Crossref DOI: https://doi.org/10.71085/rjhsa.04.04.141

A double-blind, peer-reviewed, open-access, and an HEC-recognized Y-category Journal

Research Journal of Human and Social Aspects

Web link: https://rjhsa.cclll.org

P-ISSN: 3006-9696, E-ISSN: 3006-970X

Volume 4 Issue 4, 2026, Page Rang: 110-121



Climate Change, Urban Flooding and the Politics of Elite-Led Urban Expansion in Islamabad: A Political Ecology Study of State Power, Land Use, and Flood Vulnerability

Attal Khan[1] Hamad Ullah Khan[2] Muhammad Jamil[3]

[1] Lecturer, Department of International Relations, National University of Modern Languages (NUML), Islamabad, Pakistan.

[2] BS International Relations, National University of Modern Languages (NUML), Islamabad, Pakistan.

[3] BS International Relations, National University of Modern Languages (NUML), Islamabad, Pakistan.

Correspondence Author: attal.khan@numl.edu.pk

Article information

Article History:

Received: 2026-08-05

Received in revised form: 2026-09-07

Accepted: 2026-09-17

Published Online: 2026-10-05

Keywords:

Politics; Flood; Urban Elite; Natural Drainage; Vulnerability.

ABSTRACT

This study examines the ways elite-led urban expansion in Islamabad has disrupted natural drainage channels and heightened flood vulnerability. The study uses a qualitative political ecology case study that is based on policy and planning document review, historical maps and satellite images. Interviews and focus groups discussions were conducted with planners, engineers, officials, and residents in both urban centers and low-income neighborhoods. The study revealed that major roads, gated housing schemes, and commercial mega-projects designed and promoted by elites have encroached on and canalized natural drainage channels, changing the direction of floodwaters toward poorer, informally planned neighborhoods while planning rules and environmental safeguards are selectively acted upon to favor elite interests and present floods as natural or management failures. This study argues that effective mitigation requires not only engineering and management improvements but also legal protection and partial restoration of important drainage channels, strict implementation of hydrological criteria into development approvals, stronger accountability transparency and for elite-led projects, and inclusive planning that focuses at-risk communities.

© 2026 by the Authors. Khan, Khan & Jamil. This article is an open-access distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-SA 4.0) License https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/

The Journal is published quarterly (March, June, September & December) by the Centre for Children Literacy and Lifelong Learning (CCLLL), Pakistan. **Web link:** https://cclll.org

Introduction

Urban flooding is the most obvious manifestation of climate risk in rapidly urbanizing cities of the global South, where heavy monsoon rainfalls with altered use of land, newly created infrastructure and increasingly weak governance to produce recurrent disasters. Most of the Asian urban centers are particularly exposed to climate risks as drainage channels are encroached upon, the floodplains are gradually urbanized and impermeable surfaces expand, reducing the capacity of urban landscape to absorb or safely convey flood water (World Bank Report, 2023). The recent works on urbanization in Islamabad often portrays it as a modern, well-planned and well-managed capital, however the ground reality is that it is facing escalating fluvial and pluvial flood risks linked not only to extreme rainfall but also to cumulative changes in the natural drainage system. Notably encroachment, canalization and culverting on mainstream is viewed as the most concerning aspect of city planning. Studies from the adjoining city of Rawalpindi reveals that rapid urbanization, solid waste mismanagement and narrowing flood channels on Nallah Lai have pushed rain water during summers to the densely populated poor neighborhood (Waseem and Rana, 2023).

At the same time, studies have shown the change in land-use and governance and the way unplanned and selectively planned development is shaped by elite capture, speculative real estate and weak enforcement of planning and regulation despite Islamabad's formal status as a master-planned city (Shahid, 2024). This literature highlights a pattern in city development in way that all major road, housing schemes and commercial projects are designed through or along natural drainage channels while applying environmental safeguards in ways that tend to favor political and military-bureaucratic interest. However, most of the existing literature on Islamabad and other major cities in Pakistan largely portrays urban flooding as the result of mismanagement and technocratic issue (Saima et al, 2022). It focuses entirely on modeling, mapping, engineering flaws or the generic encroachment without examining systematically how elite-led urbanization trajectories alters and reconfigure natural water channels and drainage that maximizes flood risks across in monsoons.

This study is meant to fill the gap in the existing literature using a qualitative ecology case study of Islamabad to examine the ways elite-led and elite-driven expansions have transformed the city's natural drainage networks and has increased flood vulnerability, especially for poor and informally planned neighborhoods. Moreover, this study also traces the regular waves of roads construction, gated housing schemes and commercial projects that have encroached on canalized and redirected Nullahs while floods are routinely depoliticized as natural and technical failures (Rehman, 2022). For this purpose, the researcher has utilized policy and planning documents, satellite imagery and focused group interviews in the areas alongside the main drainage corridors. An effort is made to link the material reconfiguration of the urban hydrology to elite power, land-use decision-making and unequal exposure to flood risks. The study reveals that meaningful mitigation and flood aversion will require legal protection and partial restoration of key drainage channels and implementation of Capital Development Authority (CDA) criteria into development approvals and stronger transparency and accountability for the elite-led projects and a participatory planning that centers at communities at risk in addition to improved drainage infrastructure (Ahmed, 2026).

Research Methodology

Through the intersection of policy papers, spatial data, and lived experiences, this study employs a qualitative political ecology case study to investigate how elite-led urban expansion in Islamabad has redistributed flood risk and rearranged natural drainage. Master plans, zoning laws, EIAs, and technical reports on drainage and floods were among the policy and planning documents on urban development, infrastructure, and environmental management that were gathered from official sources and examined for how they frame flooding, support projects, and control (or loosen) protections for drainage corridors and floodplains. These texts were read in

conjunction with historical maps and master plan layouts of the original streams (nullahs) and basins, subsequent zoning/layout plans, and multi-temporal satellite imagery that demonstrated changes in land use, channel canalization or culverting, encroachments on floodplains, and the alignment of projects driven by the elite with drainage pathways. Purposive and snowball sampling were used to recruit planners, engineers, officials, and residents from both affluent and low-income or informal settlements along drainage channels for semi-structured interviews and focus groups that recorded institutional narratives and everyday experiences of flooding, displacement, and negotiation with state agencies. In order to identify patterns of concentrated risk and uneven protection, georeferenced reports of flooding and controversial projects were superimposed on drainage networks and development footprints, and official claims of "improved drainage" or "natural" causes were cross-examined against historical and spatial evidence. In order to enhance credibility, treat discrepancies as analytically useful, and consider researcher positionality, informed consent, and confidentiality, documentary and interview materials were thematically coded around power, access, environmental narratives, and uneven exposure to hazard. These interpretations were combined with spatial analysis.

Analysis and Discussion

1. Elite-led Urban Expansion and Drainage Reconfiguration

Urban waterscapes are literally and politically remade by powerful state, military-bureaucratic, and real estate players, as exemplified by elite-led urban development and drainage reconfiguration. This process takes place in Islamabad through a number of road, housing, and commercial projects that gradually replace the city's original hydrological logic, as well as later deviations from the master plan (Report, 2022). With green belts and broad natural drainage channels (nullahs) designed to transfer storm-water from the hills to the river, the 1960s-plan placed the city between the Soan River and the Margalla foothills. However, over time, valley bottoms, stream buffers, and agricultural land have been transformed into high-value industries, gated communities, and infrastructural corridors due to elite control over planning institutions and zoning choices. Due to the fragmentation, narrowing, or burial of natural drainage channels, runoff has increased, lag time has decreased, and peak flows after heavy rains have been amplified (Waseem and Rana, 2025).

In this regard, one of the most important factors is the utilization of water channels and drainage land for parking lots, construction of high-rise buildings and highways. With the expansion of urban sectors, new housing schemes are granted permission on environmentally sensitive areas that has served for safe drainage of rain water for centuries. Additionally, the construction of metallic roads and streets have reduced the land surface area that used to soak rain water. Recent hydrological studies show that this covering of land surface has increased the speed of overland flow of rain water and has reduced storage in floodplains and wetlands along the main rivers like Korang, Soan and the adjacent tributaries in various neighborhoods (Moatassam, 2010). The construction of large culverts, bridges and underpasses regularly cross the natural flow of rain water corridors. In certain cases, where these structures are poorly constructed, maintained and designed, they serve as choke points where water path is blocked and resultantly rain water overflows to the surrounding communities. Looking at this from engineering perspective, it may be termed as design flaw but from a political perspective it becomes a matter of judgements and permissions about the design of roads, bridges and culverts and the people who has to suffer and who benefits from these arrangements.

Specific planning narratives are used to justify these changes. New road plans, flyovers, and commercial hubs are frequently presented as symbols of modernization and enhanced connectivity in official documents and promotional materials. These projects' drainage interventions are usually referred to as "improvements" that will simplify storm-water conveyance and lessen urban congestion. The ways that modern

infrastructure frequently shortens or reroutes natural channels, concentrates flow into undersized conduits, and transfers danger to already vulnerable populations are obscured by such narratives. Thus, what are actually highly political reconfigurations of the urban hydro-social cycle are depoliticized by the language of efficiency and progress (Bhutto and Ahmed, 2024).

The reclassification of "unused" or "vacant" areas as developable is another example of elite-led reconfiguration. According to land-change models in Islamabad, newly developed areas are disproportionately growing into regions that have been identified as being particularly vulnerable to flooding, particularly along natural streams and low-lying depressions. Planning approvals, re-zoning, and the regularization of programs that frequently involve military, bureaucratic, or politically linked developers are the reasons behind this increase, which is not coincidental. In this way, land speculation and drainage reconfiguration are related. In order to maximize the number of plots that may be sold, natural channels are redirected, straightened, or culverted, and residual drainage is channeled into narrow, engineered conduits whose failure risk is carried by downstream inhabitants. Authorities find it easier to put up with frequent flooding in these areas because these individuals frequently have no tenure security and little political influence (Oxfam Briefing, 2012).

According to urban political ecology, these infrastructures are socio-natural assemblages: power relations both form and are shaped by roadways, drains, and embankments. While low-income or informal settlements frequently rely on open, unlined nullahs that serve as waste routes, high-income areas in Islamabad usually receive comparatively generous drainage provisions, such as wide streets with lined drains, frequent inlets, and regular de-silting. These downstream rivers are readily overloaded when upstream projects increase runoff. However, official narratives in planning and water management documents frequently characterize new roads and culverts as "improving drainage" or "reducing congestion," emphasizing the advantages to land value and mobility while downplaying the development of new flood areas. Thus, the same infrastructures that shield affluent neighborhoods may increase exposure in other areas, resulting in an unevenly protected landscape (Kamal, 2004).

This phenomenon is additionally reinforced by the politics of power and knowledge. Organizations that have the authority to approve projects are linked to privileged interests and are generally indulged in solicit technical evaluation and layout violations. In these matters, peripheral and rural areas are often neglected or overlooked. In new construction approvals, most of the time the vested interested are prioritized to favor affluent communities to adhere to acceptable parameters of risks. In their personal testimonies, the residents of rural and poor neighborhoods declared destructed sewers, overflowing nullahs and excessive water accumulation as the main causes of monsoon flooding (Ahmed et al, 2010). They urged for enforcement of setbacks, removal of encroachments, desilting and delineation of alternative rod alignment for the affected communities. It should be kept in mind that Islamabad is a planned city like amny other cities in the world. For instance, In Sao Paulo a proper system of centralized flood management and residual hazards in perioral and low-income areas is implemented and riverbanks, highways and other infrastructures are redesigned in the affluent areas. In politics, this phenomenon is called infrastructural favoritism where the politically marginalized regions and communities serve as buffers in the urban social-hydro framework. In such cases, financial resources are allocated to urban and rural neighborhoods according to their needs and requirements. This pattern is also followed in many other Asian countries where road infrastructure and embankments directs water into unplanned neighborhoods. The planned and gated housing schemes are established over wetlands and drainage corridors causing urban flooding and monsoon rain water blockage (Qasim, 2024). In Islamabad, the ground realities are different because a distinctive configuration of civil-military, bureaucracy and real-estate nexus

mediate planning and design of major developmental activities.

Similarly, transportation junctions and networks also alter water flow channels in addition to residential developments thus causing flood risks in rural areas. as per latest GSI-based flood vulnerability assessment with land-utilization and modification. However, major roads and highways crosses drainage corridors depicted on urban planning maps signifying the reconfiguration of city water management to accommodate vested interests. It is crystal clear that alteration of water drainage system is not only an incidental phenomenon rather a critical mechanism which causes disparity and perpetuates it as is evident from water monitoring maps. It causes water accumulation during heavy rainfalls thus contrasting it with allocation of protected and unprotected rural neighborhoods. A close examination of available database reveals that a new strategy for future developmental projects can disclose risk reallocation and management (Ahmed et al, 2010).

Similarly, residents and civil society members have developed contrasting narratives that challenges the official assertion of depicting floods and natural and inevitable phenomenon. The common perception among the poorer and under privileged communities is that during rainy season the affluent gated societies remain safe while the adjacent planned neighborhoods experiences flooding. Over the year's studies have shown that the main causes of urban flooding are obstruction of natural drainage system, encroachments on water channels and less attention to construction regulations. Flood affectees in the rural neighborhoods view flooding as a direct consequence of elite decision-making that overlooks construction regulations and attributes flooding to natural causes like climate change (Jan et al, 2026).

Taken together these factors manifest the inherent connection between drainage redesigning and elite-led urban expansion in Islamabad. the strategic decisions and narrative construction that deliberately prioritize certain lives and assets over others are particularly reshaped as waterscape rather than simply responding to changing weather rainfall patterns and weather conditions. Therefore, technical dialogues about water channels capacity or water return periods should be aimed to mitigate flood risks and vulnerabilities. The entities defining protection needs to be redefined to accommodate tolerable losses in quest for urban development and expansions. A political ecological study that focuses on the interplay between infrastructure, land usage and modernization discourses is essential.

2. Uneven Exposure and Differentiated Flood Risk

In the context of Islamabad uneven exposure and differentiated flood risk refers to the prevail ant disparities in vulnerabilities of various communities to flooding along the major water paths. The varying vulnerability is not only attributable to natural factors like random habitation but it originates from the traditionally established pattern of land allocation, infrastructure, development and the dynamic interplay between state and citizens on one hand and elites and citizens on the other that shapes and define the vulnerability to flooding along social divides. According to Scott, in political ecology factors such as class, ethnicity, residence and legal status affects the demography of urban centers in flood-prone regions (Scott, 2014). The allocation of land for drainage system and infrastructure development largely depends on the recognition and compensation to effected communities during disasters.

The first factor in flood vulnerability is proximity to hazardous areas like river banks, embankments, steeps and water-lands that are avoided by wealthier and affluent people and are largely inhabited by low-income, poor and marginalized segment of the population. Low-cost dwellings and informal settlements are often found near river corridors and drainage canals that flood repeatedly in South Asian and other quickly urbanizing areas. For instance, a climate vulnerability assessment for Islamabad and Rawalpindi reveals that many of the city's primary flood "hotspots" are unplanned

settlements (slums) like Mera Jaffar, Muslim Colony, and 100 Quarters, which have developed along the Nullah Lai and its tributaries. These areas have high population densities exceeding 4,400 people/km^2 in some places, and they frequently sustain damage to fragile housing (UN Report, 2014). Similar trends have been observed in cities throughout the Global South, where the impoverished are driven into ecologically hazardous areas that are nevertheless "available" due to their hazard status due to affordability and employment opportunities (Sheila, 2025).

Planning choices and urban growth trajectories also result in unequal exposure. Political-ecological examination of 'haphazard urbanization' in the Kathmandu Valley reveals how fragmented zoning, state-led road construction, and speculative growth create a patchwork of planned and uncontrolled places with drastically differing levels of catastrophe risk. Strong partnerships between state agencies and developers transform wetlands and agricultural land into mixed-use real estate, frequently with little consideration for flood buffering or drainage, leaving older villages and informal settlements with poor services and increased vulnerability to flooding (Poudel et al., 2025). As a result, freshly constructed, better-served enclaves are comparatively shielded in an urban mosaic, while nearby low-income regions are subject to increasing runoff due to upslope building and clogged drainage routes.

Thus, flood danger varies according to both the location of residents and the governance of flood control. The state's attitude toward marginalized or informal groups fluctuates between coercion and neglect in many cities. Research on inequality and flood risk management reveals how authorities may drive people out of some dangerous areas while allowing or even promoting the concentration of poverty in other dangerous areas, particularly in areas where these groups have little political clout (Sheila, 2025). For instance, in Accra city of Ghana, the expansion of slums along the bank of river Karle Lagoon has been maximized by unauthorized and unplanned informal housings. Resultantly, the urban poor neighborhoods experience more exposure to flooding in exchange for being close to city-center and social welfare facilities (Poudel et al, 2025). This pattern shows that government policies produce and reinforce poverty and vulnerability in certain cases where the powerful interest are protected.

Further evidence that flood control decisions can purposefully sacrifice some people in order to preserve others comes from political-ecological research on Bangkok's 2011 floods. Authorities diverted and stored water in semi-urban and low-lying areas during the crisis in an effort to keep major business and elite residential districts dry, which delayed the flooding of weaker suburban towns. Suburban people mobilized to seek a more equitable sharing of the flood load because they perceived these policies as an unfair allocation of risk and compensation, according to analyses of "disaster justice" in this context. In this case, uneven exposure is not just a result of previous planning but also a current political struggle about where and how water should be restricted, released, or stored during emergencies (Malik, 2025).

These distinct hazard geographies are strongly related to the entanglement of physical risk distributions with state activities, clientelism, and recognition—what some scholars refer to as hazards-capes and hazard-states. Ethnographic research in Latin American cities demonstrates how clientelist relationships determine who gets emergency relief, protective walls, or drainage improvements and which settlements are presented as unlawful encroachments or "intrusive others" who are accused of "causing" floods and obstructing drains. Thus, in some formal neighborhoods, the same flood may be perceived as a minor annoyance, while in others, it may be perceived as an existential threat that puts inhabitants at risk of both physical harm and police or eviction crackdowns (Ali, 2025).

These results are consistent with environmental justice approaches to urban floods in North American and European environments. Initiatives evaluating the "environmental justice of urban flood risk" combine flood exposure maps with

social vulnerability indicators, income, race/ethnicity, age, disability, and housing quality. The results show that low-income and communities of color are disproportionately located in high-hazard areas and receive less funding for resilient design and green infrastructure. Many minority neighborhoods are trapped in cycles of under-protection and over-exposure, where even light storms can cause destructive localized floods, due to historical redlining, discriminatory lending, and unequal park and drainage supply (Abdul et al, 2025).

Many traditional adaptation strategies intended to lessen flood damage, such as levees, sea walls, elevated roads, and property-value-driven green infrastructure, paradoxically reinforce or exacerbate these inequities, according to recent syntheses, such as a 2026 review published in Nature Water. Efficiency-oriented cost-benefit analyses usually prioritize high-value real estate over protecting socially vulnerable communities; new resilient waterfront developments may force low-income residents to relocate to more vulnerable inland locations; and hard protective structures may cause floodwaters to shift onto unprotected areas. Instead of addressing inequality as a side problem, the authors advocate for "transformative adaptation," which clearly places justice and politics at the heart of flood decision-making (Javaid and Mashhood, 2025).

However, modelling work on flood risk management reveals that strategies focused on infrastructure efficiency or aggregate risk reduction, but unaware of distributional impacts, can eventually exacerbate social inequality. While more affluent groups can absorb shocks, or relocate to safer places, agent-based and system-dynamics models show how repeated flood losses deplete the limited assets of informal or low-income communities, limiting their ability to relocate, adapt housing, or invest in protection. According to Bashir (2024), these feedbacks result in path-dependent trajectories where vulnerability becomes self-reinforcing, with each incident making some groups poorer and more vulnerable while their needs continue to be ignored in planning forums (Bashir, 2024).

Once again, Islamabad presents a particular South Asian example of these phenomena. A recent thorough evaluation of flood risk in the city's formal communities indicates that the social aspect of risk is relatively diminished, implying better basic services and planning in formal sectors; however, the institutional, physical, and economic aspects of risk are significantly elevated. Nonetheless, the significantly heightened risk exposure of informal communities along the Nullah Lai, as reported by UN-Habitat, is overlooked due to the focus on formal neighborhoods and indicator-driven assessments. These evidence reveals that bifurcation of urban flood corridors, allowing informal neighborhoods adjacent to drainage systems results in regular inundation with minimal safety measures that are taken for redesigning for infrastructure development and enhanced accountability (Usman, 2025).

In short, for understanding modern urban flooding, it is essential to be aware of the level of uneven exposure to distinct flood risk among various communities, locales and regions. It may not be enough to be aware of the geography solely. urban flooding is in fact, is the result of urban marketing, planning choices, infrastructure development, state politics and elite interest. The research on political ecology shows that power politics plays important role in determining who is causing floods and with what consequence. While poorer, racialized, or otherwise marginalized communities are assigned the role of urban sacrifice zones, elites and well-connected groups typically secure safer land, better drainage, and priority in emergency responses (Poudel et al, 2025). Therefore, any serious effort to address urban flooding—whether in coastal North American cities, Islamabad, Kathmandu, Bangkok, or megacities in Latin America—must go beyond merely technical solutions and address the social and political mechanisms that perpetuate these unequal flood geographies.

3. Power, Narratives, and Contested Explanations of Flooding

Floods are frequently depicted as natural calamities brought on by storms, excessive rainfall, or river overflow. However, an increasing amount of research in the fields of political ecology, critical geography, and disaster studies demonstrates that power dynamics and conflicting narratives, rather than hydrology alone, have a significant influence on explanations of flooding. The prevalent explanation for why floods occur influences the allocation of blame, the funding of remedies, and the communities that are safeguarded or sacrificed. Accordingly, flooding is both a biophysical and a political and discursive process (MPDSI Report, 2025).

The idea that cities are "socio-natural" hybrids in which infrastructure, land-use practices, and ecological processes are co-produced through historically particular power configurations has been essential to the field of urban political ecology (UPE). UPE researchers examine how drainage systems, river channelization, land reclamation, and informal settlements are all ingrained in unequal socio-economic structures rather than viewing floods as external shocks to an otherwise neutral urban setting. This is made clear by Marks' concept of infrastructural events, the 2011 flood he examines cannot be comprehended without consideration of previous river engineering projects, whose long-term impacts determine the event's magnitude and spatial distribution. Determining whether the catastrophe was brought on by "nature" (heavy rain) or by governmental choices about infrastructure is a conflict over authority and responsibility in and of itself (Qazi, 2026).

Rarely are causal narratives impartial. Different explanations of floods are frequently put out by state authorities, engineers, real estate companies, and impacted communities in order to further their own agendas. For instance, government officials in Phnom Penh have a tendency to attribute increasingly severe floods to climate change. This official narrative is challenged by a UPE study that demonstrates how rapid land changes, wetland infilling, and poor waste management associated with elite-driven urban growth have significantly increased the risk of flooding, especially for the urban poor (Iqabl et al., 2014). The authorities justify technocratic initiatives that benefits the elites and approval of their housing and commercial projects at the expense of the vulnerable communities in the name of climate change.

The over justification of this discourse pertains to selective governance and verbal communication. The common discourse about rain and flood water politics therefore revolves around engineering and construction flaws rather than political interventions and manipulations. Instead of working on natural water corridors the policy-makers plan new infrastructure on water channels and floodwalls in the name of mitigating risks (Gelser and Suleri, 2010). These technocratic tactics enhances elite-led expansion by prioritizing hydraulic management and capacity-building initiatives. The alternative narratives that declare flood as result of social inequality and inadequate housing schemes are suppressed. In addition, the deforestation in upward streams is always overlooked to benefit the political elite. Resultantly, community-led programs about land-use, urban development and nature-based solutions are ignored. Moreover, the vulnerable communities always get less payment s for their losses.

economically disadvantaged individuals persistently encounter inadequate financial support.

Urban flooding can be used as a tool for state-making and clientelism at the state level. Political actors strategically use disaster tales to bolster their power, according to research on cities in Latin America. In order to legitimize emergency powers, secure outside finance, or divert attention from structural factors like speculative urbanization on floodplains, states occasionally inflate the extraordinary nature of floods. According to one study, narratives that emphasize capitalist urbanization, daily exposure in informal settlements, or long-term infrastructure neglect are suppressed by the ‘catastrophization’ of danger (Naeem and Farhat, 2022). As a result, floods turn into opportunities for patronage: assistance distribution, contracts for rehabilitation, and

housing initiatives increase reliance on political middlemen while maintaining underlying disparities.

Power-laden narratives also shape agendas that appear to be progressive, like nature-based solutions. An examination of river enlargement and flood control strategies in the Rhone Valley of Switzerland demonstrates how a language that combines risk management and ecological restoration promotes "sustainable security." The project mobilizes specific socio-environmental imaginaries of the river and plain, favoring some land uses and rural development aspirations over others, despite its win-win framing. According to interviews, disputes over flood protection are also disputes over whose livelihoods are considered compatible with the new river regime, who has a voice in redesigning the "hydro-social territory," and which kind of knowledge count (Adnan and Hameed, 2023). Therefore, current power inequalities can be replicated or reconfigured by green flood management strategies.

Contested flood narratives originate from daily experiences as well as from states and professionals. For example, ethnographic research in Cyprus examines how flood-affected locals tell tales that combine memories, feelings, and anticipations of future calamities. Floods are often seen by these narratives as proof of corruption, neglect of infrastructure, or apathy on the part of local officials rather than as unusual weather. Anger, resignation, and mistrust are examples of emotional registers that have a political afterlife and influence how people interact with the government, demand accountability, or stop using official channels of involvement. According to Waseem and Rana (2023), flood narratives are an essential tool for citizens to question official explanations and negotiate their relationship to power (Waseem and Rana, 2023).

Political ecology experts stress that power and knowledge are co-constitutive in catastrophe administration on a higher conceptual level. Research on "knowledge/power" in catastrophes demonstrates how expert risk assessments, maps, and models are political creations that can silence subaltern knowledge while legitimizing particular responses. According to Saima et al. (2022), urban political ecology theorists have similarly contended that the "place and time of the political" lie in these times when choices about what constitutes a legitimate remedy and what constitutes a cause of environmental problems are made. More general concerns regarding land rights, unequal development, and past dispossession are ignored when flooding is limited to merely technical issues, such as rainfall figures or hydraulic capacity (Saima et al, 2022).

These interactions have significant ramifications for flood governance that is focused on fairness. More than improved models or more robust levees are needed to manage flood risk if explanations of flooding are influenced by unequal power relations. It calls for procedures that democratize the narrative of floods, the definition of risk, and the recognition of certain types of evidence. Including marginalized communities in the co-production of flood knowledge can reveal alternative causal stories—about informal land tenure, everyday infrastructural breakdowns, or long-term socio-environmental change—that technocratic accounts tend to miss, according to studies conducted in Phnom Penh, São Paulo, Latin American flood-prone cities, and European river basins (Moatasam, 2018).

In conclusion, there is a close relationship between power, narratives, and disputed explanations of flooding. In addition to exposing and aggravating already-existing disparities, floods offer opportunities for discussion and redefining of the causes of harm. In order to shield powerful players from criticism and to sustain technocratic, infrastructure-heavy responses, dominant narratives that normalize floods or ascribe them only to climate change may be used. By connecting flooding to larger land use, infrastructure, and governance regimes, counter-narratives from critical scholars, activists, and impacted communities re-politicize floods. Conflicts over power, representation, and knowledge at various levels—from local to global climate forums—will determine whether or not these alternative explanations gain hold (Malik, 2025). Therefore, in

addition to hydrological study, understanding floods necessitates paying close attention to the politics of explanation, including who gets to speak, whose experiences become policy, and whose lives are kept under wraps.

Findings

1) Islamabad's original hydrological design and drainage corridors have been superseded by elite control of planning.

2) Runoff and peak flows have increased due to the conversion of permeable terrain into roadways and high-density buildings.

3) Bridges and culverts that are undersized and misaligned serve as politically constructed choke points that flood surrounding areas.

4) Infrastructure that actually redistributes flood risk is justified by narratives of modernization and "improved drainage."

5) Speculative development and the reclassification of "vacant" properties force construction into areas that are most vulnerable to flooding.

6) Drainage reconfiguration exposes low-income communities and katchi abadis to frequent flooding while methodically protecting privileged parts.

Conclusion

When combined, these results demonstrate that urban flooding in Islamabad is a result of elite-led planning decisions that reorganize drainage to benefit real estate, infrastructure, and mobility interests rather than a natural or unintentional consequence. Strong players defend wealthy sectors while shifting risk to low-income neighborhoods by erasing the city's basic hydrological logic, concentrating development in flood-prone areas, and justifying these changes with narratives of modernization. Therefore, rather than depending solely on technical solutions to channels and culverts, understanding and mitigating flood risk in this environment demands a political-ecological approach that prioritizes power, land use, and justice.

Declaration of Conflicting Interest

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to research.

Funding Statement

No funding is received for this project.

References

Abdul, L. et al, (2025), "Climate change and urban vulnerabilities: Analyzing flood and drought resilience of Islamabad", *Local Environment*, Issue. *30*, No. 3, PP.1-17

Abridged Report (2014), "Cities and Climate Change initiative", UN Habitat for a Better Future

Adnan, M. and Hmaid, R. (2023), "The Aftermath of Floods in Pakistan: *An Eco-Humanitarian Crisis*", Vol. 7, No. 2, PP. 740-753

Ahmed, B et al, 2010, "Hydrological modelling and flood hazard mapping of Nullah Lai", *Proc. Pakistan Acad. Sci*, No. 47, Vol. *4*, PP-215-226

Ahmed, I. (2026), "Urban Flooding in Pakistan: Linking Geological Setting, Land Use, Drainage and Rapid Urban Growth in Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad", *Journal of Climate Change*, Issue. *4*, Vol. 10, PP-210-221

Bhutto, S. and Ahmed, A. (2024), "Hydro Politics in Pakistan: A Challenge to the National Unity", *International Research Journal of Management and Social Sciences*, Issue. 5, No. 3, PP-301-315

Geiser, U. and Suleri, Q. (2010), "Floods in Pakistan and Proposed Policy Choice: A

Literature Review Based Study", *Policy Paper Series 36*, SDPI

Gohar, B. (2025), "Pakistan's Climate Resilience Crisis: Evaluating SDG 13Through Water Mismanagement and Agricultural Adaptation (2015-2025), Report for Asian Politico

Iqbal, M. S. (2014), "Floods in Pakistan and Proposed Policy Choice: A Literature Review Based Study", *Greener Journal of Social Sciences*, No. *4*, Issue, 1, PP. 45-50

Jan, M.A. et al, (2026), "Destructing Urban Flooding from the Perspective of Vulnerable Communities in Northwestern Pakistan", *Frontiers in Human Dynamics*", DOI:3389/fhumd.2026.1751158

Javaid, U and Mashhood, M. (2026), "Climate Change in Pakistan: Resilience Strategies for the Future Sustainable Development", April 2026Veredas do Direito Direito Ambiental e Desenvolvimento Sustentável, Issue, 23, No. 6, PP-78-92

Kamal, A. (2004), "Lai Nullah Basin Flood Problem Islamabad", Integrated Flood Management Report

Malik, I. H. (2025), "Climate crisis and Pakistan's Vulnerability", *Global Climate Surge Report 2024-25*

Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives Report (2022), "Pakistan Floods 2022"

Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives Report, (2025), "*Flood Damages*", https://www.pc.gov.pk/

Moatasam, F. (2018), "Entitled urbanism: Elite informality and the reimagining of a planned modern city", *Urban Studies*, No. *56*, Vol. 5, PP-1009-1025

Naeem, A. B. and Farhat, L. (2022), "Politicization of Floods in Pakistan: An Assessment of Twitter Trends", https://pide.org.pk/research/politicization-of-floods-in-pakistan-an-assessment-of-twitter-trends/

Nigeria Climate Change and Health, Climate Change and Community Forestry in Nepal Report 2025"

Oxfam Report (2011), "Six Months into the Flood" www.oxfam.org

Poudel, M. et al (2022), "Climate Change and Community Forestry in Nepal", Page-36-44

Qasim, M. (2024), "The Study of Socio-Economic Vulnerabilities of the Communities Living Nearby Flood Areas: Case Study of Nullah Lai Rawalpindi", *International Journal of Environemntal Sciences*, Vol. 9, PP-27-36

Qazi, F. (2026), "Flood Crisis in Pakistan: Challenges and Road Ahead", No. 23, Issue. 1, PP.1-15

Saima, A. et al, (2022), "Urban Flood Assesment due to Climate cjhnage During Monsoon Season: A Case Study of Islamabad and Rawalpindi", *Ecofeminism and Climate Change*, Issue. 3, Vol. 2, PP-85-88

Scott, D. (2014), "What is Environmental Justice?", *SSRN Electronic Journal*, DOI:10.2139/ssrn.2513834

Shahid, K. (2024), "Urban Flooding in Pakistan: Politicization of urban planning", Urban Planning, Issue, 1, Vol. IV, PP-78-92

Sheila, S. D. (2025), "Environmental Risks in the Work Place", *International Seven Journal of Multidisciplinary*", Vol. 3, No. 5, 36-49

Tan, W. et al, (2024), "A Rapid High-Resolution Multi-Sensory Urban Flood Mapping Framework via DEM Upscaling", Remote Sensing of Environment, No. 301, PP-51-58

Tariq, M.A. and Giesen N. V. (2012), "Floods and flood management in Pakistan", *Physics and Chemistry of the Earth Parts*", No. I, Vol. 2, PP- 23-27

UNDP Reprt, (2023) "*Urban Flood Hazard Assessment and Management Practices in*

South", https://www.mdpi.com/2073-445X/12/3/627

Usman, M. (2025), "Climate Risk and Vulnerability Assessment of Pakistan", Discourse Report

Waseem, H.B. and Rana, I.A. (2023), "Floods in Pakistan: A state-of-the-art review", *Natural Hazard Research*, Issue, 3, Vol.3, PP. 91-108