

Negotiating the Forbidden Zone: A Sociological Study on Spatial Violations in Urban Riparian Areas

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the sociological dimensions of spatial violations in urban riparian zones, focusing on communities residing along the Jeneberang River in Gowa Regency, South Sulawesi, Indonesia. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, field observations, and documentation to understand how marginalized populations negotiate their presence in areas officially designated as restricted or protected. The findings reveal that encroachments are not merely acts of defiance against spatial regulations but are driven by economic vulnerability, historical land-use patterns, and inconsistent policy enforcement. Residents often justify their presence in these "forbidden zones" through moral reasoning, local social networks, and survival strategies. The research highlights a significant disconnect between state spatial planning and the lived experiences of the urban poor, where top-down eviction efforts often ignore the complex social fabric of these communities. In alignment with President Prabowo's Asta Cita, particularly the commitment to inclusive development and improved public welfare, this study calls for spatial governance approaches that integrate community participation and social justice. The novelty of this research lies in its sociological lens, shifting the discourse from legalistic or environmental perspectives toward a more human-centered understanding of spatial negotiation and urban inequality in Indonesia.

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, cities around the globe have become epicenters of growth, innovation, and transformation. Yet, beneath the surface of this urban dynamism lies a complex landscape of socio-spatial tension. One of the most visible yet understudied manifestations of this tension is the persistent violation of protected or ecologically sensitive areas—particularly riparian zones, which serve as critical ecological buffers between land and water. These areas are designed to mitigate flooding, preserve biodiversity, and maintain water quality (Sudiarta et al., 2024). However, as urban populations swell and land scarcity intensifies, riparian areas are increasingly subjected to spatial violations—ranging from informal housing developments to commercial encroachments and infrastructure expansion.

Globally, the issue of spatial violation in urban riparian zones reflects more than just environmental neglect or weak enforcement; it embodies broader questions about social justice, access to space, and the politics of urban planning. In Latin America, South Asia, and parts of Africa, informal settlements have mushroomed along riverbanks and canal edges, revealing not only economic desperation but also the failure of formal planning systems to accommodate the urban poor. These communities often exist in legal ambiguity—tolerated but not fully legitimized, regulated but rarely protected. Scholars have argued that such encroachments are not solely acts of law-breaking but forms of negotiation with the state, of asserting the right to the city in contexts where formal access to land is constrained (Subroto, 2024).

While frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (especially SDG 11) and the New Urban Agenda (UN-Habitat) have emphasized inclusive and resilient urban development, they often fall short in addressing the everyday spatial struggles occurring in the “forbidden zones” of the city. These zones represent more than physical boundaries; they are contested arenas where power, legality, survival, and identity intersect. In line with Monterastelli et al. (2024), the term “forbidden zone” may also be understood metaphorically—as spaces of restriction that generate tension between biological, social, and institutional rhythms.

In Indonesia, these global patterns take a vivid local form. In cities such as Jakarta, Surabaya, Makassar, and Medan, spatial violations in riparian areas have become a persistent feature of urban life. Despite the existence of zoning regulations, such as UU No. 26 Tahun 2007 tentang Penataan Ruang and PP No. 38 Tahun 2011 tentang Sungai, urban riverbanks remain heavily encroached upon by informal communities. These settlements are not simply the result of illegal actions, but are often facilitated by political tolerance, economic necessity, and the absence of affordable housing alternatives. As such, they illustrate the sociological complexity of spatial transgression in the urban periphery: informal actors navigating formal systems, creating semi-permanent structures in zones that are both essential and forbidden (Yan et al., 2024; Tursunov & Rakhmanov, 2024).

From a policy perspective, land use in riparian zones is complicated by overlapping interests and governance failures. For example, in other sectors such

as geothermal development or agricultural systems, spatial conflict often arises between environmental conservation and local socio-religious or economic practices (Kusuma, 2024; Kusumiyati, 2024). These parallels show that spatial regulation in Indonesia must contend with cultural legitimacy and social resilience—not only administrative law. Furthermore, as Depari (2024) argues, understanding space in environmental-behavioral terms requires integrating architecture, culture, and everyday life—a notion highly relevant for interpreting how urban poor communities appropriate riverbanks as functional living space. This condition presents significant policy and social implications, especially in light of the *Asta Cita* (Eight Development Missions) under the administration of President Prabowo Subianto. This study aligns particularly with the missions that emphasize:

Mission 4: Building humane and environmentally friendly cities and villages,
Mission 5: Ensuring decent living through equitable and sustainable spatial planning and housing, and
Mission 7: Improving governance effectiveness and law enforcement.

The encroachment of riparian areas is not simply a technical issue—it is a test of the state’s ability to enforce regulation while upholding social inclusion and environmental justice. Addressing these violations requires more than legal reform; it calls for a deeper understanding of the social dynamics that produce and sustain them.

This article, therefore, explores how spatial violations in urban riparian areas are socially constructed, legitimized, and negotiated. Through a sociological lens, this study seeks to go beyond the conventional legalistic or environmental interpretations. Instead, it conceptualizes these “forbidden zones” as arenas of negotiation, where informal settlers, government officials, urban planners, and local actors contest, resist, and sometimes co-opt one another’s claims over space.

The novelty of this research lies in its approach: treating spatial violations not as static legal infractions but as dynamic social processes. While most existing studies on riparian encroachment in Indonesia focus on urban planning, disaster mitigation, or environmental degradation, this article frames the issue through the lens of urban sociology and spatial theory. By analyzing the meanings, discourses, and everyday practices surrounding riparian encroachments, the study contributes to the growing field of critical urban studies, offering insights that are both academically original and practically relevant in the context of inclusive urban governance in Indonesia (Siahaan, 2025; Pandiangan, 2024).

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore the sociological dimensions of spatial violations in urban riparian areas. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and document analysis to gain a comprehensive understanding of the socio-cultural, economic, and political factors driving encroachment into these regulated spaces. The research was conducted in selected urban riparian zones in Gowa Regency, South Sulawesi, particularly focusing on areas along the Jeneberang River where land-use conflicts and informal settlements are prevalent. Key informants included

local residents, community leaders, urban planners, and government officials. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, meanings, and social dynamics related to the negotiation and contestation of space. This approach allows for an in-depth examination of how individuals and communities perceive, justify, and navigate spatial restrictions in the context of urban development and state regulation.

RESEARCH RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study explored the sociological dynamics of spatial violations in riparian areas of Gowa Regency, South Sulawesi, with a specific focus on informal settlements along the Jeneberang River. Using qualitative methods, including interviews, observations, and document analysis, several key themes were identified that illuminate how these riverbank communities operate, persist, and negotiate their place in legally restricted zones.

Riverbank Settlement as a Last Resort

Respondents consistently indicated that settling along the riverbanks was not a matter of choice but of economic survival. Many came from precarious housing situations—rented units, evictions, or rural areas where livelihood opportunities had dwindled. A 36-year-old woman recalled:

"We used to rent in the city, but after my husband lost his job, we couldn't afford it anymore. This land was empty, and other families were already here."

For many families, the riverbank represented the only feasible housing option that was close to employment and social networks, despite awareness of its illegality and risk.

Informal Tenure and Internal Order

In the absence of formal land titles, communities have developed self-regulated systems of land tenure, spatial management, and social control. First settlers demarcate space, and newcomers are expected to negotiate their presence. Disputes are handled through peer mediation or by involving respected elders.

"If someone wants to build next to your house, they have to ask the others first. No one wants trouble." – Male, 53

This informal system provides a sense of tenure security and spatial order that compensates for the absence of state recognition.

Infrastructure Self-Provision and Collective Action

Residents have demonstrated remarkable collective agency in filling the void left by government services. Community members have constructed shared infrastructure such as drainage canals, latrines, footpaths, and makeshift water access systems. Electricity is often obtained via informal connections.

Pooling resources to repair shared assets and maintain order illustrates that these are not chaotic or transient settlements, but self-organized communities responding pragmatically to state absence.

Ambiguous and Inconsistent State Presence

Many residents expressed frustration over the unclear role of government actors. While some mentioned visits from municipal officers or NGOs, these engagements were often superficial—limited to surveys, warnings, or photo documentation. Others noted that during election seasons, local authorities became more lenient.

"When elections approach, authorities become more lenient. They don't want to lose votes from the residents." – Community leader

This inconsistency fosters mistrust and uncertainty, while reinforcing the perception that their presence, though unofficial, is tolerated.

Emotional Attachment and Social Cohesion

Over time, riverbank settlements have evolved into tight-knit communities with deep emotional ties. Shared experiences, schools, celebrations, and mutual assistance have built a strong sense of place and belonging.

"This is not just land. This is our home. Our children grew up here." – Female, 48

Such social cohesion complicates relocation efforts, as residents fear not just the loss of shelter but the fragmentation of social identity and networks.

Conditional Openness to Relocation

While initial responses to relocation are often negative, many residents expressed willingness to move if the new site meets certain conditions: proximity to work, availability of public services, and participatory planning.

"If the new place is not far and has water, roads, schools – we will move." – Male, 40

There was strong opposition to vertical housing (flats or towers), which were seen as incompatible with their lifestyle and lacking green or communal space.

Awareness of Environmental Risk

Contrary to assumptions, residents were well aware of the flood risks and environmental hazards associated with riverbank living. Some have adapted by raising their homes or constructing sandbag barriers. Children are cautioned against playing near the river during rainy seasons.

"Floods are part of life here. We just move things to higher shelves and wait." – Male, 38

Despite this awareness, coping strategies remain reactive, as residents lack alternatives and rely on communal resilience.

Absence of Alternative Affordable Housing

A persistent theme was the lack of viable, affordable housing options for low-income families within reach of urban centers. Public housing programs were perceived as bureaucratic, exclusive, or insufficient.

"I once tried to apply for a housing program, but I didn't know anyone on the inside. It felt impossible." – Female, 41

This structural exclusion leaves informal settlement as the only available solution, perpetuating cycles of spatial marginalization.

Theme	Core Insight
Economic Necessity	Riverbank occupation driven by housing exclusion
Informal Tenure	Self-organized rules provide spatial order
Infrastructure Provision	Community-built services fill state gaps
State Ambiguity	Inconsistent visits create limbo, not clarity
Social Cohesion	Deep neighborhood bonds and emotional attachment
Conditional Relocation Support	Openness if needs are met and planning is participatory
Risk Normalization	Residents live with and adapt to environmental threats
Housing Inaccessibility	No viable formal alternatives for low-income families

These findings reveal that spatial violations in the Jeneberang riverbank areas of Gowa are deeply rooted in systemic urban inequality, fragmented governance, and social resilience. Far from being passive victims or lawbreakers, residents are active negotiators of urban space, crafting legitimacy, infrastructure, and identity in the face of exclusion. Effective policy responses must start with acknowledging these lived realities and offering inclusive, empathetic, and context-sensitive solutions.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that spatial violations in the Jeneberang riverbank areas of Gowa Regency are not simply acts of illegality or disregard for urban planning regulations. Rather, they reflect a multifaceted response to systemic inequality, institutional neglect, and the pursuit of survival by marginalized urban populations. These patterns resonate with broader theoretical perspectives on urban informality, which suggest that informal settlements are not just spatial transgressions but socio-political productions rooted in exclusionary processes (Roy, 2005; Yiftachel, 2009).

Riverbank Settlements as a Response to Structural Exclusion

Participants' narratives consistently pointed to economic necessity as the primary driver of riverbank occupation. The absence of affordable, accessible housing options within the formal sector has rendered informal settlements the only viable alternative for many low-income families. This aligns with Harvey's (1973) argument that capitalist urban development often marginalizes the urban poor, forcing them into peripheral and precarious living conditions.

Self-Governance and Informal Tenure as Survival Strategies

In the absence of state-recognized land ownership, communities have developed their own internal systems of spatial governance. These practices include self-demarcated plots, informal negotiation mechanisms, and community-led dispute resolution. Such findings support Cleaver's (2012)

concept of "vernacular governance," wherein informal communities create their own social institutions to manage uncertainty and assert a form of legitimacy.

Community Infrastructure and Collective Agency

Contrary to the stereotype of informal settlements as chaotic or disorganized, residents of the Jeneberang riverbanks have demonstrated significant levels of collective agency. They have self-provisioned essential infrastructure—such as drainage, sanitation, pathways, and informal electricity—through mutual cooperation. This reflects a form of grassroots urbanism in which excluded communities actively compensate for state absence through pragmatic and adaptive responses.

Ambiguous State Presence and the Production of 'Gray Spaces'

One of the most striking findings is the inconsistent and ambiguous engagement of government institutions. State actors often appear during election cycles or for data collection, but rarely for substantive service delivery or housing support. This creates a "gray space" (Yiftachel, 2009)—a legal limbo where informal residents are neither fully recognized nor actively displaced. Such ambiguity undermines trust in the state and reinforces the perception that legality is negotiable and political.

Emotional Attachment and the Social Fabric of Informal Settlements

Beyond physical structures, these riverbank communities are deeply rooted in shared histories, emotional ties, and social interdependence. Homes are not merely shelters but sites of identity, community, and belonging. This sense of place complicates relocation policies that fail to address the social and psychological dimensions of displacement.

Conditional Acceptance of Relocation: Participation Matters

While many residents initially resist relocation, their responses are not categorically opposed to movement. Instead, they are conditional: relocation is acceptable if it ensures access to livelihood, education, water, transportation, and communal space. Importantly, residents demand to be included in the planning process, indicating that top-down resettlement programs lacking community input are unlikely to succeed.

Risk Awareness and Local Adaptation

Contrary to popular assumptions, residents are highly aware of the environmental risks posed by living on riverbanks, particularly flooding. Adaptation measures—such as raising homes or constructing barriers—indicate a practical engagement with their environmental reality. However, these measures remain reactive and limited without institutional support or long-term planning.

Persistent Lack of Affordable Housing Alternatives

A critical structural factor perpetuating informal settlements is the absence of inclusive housing programs that cater to the urban poor. Government

housing schemes are often inaccessible due to bureaucracy, favoritism, or limited supply. This structural exclusion reinforces spatial marginality and compels vulnerable populations to occupy hazardous or unauthorized lands.

Policy Implications

These findings underscore the need for a paradigm shift in urban planning and housing policy, moving from punitive or technocratic models to more inclusive, participatory, and context-sensitive approaches. Key recommendations include:

Participatory Planning for Relocation: Any relocation effort must engage communities from the outset to ensure that new housing meets their social, economic, and spatial needs.

Incremental Tenure Security: Instead of eviction, authorities might offer phased legal recognition or conditional tenure, providing a pathway to formalization over time.

Collaborative Governance: Partnerships between local governments, NGOs, and community groups can enhance infrastructure provision and strengthen social services.

Culturally Responsive Housing Design: Public housing must accommodate communal lifestyles, include green space, and foster social interaction to maintain the cohesion found in informal settlements.

By foregrounding the voices, experiences, and strategies of riverbank settlers, this study challenges dominant narratives of illegality and disorder. Instead, it reveals a dynamic and adaptive social order that emerges in the gaps left by the formal system. Effective and just urban policy must begin by recognizing these realities—not as problems to be eliminated, but as communities with agency, knowledge, and legitimate claims to urban space.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has revealed the complex and layered socio-spatial dynamics underlying the encroachment of urban riparian zones in Gowa Regency. Through a qualitative approach, it was found that violations of spatial boundaries in areas along the Jeneberang River are not merely acts of ignorance or defiance toward formal regulations, but rather social practices rooted in economic necessity, historical land use patterns, and weak enforcement of policy. Residents living in these "forbidden zones" often negotiate their presence through informal agreements, local power networks, and moral justifications related to survival and identity. As one resident stated,

"Kami tinggal di sini bukan karena ingin melanggar, tapi karena tidak punya pilihan lain. Kami hanya ingin bertahan hidup."

(We live here not because we want to break the law, but because we have no other choice. We just want to survive.)

The study also underscores the discrepancy between state spatial planning and the lived realities of low-income communities. Efforts to evict or relocate these populations without meaningful dialogue and consideration of their deep social ties often lead to heightened resistance and instability. These findings

affirm that governance in riparian zones must move beyond top-down, technocratic regulation and instead embrace inclusive urban planning that centers on the needs and voices of marginalized communities.

Aligned with President Prabowo Subianto's Asta Cita vision – particularly the goals of enhancing public welfare, developing humane and sustainable urban environments, and strengthening governance – this study calls for a people-centered spatial policy. There is an urgent need for cross-sector collaboration between government agencies, community members, and urban planners to co-design solutions that balance environmental protection with social justice.

The novelty of this research lies in its sociological framing of spatial violations, shifting the discourse from purely legal or environmental concerns to a broader understanding of spatial negotiation as a lived and socially constructed phenomenon. By documenting the experiences of riverbank communities in Gowa, this study offers valuable insights for context-sensitive and humane urban spatial governance in Indonesia.

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