critical discourse around governance frameworks and land rights. As a long-term project still in its early stages, existing literature on RUDP is limited but reveals key gaps, particularly regarding governance structures and the equitable management of land acquisition. RUDP is estimated to be a project worth 7 billion USD (hrq.org, 2021), and the area it occupies is essentially 85% agricultural land. This study aims to address these gaps by critically examining how centralized governance and land acquisition processes intersect with broader issues of accountability and justice in Pakistan's urban development.

At the heart of the governance critique is the centralized authority granted under the RUDA Act, which has been scrutinized for circumventing constitutional provisions that mandate local government participation. This governance model reflects broader trends in Pakistan's urban development, where

centralized mechanisms frequently erode democratic accountability and local agency. Scholars have argued that such practices weaken the inclusivity and effectiveness of urban planning, resulting in a disconnection between the macro development or economic goals and community needs.

Pakistan's reliance on the colonial-era Land Acquisition Act of 1894 underscores systemic inadequacies (Khan, 2024) in ensuring procedural fairness, adequate compensation, and the protection of marginalized communities. Reports by organizations like the HRCP document cases of forced evictions and inequitable compensation, highlighting the socio-economic vulnerabilities of affected populations. These findings resonate with global scholarship on urban megaprojects in South Asia, which emphasizes the socio-economic and legal disruptions caused by inadequately planned land acquisition processes.

Moreover, the use of public-private partnerships (PPPs) in RUDP's implementation introduces additional layers of complexity. With an ambition to house 15 million individuals (Omer, 2024), the PPPs are often celebrated for mobilizing private resources and expertise, concerns about preferential treatment, lack of transparency, and weak regulatory oversight have raised questions about their accountability. Literature underscores the need for participatory, transparent, and inclusive decision-making processes in such large-scale projects. This is a critical gap in Pakistan's urban development framework, where the balance between the real-estate economy and equitable development remains at odds (Lohar, 2024).

In summary, the literature reveals a pressing need to address governance and land rights issues through more inclusive, transparent, and participatory mechanisms. By situating RUDP within both the national and global context of urban development, this study intends to contribute to a nuanced understanding of the project's implications for governance, land rights, and bottom-up urbanization.

DISCUSSION

RUDP encapsulates both the aspirations and pitfalls of large-scale urban development in emerging economies, especially in a top-down fashion. While the project's proponents emphasize its potential to address Lahore's urban

challenges, the governance framework, land acquisition practices, and socio-economic implications reveal systemic shortcomings that demand scrutiny.

GOVERNANCE AND CENTRALIZATION OF POWER

Centralized governance models, like the one seen in the RUDP, have historically led to significant challenges across South Asia. In India, the Yamuna Riverfront Development is a notable example where sidelining local governments caused legal disputes and public protests (Kanoi, 2022), delaying the project for years. Similarly, the Sabarmati Riverfront Development in Gujarat faced criticism for displacing over 10,000 families (Aditi Patil, 2018) without adequate compensation or relocation plans, highlighting the adverse effects of excluding community voices.

In Nepal's Kathmandu Valley Road Expansion Project, the lack of local consultation resulted in the demolition of homes and heritage sites, sparking public outrage (Sunuwar, 2015). These cases demonstrate how centralized frameworks fail to account for local needs and cultural sensitivities, leading to resistance and inefficiencies. Another case from South Asia can be found in Bangladesh, the Hatirjheel-Begunbari Lake Development Project, while praised for urban beautification, displaced thousands of low-income families (Farzana Quader, 2019). Critics argued that local stakeholders were not adequately consulted, resulting in incomplete compensation plans and long-term socio-economic impacts.

These examples underline the need for decentralized governance models that prioritize local participation. Empowering local governments and stakeholders in urban development decisions ensures projects address community needs while fostering trust and accountability, crucial for achieving equitable and inclusive development.

LAND ACQUISITION AND RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

Land acquisition controversies in Pakistan are not unique to the RUDP it is just another signal of systemic governance flaws. In the Orange Line Metro Train project, residents were evicted with little consultation and compensation rates that failed to reflect market values (Khan S. A., 2018). Similarly, the Lyari Expressway Resettlement Project in Karachi displaced thousands, with many

families receiving inadequate relocation support (Mustafa, 2006), leaving them struggling to rebuild their lives.

Reports from the HRCP on the RUDP reveal similar patterns of forced evictions and insufficient compensation, as mentioned earlier, around 4000 acres of land remain under conflict. The lack of transparency in these processes, coupled with allegations of collusion between officials and private developers, undermines public trust and fuels resistance. These examples demonstrate the broader issues with Pakistan's reliance on the colonial-era Land Acquisition Act of 1894, which enables land acquisition with minimal regard for equitable outcomes. Reforming this framework to include fair compensation, stakeholder engagement, and transparent procedures is critical to prevent socio-economic disparities and protect constitutional property rights in future urban development projects.

BALANCING EFFICIENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Public-private partnerships (PPPs) in Pakistan, as exemplified in RUDP, often highlight a complex mix of opportunity and risk. While PPPs can attract investment and expertise, the lack of robust regulatory oversight frequently results in challenges related to transparency and accountability. Allegations of land acquired at district collector rates being resold at inflated prices to private developers are not unique to the RUDP. Similar accusations surfaced during the Bahria Town projects, where land acquisitions fueled perceptions of profiteering at the expense of local communities (Ali N. S., 2024).

In another case, the Karachi Circular Railway revival project, the involvement of private developers raised questions about fair valuation and equitable development (Javed, 2017), with critics highlighting the risk of prioritizing commercial interests over public welfare. These instances underscore the need for a regulatory framework that ensures PPPs remain accountable to public interests. Independent oversight mechanisms, transparent contractual terms, and stringent checks on land dealings are essential to prevent exploitation and foster public trust in such collaborations.

By addressing the aforementioned governance gaps, Pakistan can also better harness the potential of PPPs to deliver large-scale urban projects that balance efficiency with equity, ensuring sustainable outcomes that prioritize public welfare along with uplifting local actors.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS AND RESISTANCE

The socio-economic implications of the RUDP are a reflection of larger challenges faced by other urban projects in Pakistan and other emerging economies, where displacement significantly disrupts livelihoods. For instance, during the Lyari Expressway Resettlement Project in Karachi, displaced families struggled to adapt to new locations without adequate livelihood support (Hasan, 2004), deepening economic vulnerability. Similarly, in the Orange Line Metro Train project, many small business owners and workers were left without clear compensation plans or alternative opportunities (Toppa, 2020), exacerbating socio-economic disparities.

Farmers affected by the RUDP face parallel challenges, with many losing their agricultural livelihoods and struggling to transition to other income sources. Farmers are up in arms and their protests, along with other locals, echoed the widespread dissatisfaction among these communities (Singh, 2022), reflecting their frustration with the lack of comprehensive resettlement frameworks. The aforementioned examples emphasize the critical need for policies that address the socio-economic impacts of urban projects. Inclusive resettlement strategies, sustainable livelihood programs, and proactive stakeholder engagement are essential to mitigate resistance and ensure equitable outcomes. Without these measures, such projects risk perpetuating cycles of inequality and social unrest.

CONCLUSION

RUDP serves as an illustration of the tensions between urban development, governance accountability, and developmental equity. While its ambition to transform Lahore's urban landscape is admirable, it does so at the expense of creating parallel governance structures (Tahir, 2020) for a twin city that is going to invariably face the brunt of its failures. Its execution highlights significant gaps in transparency, stakeholder inclusion, and the safeguarding of vulnerable communities.

The exclusion of local governments underlines a broader need for participatory governance models that align with constitutional mandates. Local bodies, empowered through clear legal frameworks (GoP, 2022), can foster accountability and ensure that development projects reflect the needs and voices of affected communities. The challenges surrounding land acquisition

emphasize the urgency of reforming outdated legal structures such as the Land Acquisition Act of 1894. Equitable compensation, comprehensive livelihood restoration plans, and meaningful engagement with affected stakeholders must become cornerstones of future projects. Without these, large-scale developments risk perpetuating cycles of displacement and inequality.

In addition, the RUDP highlights the urgent need for robust oversight in public-private partnerships. Transparent contracts, independent monitoring, and a clear emphasis on public welfare over profit are essential to ensure these collaborations serve societal interests (S. Hassan Waqar, 2021). RUDP emphasizes the importance of reimagining urbanization in Pakistan, the research has argued for learning from other emerging economies and not repeating the same mistakes. By addressing governance shortcomings and prioritizing human-centred development, policymakers have the opportunity to chart a path toward more equitable and sustainable cities. The lessons from RUDP, if embraced, can guide transformative reforms that prioritize justice alongside growth.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As the previous sections demonstrated, RUDP highlights the critical need for rethinking governance, land acquisition practices, and stakeholder involvement in such mega-projects. Based on the findings, the following recommendations intend to guide future projects toward inclusivity, transparency, and equity.

Restructuring Governance

The governance challenges of the RUDP highlight the need for inclusive and decentralized frameworks that align with international benchmarks (Kun Jia, 2024) such as SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities, and SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions. RUDA must learn from other global-south examples as well, such as Curitiba's participatory urban planning that challenges conventional planning norms (Rabinovitch, 1996) and Kerala's decentralized governance, which emphasizes the transformative impact of empowering local authorities to address specific community needs (Heller, 2004).

To ensure accountability, governance structures should integrate Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) principles (WEF, 2023),

prioritizing transparency, equity, and sustainability. Independent oversight bodies, modelled on frameworks such as South Korea's anti-corruption and civil rights commission (Seong-Jin Choi, 2012), can help enforce ethical and legal standards. Open data platforms should provide real-time access to budgets, timelines, and assessments, fostering trust and public engagement. Lastly, the governance model must also balance economic imperatives with environmental and social considerations as Lahore is no stranger to issues of water, sanitation, and smog (Reuters, 2024). By embedding these principles into future urban projects, Pakistan can create sustainable, resilient cities that serve as models for responsible development in South Asia.

Protecting Land Rights

It is essential to recognize the need to reform Pakistan's colonial legal framework for land acquisition. Reforms must emphasize transparency, equitable valuation, and the socio-economic well-being of displaced communities. Learning from global best practices, compensation should not only reflect market values of DC rates but also incorporate provisions for livelihood restoration, such as vocational training and income support.

Stakeholder engagement must become a central pillar of the acquisition process. Genuine consultations, similar to community-based planning models must be put in place. To learn, the example of Sri Lanka's Mahaweli Development Program is quite apt, as it ensures that affected populations actively participate in decisions impacting their lives (ADB, 2015). Their consent should form the cornerstone of land acquisition practices, fostering inclusivity and reducing conflict.

Efficient and impartial grievance redressal mechanisms are also vital. India's Right to Fair Compensation Act of 2013, offers a useful model for us to learn, where landowners are provided clear channels to contest compensation and raise concerns (I.U.B Reddy, 2014). By embedding accessible, independent dispute resolution systems, Pakistan can protect the rights of affected individuals and ensure procedural fairness. Through the aforementioned reforms and measures, Pakistan can mitigate the socio-economic impacts of displacement and build a more inclusive foundation for future urbanization.

Building Adaptive Frameworks

Large-scale urban projects like the RUDP demand dynamic frameworks capable of responding to changing circumstances and stakeholder needs. Continuous monitoring and evaluation systems are essential for identifying challenges early and enabling timely interventions. Pilot projects can test governance structures, land acquisition strategies, and social safeguards, minimizing risks before full-scale implementation.

India's smart-cities mission illustrates the importance of integrating academic expertise and public-private partnerships to design resilient urban strategies (Persis taraporevala, 2018). Through collaborations with local institutions, the mission has developed evidence-based frameworks for governance and citizen engagement.

Lastly, incorporating robust contingency planning, as seen in Japan's urban disaster resilience strategies, can prepare projects for unforeseen delays or legal challenges (UNDP, 2024). By embedding these adaptive approaches, Pakistan can ensure urban development projects like RUDP become models of sustainable growth, balancing innovation with public interest.

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