

Shafaq Sohail: *Peasants, Property, and the Politics of Climate Change in Punjab, Pakistan*

In August 2020, the government of Punjab, Pakistan, announced the launch of Ravi Riverfront Urban Development Project (RRUDP) – a planned city to be built on the embankments of River Ravi, just outside Lahore, the provincial capital of Punjab. Spanning more than a hundred thousand acres of land, including seventy-six thousand acres of productive farmland, the project was proposed as a solution to worsening climate predicaments, housing crisis, and the degradation of River Ravi. The implementation of the first phase of the project began immediately after the announcement, conveying the government's commitment to the global fight against climate change. Through the AIPS short-term grant, I aim to conduct preliminary research in Lahore and its environs to explore a) how RRUDP uses the language of climate action as the new logic and instrument to further capital accumulation through large scale real-estate development and b) the varying responses of small- and large-landholders to the project and the threat it poses to their lands and livelihoods. The exploration of these questions through preliminary fieldwork will significantly help me make progress towards my dissertation research by allowing me to establish contacts in the field and refine my project and research focus.

My first research question attempts to understand *how* and *why* the state and the real estate sector coopt the language of climate discourse for RRUDP, when the project can simply be understood as just another real-estate endeavor in a longer history of envisioning world-class cities and lifestyles through marketized housing schemes (Ghertner 2015). To this end, I premise my investigation on the argument that the framing of climate change adaptation allows the state to transform productive land into “globally legible property” (Cowan 2022) and integrate itself into the global structures of financial capitalism now ironically oriented towards a discourse on climate action. To understand *how* the state and real estate sector achieve this, I will begin my field research by conducting ethnographic observations within land revenue offices and offices of Ravi Urban Development Authority (RUDA) (the government entity overseeing the execution of RRUDP) to acquaint myself with the daily workings of bureaucrats, land surveyors, and office visitors (*patwaris* or village accountants, lawyers, estate agents etc.) (Cowan 2022). My primary aim would be to understand how the ‘idea’ of the project materializes within these spaces of bureaucratic decision making. During this period, I will focus on processes and practices through which the state is simultaneously able to frame RRUDP as a climate initiative for transnational investors and a real estate investment opportunity for its local clients.

My second question delves deeper into the different responses RRUDP generates amongst those it seeks to dispossess. While many large landowners (owning at least 50 acres) may resist the acquisition of their land for real estate projects, small to medium landholders (with less than 12.5 acres of land) have predominantly and historically complied with projects and policies that may potentially disadvantage them. I seek to understand what determines their compliance with development projects geared towards national progress and preparedness against climate change when they are systematically excluded as beneficiaries of such growth and resilience. I hence aim to dedicate part of my research duration to visiting villages in the peripheral areas of Lahore to interview farmers who have already sold their land for the first phase of the project. This will primarily be done through referrals and snowball sampling, starting with relatives and acquaintances of farmers I have already been able to contact. I will also interview farmers who may have willingly sold their land to real estate developers for similar projects in the past, including, for example, ex-inhabitants of the peri urban area of *Bedian* around Lahore that has now been developed into the military owned Defence Housing Authority.

Lastly, to historically ground my project, I will be conducting archival research, particularly at the Punjab Public Library in Lahore. I will rely on legal and policy documents to trace the economic, social, and political bases of agrarian transformation and dispossession over the decades. Particularly, I will be researching the visions of development and nation-building purported by development projects, policies, and mandates. Relatedly, it will be my intention to understand how these visions encoded in planning policies and legal orders were interpreted, narrativized, and circulated amongst the public through print media, in particular news reporting, advertisements, and pamphlets.