

Pakistan: Remaking A River: Land And Profit Along The Ravi

Sunday 27 June 2021, by [ALAM Ahmad Rafay](#), [JAN Ammar Ali](#), [JAVED Umair](#), [QASMI Ali Usman](#), [SAJJAD Fizzah](#), [SPENCE Tabitha](#) (Date first published: 13 June 2021).

The much-hyped Ravi Riverfront Urban Development Project is being touted by the government as the panacea to Lahore's problems of urban sprawl, housing, water and pollution. But an in-depth look raises question marks over all the fancy claims. Who does it serve then?

It is a cool winter morning and a thick layer of smog has enveloped Lahore and its surrounding areas. The Environment Protection Agency (EPA) is holding a public hearing in Tehsil Ferozwala to solicit comments regarding the environmental approval of the Ravi Riverfront Urban Development Project. As the venue slowly fills up with government representatives, security personnel, farmers, local residents, civil society groups and other members of the public, the event organisers share an image of a Dubai-like city (the future Ravi City) with glistening high-rises on the projector screen.

Sitting in the midst of agricultural land, among local residents with questions about the project, the absence of any connection to ground realities is palpable. Despite the lack of information provided by authorities, it is clear that there is no space in this new city designated for the farmers and residents whose land is being acquired.

Once the presentation starts, the consultant for the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) claims that the project would reduce smog and improve the environment in Lahore. Praising the project, he argues:

"Lahore is sprawling outwards. If we don't build this city then this will continue to happen. Agricultural land will get swallowed anyway. We will also help improve yield on the remaining agricultural land. We will give incentives. We will focus on barren land. Actually, we will increase the agricultural area."

Once the questions and answers session starts, however, it is clear that the local farmers and residents believe none of these claims.

"This project is not being designed to improve the environment nor to address our needs, but is being designed for those interested in real estate gains," says a farmers' representative. "We are willing to cooperate in the cleaning of River Ravi," he adds, "but we will never allow a Dubai to be built on our land and homes." As the representative finishes saying his piece, he receives thunderous applause from the other farmers in attendance.

Lahore is a disaster, we're told. It's running out of water and this is supposedly why the government has decided to proceed with reviving River Ravi.

There's no arguing with the fact that it is critical that we address water scarcity in the city. But part of getting to solutions is questioning the 'development' plans. For instance, if the primary purpose of the project is to 'revive' the river, why is the government keen to build a new city on both sides of the river itself?

Press conferences and project materials offer some answers. We're told that the new city, much like the revival of the river, is also essential for Lahore's survival. It will allegedly address the housing needs of a growing population, improve the environment, create new jobs and serve as a destination for leisure purposes. Project spokespersons claim that all the planning mistakes made in Lahore will be rectified in the new city to meet the needs of its population in a sustainable way.

But, as evidenced by the protests surrounding the project, not everyone is convinced.

In this article, we examine the government's claims and find their rationale to be misleading. Closer scrutiny reveals that the proposed project is anti-poor and anti-environment, primarily aiming to extract value through land speculation.

What is the river ravi project?

In August 2020, Prime Minister Imran Khan inaugurated the five-trillion-rupee Ravi City megaproject. Envisioned as the second largest planned city in Pakistan — after Islamabad — the proposed development is planned to cover 102,074 acres, catering to a population of 10 to 12.5 million people (equivalent to Lahore's current population), over a 30-year period.

The proposed project seeks to revive River Ravi as a freshwater source through the construction of barrages and lakes, and develop "high quality residential, industrial, commercial and recreation zones" on both banks in northwest Lahore.

Advertisements of the project show a 'Dubai-like' city, with high-rises located along a waterfront and, what look like, Caucasian families cycling and walking around promenades. The project website also states that the residential city will build "luxury style residential development which will result in increasing land values and market interest."

While the project builds upon Prime Minister Imran Khan's vision, plans to implement a Ravi Riverfront project have been circulating for nearly 15 years. "The project was first conceived as early as 2006, when a design charette was conducted amongst local and international architects and academics," wrote architect Hala Bashir Malik in a 2014 *Tanqeed* [article](#). The Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) government is now building on these plans, aiming to bring them to fruition.

The development of new cities and riverfront projects is not unique to Pakistan. In recent years, several new cities and riverfront projects have been planned across Asia and Africa. Vanessa Watson, a professor at the African Centre for Cities, notes that many cities in sub-Saharan Africa are being reimagined "in the image of cities such as Dubai, Shanghai, and Singapore," and marketed as sustainable 'smart cities' and 'eco cities', whose visions stand in stark contrast to ground realities and the needs of local populations living in poverty. She finds that these "urban fantasy plans" are designed primarily to meet the needs of middle- and high-income groups. While she is writing of cities in the African continent, her words ring true in the case of the Ravi City project too.

Governance and limited accountability

The Ravi project is not being implemented by any of the entities that currently run the city of Lahore. In order to implement the project, the Punjab Assembly passed special legislation in 2019, establishing the Ravi Urban Development Authority (Ruda). Under the Ravi Urban Development

Authority Act 2020, Ruda has been given total control of the project area as a supra-development body. The Lahore Development Authority (LDA) and local governments of Lahore, Gujranwala and Sialkot are subservient to Ruda.

As per sections 48 and 49 of the Act, the Authority and its employees have immunity from all legal proceedings, and “no court or other authority” can “question the legality of anything done or any action taken in good faith under this Act, by or at the instance of the Authority.” The mechanisms to hold the Authority accountable are, hence, limited.

Presently, the law requires Ruda — the statutory authority — to formally notify the projects under its regulatory control. To date, however, Ruda has not officially notified the Ravi project. In other words, there is no official Ravi project. With time, Ruda intends to acquire nearly 100,000 acres of land along the Ravi for a project that isn’t even officially notified.

In the guise of ‘solving the problems of Lahore’, the state is already exercising the power of eminent domain, and has immense political support in doing so. Since this process started, affected households and farmers have mobilised and are protesting against the project under the banner of the Ruda Affectees Action Committee.

At present, the Lahore High Court has stayed land acquisition of the project. It has also restrained the Punjab Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) from granting it any form of approval. Under the law, no project may commence construction or operation without an environmental approval.

And yet, Ruda continues to hire personnel and issue expressions of interests from developers. This may not be illegal, but it raises an important question: without land acquisition complete and without environmental approval, how can Ruda continue to market the project and seek investment, especially when there are court injunctions restraining it from proceeding further?

The law for urban development is straightforward: No property developer can market their project without first getting all relevant approvals. If Ruda were a regular property developer, it would be in violation of the law. But Ruda isn’t a regular property developer. A special law has been created that allows it to function in this manner, while the prime minister has taken a special interest in its speedy implementation.

Greenwashing ‘Ravi City’

Ruda describes the Ravi project as in alignment with the government’s ‘clean and green’ objectives, and the key to securing water and food for all of Pakistan. Yet, it is hard to imagine how paving over nearly 80,000 acres of rich farmland can be conceived of as ecologically sustainable or socially responsible.

In a fact-finding report about the project, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) showcases findings of the Lahore Conservation Society, deeming the project to be “unsustainable environmentally, ecologically and financially.” It also indicates that “the river’s channelisation was against all principles of sustainable development and ecological sustainability of a river and its environment.”

A January 2021 EIA ecological report suggests that much of Ravi City’s impacts on ecological resources would be long-term and irreversible (see table).

**IN-DEPTH IMPACTS OF RIVERFRONT DEVELOPMENT ON
ECOLOGICAL RESOURCES OF THE RAVI**

Ecological resources	Impacts			
	Positive/ Negative	Magnitude or Extent	Duration	Reversibility
Available resources: Territory (hunting/ foraging grounds; shelter and breeding sites; corridors for migration and dispersal)	Negative	Extensive	Long term	Irreversible
Water quality of river	Positive	Extensive	Long term	Reversible to some extent
Soil minerals and nutrients	Negative	Extensive	Long term	Irreversible
Stochastic process: Flooding	Positive	Extensive	Short and Long term	Irreversible
Climate change	Negative	Complex	Long term	Complex
Erosion	Negative	Extensive	Long term	Irreversible
Eutrophication	Negative	Extensive	Short and Long term	Reversible
Ecological processes: Population dynamics (survival rates and reproduction rates; competition; predation; seasonal behaviour; dispersal and genetic exchange; elimination of wastes)	Negative	Extensive	Long term	Irreversible
Vegetation dynamics (colonisation; succession; competition and nutrient cycling)	Negative	Extensive	Long term	Complex
Ecosystem properties: Fragility and stability carrying capacity and limiting factors	Negative	Extensive	Long term	Irreversible
Productivity	Negative	Extensive	Long term	Irreversible
Connectivity, patchiness and degree of fragmentation	Negative	Extensive	Long term	Irreversible
Ecological relationship: Tropic levels, food chains and food webs, herbivore-plant relationships, predator-prey relationships, herbivore-carnivore relationships, adaptation and dynamism	Negative	Extensive	Short and Long term	Complex
Ecological role or function: Decomposer, primary producer, consumers, parasite and predator, keystone species.	Negative	Extensive	Long term	Irreversible

From the ecological impact study of the 'Strategic Development Plan for Ravi Riverfront Urban Development Project' (January 2021) | ECSP

But in spite of this, the EIA report concluded that the project will have an “overall positive impact” on the entire ecosystem, and deemed the strategic development plan of the project “feasible” at the proposed location, as long as the recommendations made in the report are implemented in “true spirit”.

One struggles to reconcile the optimism of the Ruda EIA with the findings of a feasibility study of a similar Ravi project considered by the PML-N government in 2013. The study concluded that there was no water in the Ravi to make its riverbed an attractive real-estate proposition. So, technical solutions to bring water to the Ravi were considered. One was to build spate dams near Sialkot to store the monsoon rainwater so that the riverbed could be flushed in the dry winter months. But the 1,000-acre spate dams would come at the cost of prime rice-growing land.

The other was to divert irrigation water from the BRB (Bambawali-Ravi-Bedian) canal, pass it along Lahore and back into the irrigation system at Head Balloki, about 80 kilometres downstream. But the Irrigation Department balked at the idea that their clean irrigation supplies would be returned to them impossibly filthy, as Lahore discharges all its domestic effluent into the river and contaminates water meant for irrigation. Besides, the effluent of Gujranwala and half of Sialkot and Faisalabad are also discharged into the Ravi.

Since no one wants to live next to a sewer, any Ravi project would also involve treating and cleaning domestic effluent. So far, no one in Pakistan has been able to run an effluent treatment plant at a municipal level.

Water woes

“My passion for this project is linked to water,” says Sheikh Imran, a spokesperson for Ruda, in an interview on the Authority’s YouTube Channel. He recognises the Ravi River as a sewage drain, and goes on to characterise it as being at major risk of mega floods or complete loss of water due to India potentially releasing or holding back water.

Claiming that Modi is building India's Shahpur Kandi dam for this purpose, he urges viewers to "think about this with a clear head." "This is why the project is so close to the PM's heart," he says.

But this claim is completely unwarranted. Yes, India has constructed dams on the Ravi. But for it to flood Pakistan, it would have to flood its own territories first.

If the government was serious about fixing the water situation in Lahore and in the province, they'd work on implementing the Punjab Water Act 2019 — an Act aiming to comprehensively manage and regulate water resources in the province — and establishing the Punjab Water Resources Commission and the Punjab Water Services Regulatory Authority, instead of trying to fool the public with ludicrous threats of a water war with India.

While Ruda claims that the project will provide water for agricultural irrigation all the way down to the Indus Delta, thus ensuring the country's food security, environmentalists, litigators and local planners question where the extra water will come from and what the impacts of channelising the river with concrete retention walls would be for local ecologies.

Local farmers and residents are themselves concerned about the water pollution, which is behind a major waterborne health crisis in the country. They have offered to give the government an acreage of their land free of cost, to construct and maintain water treatment facilities to meet the right to safe drinking water of the existing residents of the area.

"We've applied a hundred times for water treatment," says Karamat Ali, a youth organiser in the area. "Don't take the land," his aunt appeals to the government. "If you have to do something, make a school, a hospital or a water treatment plant for people already living here."

The farmers whose land is marked for acquisition argue that destroying their livelihoods will also mean higher prices for agricultural produce consumers in Lahore and other local markets. Meaningful climate adaptation entails strengthening local food production and distribution, so that, when disasters hit, basic nutritional needs at home can still be met. While the pandemic lockdown measures disrupted supply chains, these very farmers along the river were among local suppliers who continued providing nutritious food to Lahore and other nearby markets.

A group of young singers, whose families are small farmers in the area marked for acquisition, have banded together to compose Punjabi songs, paying tributes to the struggle of farmers and criticising the policy of the PTI government.

As the HRCP's fact-finding mission finds, both Ravi City and the river's channelisation come with "serious environmental hazards and evictions of local farmers, along with the destruction of their agricultural land."

Resistance by ruda affectees

Organising resistance has been a difficult task for people in the area, due to widespread rumours about the precise nature of the project and its uneven repercussions based on class. Initially, only small landowners and agricultural workers opposed the project, fearing permanent displacement. But, eventually, bigger landlords also joined the movement, as it became clear that they were being offered a pittance for the land.

The campaign escalated when farmers stormed a public hearing on land acquisition at the District Police Office headquarters in Sheikhpura. They compared their fate to that of the Kashmiris, whose lands are being illegally occupied, and declared their intent to fight "until our last drop of blood." The government responded by registering an FIR against roughly a hundred protesting farmers, but

has so far resisted the temptation to arrest them.

Since early 2021, local farmers have worked with urban activists belonging to various groups, including HRCP, Climate Action Pakistan, the Pakistan Kissan Rabta Committee and the Haqooq-i-Khalq Movement. Recently, the All-Pakistan Kissan Ittehad, Pakistan's largest farmers' rights body, also announced its support for Ruda affectees, signalling the growing support for the movement.

At the moment, teams of young people are going from village to village to organise farmers and residents, including women, for what they believe is an inevitable confrontation with authorities. Two tendencies are specifically interesting about this burgeoning campaign. The first is the role played by music in fuelling the movement. A group of young singers, whose families are small farmers in the area marked for acquisition, have banded together to compose Punjabi songs, paying tributes to the struggle of farmers and criticising the policy of the PTI government.

"Our elderly worked hard to build what we have here. We even have our graveyards [here]," says one of the young singers known as Bafi Bukhanwali. "For two lakh per acre, no one would accept this," Bukhanwali adds, speaking about the paltry amount being offered by the government for the land.

The protest song *Arh Ke* is a massive hit among the youth of the area, and the singers have become local celebrities. Ziafat (aka Bafi Bukhanwali), Nasir Jatt, Waqas Ali and Karamat Ali put their lyrics to a catchy Punjabi tune:

Arh ke arh ke haq leyn pindon aaye aan
Asi aaye aan tractaran te charh ke
Kissan barbaad ho gaya.
Ek teri tabdeeli kar ke asaan te hue parchay
Par kharreh aan asi hikka tan kay.

[We come from the villages with our heads held high,
Marching on top of our tractors,
Farmers have been ruined.
This '*Tabdeeli sarkar*' of yours registered cases against us,
But we are standing tall with our pride.]

The second interesting aspect of the movement is how closely the participants are following developments of the farmer's movement in India. This interest represents a rare case of identification with a secular global cause among the youth in contemporary Pakistan. Interestingly, the songs that became popular in Ruda-affected villages also turned into YouTube sensations across the border, with Indian Punjabi farmers playing the songs in their protests in Delhi.

The increasing internal cohesion of the farmers' movement, its alliance with urban actors and its global imagination position it to potentially become an unparalleled farmer's movement in our recent history.

Colonial roots of dispossession for elite settlements

In talking about the Ravi project, it is difficult not to draw historical comparisons with settler colonialism. As Yogi Hendlin, an environmental philosopher, has argued, colonial powers coined the term '*Terra Nullius*' (land that is legally deemed to be unoccupied) to justify the occupation of native land, because it was allegedly uncultivated or underutilised. Postcolonial states inherited these ideas

to exercise control over land.

It is, therefore, no surprise that the Pakistani state — like other postcolonial states — continues with the same legal modes of extractive and structural violence. Perhaps, the only point of differentiation is that while the imperial state lacked legitimacy, the postcolonial state can exercise this power in the name of national sovereignty. It is, hence, unsurprising that anyone opposing the project is also referred to as an enemy of the country.

This is evident in the Pakistani state's view of the land that it seeks to bring under control in the name of a mega development project. The Punjab government has proposed to build the project on thousands of acres of farmland that serves Lahore's daily needs for fruits, vegetables and dairy. Yet, the state acts as if this land is *Terra Nullius*.

During the British colonial rule over India, land ownership was at the centre of numerous discussions and debates. Multiple groups and communities laid claims to the land for a range of moral, social and political reasons.

But with the market-driven, neoliberalised logic of the postcolonial state, the concept of land rights has come full circle. Previously, the settler colonialist could override ownership claims in the name of productivity and utilitarian use, and the imperial state could disregard indigenous communities' claims to the land as lacking legal documentation. Neither of these two 'justifications' is applicable in the current case. The communities living along the Ravi marked for forceful acquisition are neither unproductive in their land use nor do they lack legal rights to own it.

Yet, the state is invoking the sovereign clause to acquire land forcibly, and offering a miserly compensation to the owners. Such a practice is indicative of the foundational basis of the law as violence. In other words, the colonial legacy of law dictates that it does not exist to endow the individual with rights, but operates as a systematic tool for exploitation and dispossession.

This is precisely the role of the dreadful clause 4 of the Land Acquisition Act of 1894, that the state has frequently used to deprive indigenous communities of their claims to land and its resources. A repeal of the colonial era Land Acquisition Act 1894 (as it has been practised in other South Asian countries such as India and Bangladesh) is rightly one of the key demands of the Ruda Affectees Action Committee.

As Mustafa Rashid, one of the leaders of the movement, puts it: "We are going to bury section 4 in the riverbed of Ravi."

Political economy of real estate practices

While the environmental and planning shortcomings of the project are abundantly clear, its conceptualisation and fast-tracked implementation also reveal the institutional and structural position of real estate development in the country, and how deeply it remains tied to broader political-economy considerations, especially over the past two decades.

Since 2000, the urban extent of the city has grown at a 25 percent faster rate per annum than in the 1990s. This growth manifests itself through the transformation of peri-urban and rural hinterland within the district boundaries into low-density residential housing developments.

Those implementing and benefitting from sprawl point to an annual population growth of around three percent, and the need for land conversion to meet housing demand requirements. However, this purported rationale ignores the fact that the vast majority of land being converted is in development schemes ostensibly targeting middle- and upper-income households — demographic

segments where housing demand is, both in terms of absolute scale and proportion, less than that of lower-income groups. The majority of such schemes, as found by the Urban Unit in 2019, also remain vacant.

The preceding two decades are marked by considerable growth of private capital in real estate development, either in the shape of private developer-led schemes, or the partnering of private firms with public and parastatal entities.

Between 2001 and 2010, Bahria Town alone acquired and sold nearly 4,000 acres of land (mostly without formal approval from the LDA), which on its own was greater than all public-sector land development projects in the city combined. Private developers are increasingly engaged with parastatal and military-run entities, such as the Defence Housing Authority (DHA), in land acquisition partnerships to create new residential schemes that are unsustainable in the long-run.

The returns from investing in real estate are sizable and outstrip returns from other asset classes. This is precisely why private developers and investors remain fixated on acquiring rural land, with little regard for environmental and socio-economic sustainability. These returns remain mostly undocumented and untaxed, given the high prevalence of cash-based transactions in real estate, and the popularity of *benami* (proxy) investments to mask real beneficiaries.

What is, thus, inevitable then is the passage of unregulated returns in real estate into the political domain, both to phase out zoning and building regulations, as well as to retain protection for the near-instant rents accrued from converting cheap arable land into high-value investible files and plots.

Since stepping into office in 2018, the current federal and provincial government has taken several steps to lubricate the speculative functioning of the real estate industry, by providing blanket source-of-funds amnesties in the construction sector, including for the purchase of land in new developments; and by setting up a commission to validate environmental and planning irregularities for pre-existing housing projects, through the payment of small fines.

The Ravi Riverfront project must, therefore, be understood within this political nexus marked by political collusion, speculative practices and outsized gains obtained from converting rural land into investible commodities.

Project claims and key questions

Lahore's survival as a city certainly requires planning for future water challenges in an appropriate way, but is not dependent on the building of a new Ravi City. We cannot wish away the problems and challenges that Lahore currently faces by turning away from it.

If Ravi City is being developed to address sprawl, is it not possible to control Lahore's sprawl in more effective ways than building another city and contributing to sprawl directly? Lahore continues to expand outwards with new low-density residential developments which have high social, environmental and economic costs. Would it not be better to address this challenge head on by planning for higher densities in the city?

If Ravi City is being developed to provide low-carbon, pedestrian-friendly sustainable transport that will be less harmful to the environment, can we not adopt a similar approach in Lahore now? The number of public buses in Lahore has been falling, walkability and pedestrian infrastructure is fast disappearing, and public bodies continue to prioritise road and underpass construction for car-users.

At the time when plans for sustainable transport were announced for Ravi City, the LDA announced

the building of underpasses and tunnels on Mall Road. In May, the Lahore Commissioner's office announced multiple new overhead and flyover projects. Are sustainable transport plans only applicable in one city and not the other?

If we want to improve air quality, forestation and the environment through the new city, can we explain why we have to do so through the destruction of existing agricultural land and ecological systems?

If we want to address the housing needs of a growing population, detailed plans should be shared with the public so that these can be better assessed. Can we also clarify why the project spokesperson has shared that only five to 10 percent of the constructed housing will be provided for low-income groups (under the Naya Pakistan Housing project)?

The majority of unmet demand for housing in Lahore stems from low- to lower-middle income groups, and this demand is likely to increase in the coming years. Why is the project prioritising the needs of those without a need for housing — those who already have a wide range of options in Lahore — as compared to those who are unable to access the formal market?

These questions must be considered and answered, otherwise no amount of flashy advertisements would change the perceptions of the project. As a farmers' representative shared at the EIA hearing in January in no unclear terms:

"This is a land-grabbing programme by developers that will destroy our homes, livelihoods and lands."

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1629117/remaking-a-river-land-and-profit-along-the-ravi#comments>