Deconstructing the Density Discourse: Exploring the Densification, Construction, and Land-Use Triplex in Pakistan

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Abstract

The article explores how urban densification is defined, measured and conceptualised in the context of Lahore through the narratives of key policy stakeholders. A preliminary analysis of policy documents, and the recent changes in building regulations and land-use rules show that there is a commitment to increase density by discouraging urban sprawl and encouraging the growth of mixed-use, highrise buildings. By conducting an analysis of policy documents and the changes in building regulations and land-use rules through the narrative of key stakeholders in policy making, the research unveiled motivations which underpin policy makers' commitment to higher densities, illustrating how urban densification is manifested in the realm of policymaking, the forms and typologies within which high densities are envisaged by stakeholders and how these have materialised on the ground, and the implications thereof.

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Introduction

Over the past decade, developing dense, multi-function cities that attract investment and capitalize on the benefits of agglomeration has been central to the policy agenda in Punjab, Pakistan. This is expressed by the Planning Commission of Pakistan in the Framework of Economic Growth, a policy strategy document that aims to guide accelerated economic growth in the province. The Framework of Economic Growth, adopting the language of the World Bank, envisages cities as "engines of economic growth" and commits to mitigate urban sprawl, optimize land-use, incentivize construction activity, and develop dense cities with high-rise developments (Planning Commission of Pakistan 2011, 94). The aspiration to develop dense and economically vibrant cities is rehashed by Vision 2025. Vision 2025 is a strategy articulated by the

Planning Commission of Pakistan that aims to transform Pakistan into one of the ten largest economies of the world by 2047. It compares the horizontal expansion of cities in Pakistan to Dubai and aims to transform urban areas into "drivers of growth" by developing mixed-use areas and encouraging vertical, high-rise buildings to curtail horizontal growth (Planning Commission of Pakistan 2014, 15). Similarly, the Punjab Growth Strategy (2018) published by the Planning and Development Board and the Punjab Urban Sector Plan (2018) developed by the Planning and Development Board with support from the International Growth Center stress that density and agglomeration are pivotal to economic development, as dense, multi-function urban areas attract investment, create jobs, and boost the construction industry:

> Placing urban development (with an emphasis on density and commerce) at the heart of our Growth Strategy has several advantages: dense multi-function urban areas create jobs and are free from barriers to entry and exit; and density attracts investment and helps the growth of the construction industry as well as commerce, both of which are employment friendly (Punjab Urban Development Sector Plan 2018, 3).

The legal and administrative framework for spatial planning in Punjab is ambiguous and fragmented. Based on Articles 137, 138, and 140A of the Constitution of Pakistan, spatial planning is a mandate of provincial and local governments through multiple institutions including the Planning and Development Board; Housing, Urban Development and Public Health Engineering Department; and the Local Government and Community Development Department. Although urban and spatial development falls under the domain of the provincial and local governments, the Prime Minister's Office constituted a National Coordination Committee on Housing, Construction, and Development (NCCHCD) in July 2020 to coordinate and promote construction- and development-related activities, especially affordable housing projects. The committee consisted of senior-level bureaucrats and acted as a focal point for inter-province, inter-ministry, inter-department, and inter-agency coordination for housing-, construction-, and development-related policies and initiatives across the country. The committee was chaired by the Chairman of the Naya Pakistan Housing and Development Authority, which is a corporation established in January 2020 through an Act of Parliament. The committee convened twice a week to review progress on housing- and construction-related initiatives and to monitor and facilitate timely approvals of housing, construction, and development projects across the country. One meeting each week was diligently attended by the prime minister.

The article explores how urban densification is measured, conceptualized, and framed by policy stakeholders in Punjab, Pakistan. It draws on the case of Lahore to understand the extent to which definitions and measures of densification drive and

ground policy discourse. It examines how the aspiration to increase densities is conceptualized and enacted through changes in building regulations and land-use rules. It also looks at the coalition between the government and private developers that has steered regulatory changes and explores the different motivations of the public and private sectors to increase density. Using Lahore as a case study to ground empirical findings, especially with regards to the measures of densification, the article makes broader arguments about how urban density is conceptualized, framed, and incentivized by various levels of the national and provincial government.

Lahore is the second most populated city of Pakistan and the most populated city of Punjab. It has a population growth rate of 3 percent per annum,[1] which is higher than the national average growth rate of all urban areas of Pakistan (2.7 percent). In 2019 and 2020, the Lahore Development Authority (LDA)[2] introduced a series of changes to the building and zoning regulations and the land-use rules. The changes allow increased floor area ratios (FARs) on different plot sizes, reduce the plot size required to build apartment buildings from four *kanals* to 10 *marlas*,[3] increase the number of stories permissible in apartment buildings in residential areas from four stories to seven stories (excluding the basement), relax height restrictions in most of the LDA-controlled area, and completely remove height restrictions along 10 roads which have been identified for commercialization. Moreover, dedicated counters have been established to streamline the process of providing building permits and reduce the time and cost of obtaining building permits. These changes have been adopted by the development authorities of other divisions with little or no changes.

Methods

I have conducted a review of the changes made to land-use rules and building and zoning regulations. I interpret these changes through an analysis of the narratives of five key stakeholders in policymaking. The narratives reflect how professionals make sense of their everyday, professional experiences (O'Dowd and Komarova 2013). The narratives of policymakers have been gathered through open-ended interviews with two policy advisors (PA1 and PA2) who advise the government on urban and spatial development, two town planners employed by different development authorities (TP1 and TP2), and one private developer (D1), who is an active member of the Association

1 In some sources, the population growth rate for Lahore is quoted to be 4 percent. This figure does not account for the change in definitional categorization of urban and rural Lahore between 1998 and 2017. In 1998, 18 percent of Lahore's population was considered rural, and 82 percent was considered urban. In 2017, the entire Lahore district was considered urban.

2 Development authorities operate at the divisional level. There are 11 divisions in Punjab, which are further subdivided into districts, tehsils, and union councils.

3 One marla is equal to 225 square feet, and one kanal is equal to 4,500 square feet or 20 marlas.

of Builders and Developers (ABAD).[4] Except for the private developer, all my interviewees are employed by the government based on either competitive examination or qualifying experience for advisory and technical roles. All interviewees have either directly been a part of the NCCHCD or have been privy to its proceedings because of the nature of their work.

I have worked closely with three of the five interviewees and draw on participant observations from my own experiences of working as a senior research analyst at the Urban Unit, a technical research wing for the government of Punjab. My role has had a profound impact on my position in the research. It has informed the research topic and question, the questions asked from each policy stakeholder, and the choice of policy stakeholders interviewed. My "lived familiarity" with the urban and spatial development and policy in Punjab, acquired through my work experience, has given me a priori knowledge of the policy and stakeholder landscape and has enabled me to evade gatekeeping, ask insightful questions, elicit candid responses, and understand colloquial phrases (Griffith 1998). However, it has also made me sympathetic to the constraints of working within the public sector (Holmes 2020).

The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and a thematic analysis was carried out. This article has deliberately been written in first-person to acknowledge my position in this research.

Measuring Urban Density

I started my interviews by asking my participants to define urban density. The definitions of density elicited through the interviews are complicated by the measures, forms, and outcomes of urban density. The town planners I interviewed defined urban density the "number of people" or the "number of housing units" that can be accommodated in a unit of area.

Using population density as a starting point, I have calculated the population density of Lahore at the tehsil level using census data for 1998 and 2017.[5] The population density of Lahore district (for the same geographical area) increased from 2,640 persons per square kilometer to 6,275 persons per square kilometer (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics 2017). This indicates that the population density in the district approximately doubled. However, aggregate measures of population density at the district level conceal internal variations within and across neighborhoods. A look at the tehsil-level data for Lahore shows that there was an increase in the population density for every tehsil in the Lahore district; however, the extent to which population density increased in each tehsil varied, and the forms that that increased density takes has

4 The Association of Builders and Developers is an organization of builders and developers from across the country registered under the Companies Ordinance of 1984. ABAD was formed in 1972 and has over 1,400 construction companies as members.

5 The tehsil is an administrative subdivision of the district. Tehsils are further divided into union councils.

material implications in the context of Lahore. Figure 1 shows the intercensal increase in population density at the tehsil level.

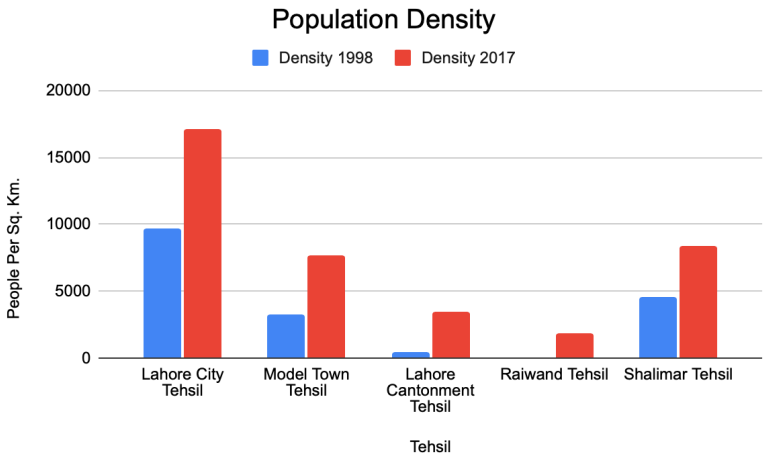

Figure 1 Intercensal population density at tehsil level
Source: Census data, calculations by author

Based on the town planners' distinction between number of people and number of housing units, I estimated the number of housing units in each tehsil in 1998 and 2017 using the average household size for the tehsil and calculated the compounded annual growth rate for housing units for each tehsil. Although the Raiwind and Cantonment tehsils had the lowest population density, they showed the largest percentage increase in population density as well as the highest compounded annual growth rate in the number of houses, with Raiwind's standing at 0.21 percent per annum and Cantonment's at 0.13 percent per annum.

The limitations of measuring population density based on census data have been widely acknowledged in the literature: it only records the resident, night-time population and often excludes low-income, marginalized, and unhoused groups (Angel et al. 2021). The problems posed by census data in Lahore are not only limited to the population numbers but also the geographical area recorded. Calculations of population density based on census data show the population density for the same geographical area in 1998 and 2017 and do not take urban expansion into account.

The population density for the district calculated using built extent of Lahore instead of area recorded in the census as a denominator shows starkly different results (Table 1). Built extent refers to the contiguous urban area (which includes built units and vacant land) captured using Landsat imagery based on the methodology also employed in the well-known Atlas of Urban Expansion (Angel et al. 2012). Using the

Urban Unit's Landsat imagery for 1995, 2005, 2015, and 2020, the average growth rate of Lahore's built extent has been calculated (Table 2).

	Year						
	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020	2025 (projected)
Population	4,652,529	5,576,372	6,856,969	8,432,132	10,369,137	12,642,423	14,825,828
Built Extent (sq. km.)	168	194	225	302	406	805	1,596
Population Density	27,694	28,682	30,475	27,899	25,540	15,705	9,289

Table 1 Population density of Lahore per square kilometer of built extent
Source: Urban Unit and author's calculations

Decade	Average growth rate
1995–2005	3.39%
2005–2015	8.04%
2015–2025 (projected)	29.31%

Table 2 Average growth rate of Lahore's built-up area
Source: Author's calculations

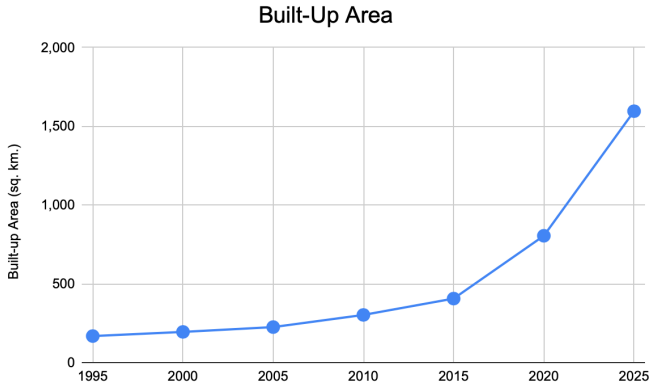

Figure 2 Lahore's built-up area

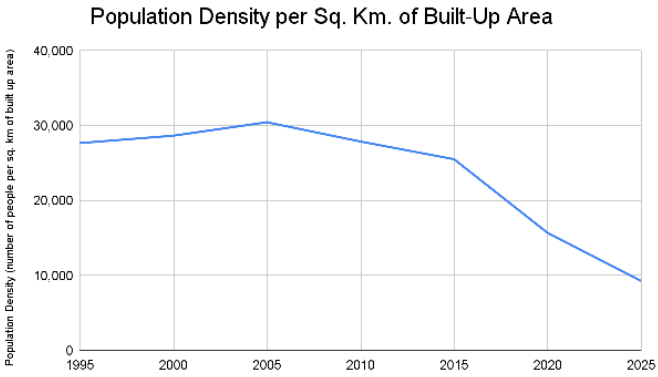

Figure 3 Population density per square kilometer of Lahore's built-up area

In comparison to the intercensal population density figures that show that the population density of the district of Lahore has doubled, the population density calculated using Lahore's built extent shows that the population density has steadily declined since 2005 (Figure 3). At the same time, it also shows that the built extent of Lahore has been rapidly increasing since 2005 (Figure 2). Since Lahore's built extent has doubled every decade, the population density per square kilometer of this area has decreased.

Although these calculations capture the increase in the built extent of Lahore, they do not capture the variation in the distribution of the population density and do not provide an indication of what this density looks like on the ground. This is particularly limiting in the context of Lahore because it is estimated that 42 percent of Lahore comprises vacant land plots (calculated by the Urban Unit using Landsat imagery). Despite these limitations, comparing population density calculated using the geographical area in the census versus calculating population density using the built extent indicates the extent of urban sprawl and provides a background to understand how stakeholders in policymaking understand urban densification and the extent to which this understanding grounds the discourse on densification.

The policy documents referenced in the introduction emphasize curtailing horizontal expansion, and the data shows that there has indeed been rapid horizontal expansion. At the same time, policy advisors envision densification as "intensified use of land and space which leads to more housing, commercial activity, and economic growth" (PA 1), which is in line with the policy objectives to generate economic activity and increase efficiency through densification. Town planners have a more technical understanding of urban density and describe it as the number of people or housing

units that can be accommodated per unit of area, referring only to residential density. However, my research shows that there is a tension between competing land uses, i.e., the aspiration to provide increased housing is at odds with the ambition to develop commercial spaces.

Conceptualizing Urban Densification

This section examines changes to legislation through an analysis of the narratives of policymakers and conceptualizes how urban densification has manifested in the realm of legislation. My research shows that discussions on densification culminate in and are enacted through building and zoning regulations and land-use rules, as these are the legislative instruments which govern what is built and how it can be used:

> It is not easy to frame discussions on densification in our context. Urban planners who have worked in Lahore have their own jugaad (improvisation) of density that combines [the] textbook definition with the on-ground situation. It is within the realm of rulemaking that these discussions materialize, so a professional norm of densification emerges (PA 2).

The interviewees suggest that the key instrument and practice to address density is master planning. The master plan indicates what constitutes a low-, medium-, or high-density area; however, it does not provide guidelines for the number of people or housing units that should be accommodated. In a meeting on the master planning of Lahore, dense areas around the Walled City were commended for being "denser than London," and attention was drawn towards the low-density areas of Raiwind that require densification. High-density areas, despite their lack of amenities and overcrowding, with 7–10 people sharing a room, were not identified as an area of concern, thus indicating that higher densities are considered aspirational, with limited attention being paid to the on-the-ground implications of densification and the ability of existing physical structures to accommodate it (PA 2).

While the master plan is an overarching strategic document, the guidelines for densification are actualized in the realm of rulemaking through land-use planning, directed by different legislations such as the LDA Land Use Rules (2020) and the LDA Private Housing Schemes Rules (2014); however, the way these rules are expressed is ambiguous:

> If a housing society of 1,000 kanals is developed, the [land-use] rules will only say what percentage of the area should be residential, commercial, and allocated for other uses; they will not say how many people or housing units it should accommodate (TP1).

As mentioned earlier, the town planners understand density as residential density; however, residential density is not regulated by indicating an optimal number of people or housing units that an area can accommodate with respect to contextual factors such as infrastructure and amenity provision, but rather through the percentage of land use dedicated towards housing and other uses.

On the other hand, higher densities are promoted by building regulations that permit increased heights for commercial and residential buildings. This puts residential density at odds with competing land uses:

> Densification should apply to housing. Tall apartment buildings are dense, but you can also have high-density housing on smaller lots. But unfortunately, it is enacted differently. The prime minister thinks that high-density means high-rise, and this thinking has permeated the provincial government. When the height restriction along a certain road is removed or it is identified for densification—for instance areas around the Orange Line [of the Lahore Metro]—everyone wants to build a commercial building (PA 2).

This teases out the tension between competing land uses and illustrates that higher density is imagined in terms of a very specific typology rather than a particular land use, expressed in rulemaking and interviews through the "removal of height restrictions" and "increasing building heights." Thus, it is almost impossible to separate the discussion on urban density from the typology of high-rise buildings within which it is imagined. This conceptualization of higher densities is key to the analysis because it is within this typology that the tensions between competing land uses manifest. The revenue-generating objective of the LDA has led to "linear commercialization" along List A roads, so structural densities along those roads has increased; however, the houses behind those properties remain G+1 (having a ground floor and one floor above) (TP 2).

According to PA2, the policy has indirectly attempted to increase residential densification, but it has not had the desired impact because the changes made to the LDA's building and zoning regulations in 2019 led to the construction of either commercial buildings or high-end apartments. According to the developer (D1), "Maintaining a 40-story building has costs, and people who need affordable housing can't pay maintenance charges. These buildings will have a combination of corporate offices, hotels, and high-end apartments. Just because I can go up to 500 feet doesn't mean I am going to convert it into affordable housing."

Thus, while the aspiration to increase densities and the supply of housing is intended to result from enabling increased construction activity on a plot of land, the changes to the building and zoning regulations may not have had the desired impact on housing supply. This is because the construction of commercial buildings takes precedence over affordable housing in areas where commercialization is permitted. Even

though these new developments add to the construction volume in the city, they do not curtail the horizontal expansion of the city, as they do not provide affordable housing or a substantial increase in the housing supply. They do not increase the residential density of the city, which is how the town planners imagine density. Rather, they add tall structures with economic activity, a vision of densification which is held by the government. At the same time, in areas where commercialization is not permitted, high-end apartment buildings which cater to a very limited proportion of the population are being built. High-end apartment buildings are a newly emerging phenomenon in Lahore, and interviewees expressed apprehensions about the viability of these buildings as well skepticism about the groups that have been able capture the highest gains from the changes to the building regulations and land-use rules. The interviewees saw these buildings as a viable option for younger people as land becomes more expensive; however, they are seen unsuitable for the older generation, who is perceived to be attached to the idea of living at the ground level and knowing their neighbors. The town planners also expressed concerns regarding infrastructure and amenities such as schools, parks, and roads, which were planned and provisioned based on areas' original densities but are not receiving investment to keep up with the vision of densification. Moreover, they anticipated that high-end apartment buildings will lead to more informal settlements:

> Informal settlements are there because they are needed. Luxury apartments cannot survive without informal settlements: they need someone to wash their car, bring groceries, clean, cook, wash dishes, and do the laundry. These buildings cannot accommodate the number of staff that we require: how many servant quarters does a three-bedroom apartment have? (TP 2).

However, as pointed out by PA 2, informal settlements are not a part of the densification discourse but a part of the regularization discourse.

Despite the town planners' apprehensions about the viability of high-end apartment buildings in providing housing, the government remains committed to a version of densification which does not fully meet the objective of providing increased housing supply. This makes it necessary to explore the motives that underpin the shift towards higher densities within planners' conceptualization of higher densities.

Motivation for Higher Densities

The literature on urban densification in various contexts shows the dissonance between planning objectives and developer interests and the inequitable distribution of the benefits of densification amongst different groups (Livingstone et al. 2021; Du Toit et al. 2008). As governments roll back and require additional sources of income to finance infrastructure and affordable housing, a stream of literature also illustrates the

ways in which density planning is the result of collusion between the government and developers as governments leverage higher densities to extract value from new developments (Robinson and Attuyer 2020; Livingstone et al. 2021; Karampour 2021; Stein 2019; Sandroni 2010).

Around the world, high-rise buildings have been appropriated to showcase economic successes (King 1990; King 2004). Ghertner (2015) argues that the aspirations of governments to "rule by aesthetics" and have cities appear "world-class" override governmental and legal logics of accountability. However, tall buildings cannot only be thought in terms of establishing skylines; it is essential to remain cognizant of the role of speculation and real estate cycles that shape the form and distribution of tall buildings. In a more complex argument, Ong (2011) addresses the nexus between urban inter-referencing and speculative practices and explores "hyper-building" as both "a speculative of overbuilding and as a particular type of spectacular monument in East Asian cities" (20).

In the case of Pakistan, however, building tall buildings does not attempt to showcase the outcomes of existing economic growth. This is not to say that images of Dubai, Singapore, and London are not used in presentations to evoke an imaginary of the world-class cities that Pakistan aims to build (TP 2, PA 2). Rather, the route to achieve the world-class city imaginary is different. Increased construction aims to generate economic growth by boosting the construction industry, as construction activity that culminates in the form of high-rise buildings is seen as a catalyst rather than an outcome of economic growth. This section of the article first establishes how the shift towards higher densities is in fact underpinned by the motive to increase construction, and second, it elucidates the thought process through which the government perceives increased construction activity as economic growth, a phenomenon only visible through close participant observations.

Despite the town planners' understanding of densification as an increase in population density or residential density, those at higher levels of policymaking view densification as means to boost the construction industry, which will eventually lead to economic growth: "The regulations haven't been changed to densify the city, but to boost the construction industry" (TP 2). This provides interesting insights into the policymaking process, as it shows that the changes in building regulations and land-use rules are not the initiative of technically trained town planners working for the development authorities, which are tasked with spatial planning, nor are they a result of the master planning process. Rather, they are a policy imperative that has been imposed on the development authorities. I now explore the coalitions through which planning for higher densities and increasing construction activity have become intertwined.

The motivation to increase densities and construction activity is a collaboration between the government and private developers. Although I could not ascertain whether the developers influenced the government or vice versa, it is clear that there

is sustained reciprocal engagement between the government and developers, the latter of whom have reasonable stakes in the process, as they are organized under ABAD:

> This government is very pro-construction. Every two weeks, they sit us down and ask what we want. We have recently been engaged by the government for feedback on health and safety laws. As an entrepreneur, I am not trained in bylaws. But we have engaged our architects to comment on their draft. We try to manage their expectations and find a balance between safety, ease of doing business, and growth (D1).

The government and developers both rationalize the pro-construction stance through the aspiration of economic growth: "Better heights and floor area ratios increase property valuation, and as people build more, there is more economic activity" (D1). Since private developers support the increase in FARs and building heights for obvious reasons, I delve deeper into the government's commitment to boosting the construction industry.

Post-political scholars argue that the predominance of using neoliberal theory to understand planning and densification has neutralized the discipline and obscured its politics. Employing neoliberalism as a lens to understand the shift towards market-oriented approaches reduces the heterogeneity of social, economic, political, and cultural phenomena to the market imperative, giving the impression that all stakeholders have an equal say in shaping planning policy and practice (Holman et al. 2018). However, recent literature on densification draws attention towards powerful voices which frame the discourse on densification and often perpetuate the interests of commercial developers, producing exclusive living spaces which price out urban majorities (Marcuse and Madden 2016; Stein 2019). Densification is not a neutral process of producing and reproducing space. Instead, it is laden with displacement, with the valorization and prioritization by governments and markets of certain forms of densification at the expense of other possibilities (McFarlane 2020).

My research shows that the development authorities have made changes to their building regulations and land-use rules because of directives from "the government," which the interviews collectively show refers to the Prime Minister's Office:

> We had written instructions from the government to promote high-rise buildings and create opportunities for investors. The government wanted to improve the ease of doing business, encourage high-rise buildings, and boost the construction industry so more people get housing and jobs, and industries related to construction also benefit. ABAD had a huge role to play. They communicated how our policies impact them and requested us to increase FARs and building heights (TP1).

The government explains its commitment to higher densities as a means of boosting the construction industry, which in turn was believed to generate more housing, create more jobs, boost ancillary industries, and improve the "ease of doing business," a competitive ranking on which Pakistan boasted a jump of 28 positions between 2018 and 2021. Close observations of the proceedings of the NCCHCD show that the key performance indicators to monitor whether the objectives of increasing construction activity are being met is the number of residential and commercial building applications received and approved by each development authority and municipal corporation. The rapid approval of building permits indicates the efficiency of the development authority and is one of the indicators used by the World Bank to calculate the ease of doing business. Data on building permits also indicates the sum total volume of construction activity that has been approved in square feet. The volume of approved residential and commercial construction is multiplied by the cost of construction of residential buildings per square foot and the cost of construction of commercial buildings per square foot, and these numbers are then summed up to indicate the monetary value that the construction industry is generating. These figures are scrutinized by the highest offices in the provincial and national governments on a weekly basis. Periodically, increases in the sale of raw construction materials such as bricks and cement have also been used to show the value generated by construction activity.

The collaboration between the government and developers to increase construction activity is also lubricated by an amnesty scheme for builders and investors called Amnesty100D in order to encourage investment in real estate. Under the amnesty scheme, investors could not be required to declare their income source or provide a money trail for properties bought until 30 June 2021. Additionally, builders and developers also enjoyed a fixed tax independent of the volume of construction until 30 December 2021 and were provided tax breaks in the withholding tax levied while buying construction materials. First-time purchasers of a building or a unit in a building were also exempted from declaring their income source until 23 March 2023. The amnesty scheme has received support for boosting the real estate business and bringing more developers into the tax net but has been criticized for inflating the price of property and turning real estate into a haven for "black money:"

> Only large developers are benefitting from this. Land prices are rising rapidly where tall buildings can be built, and small developers are being priced out of the market. Large developers are converting their black money into white money, and there is no clause in the policy that requires them to reinvest a proportion of their income back into real estate (TP 2).

Conclusion

This article sheds light on the ways in which the densification discourse and policies are being formulated, enacted, and monitored in Pakistan. Drawing on the case study of Lahore for empirical evidence, it illustrates how policy stakeholders conceptualize, frame, and enact densification. Drawing on the narratives of these professionals, it explains how coalitions, committees, and collaborations shape and are also shaped by policies and policy discourse and how these groups' opinions often outweigh those of town planners and even advisors who are technically trained and formally tasked with spatial planning. This article zooms into the collaboration between the government and private developers, who are organized under ABAD, to show that consistent engagement between them has led to regulatory changes that increase construction activity, especially in the form of high-rise buildings. Construction activity is seen as a vehicle to provide economic growth through the anticipated value that it adds to the economy rather than as an outcome of economic growth. Unlike what is indicated in policy documents, the motivation to increase densities is not only to curtail urban sprawl or mitigate the negative impacts of low-density cities such as greater infrastructure costs and the loss of agricultural land, but also to boost the economy through the value generated by the construction industry.

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