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# World Bank, Digital Public Infrastructure and Human Rights

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In February 2025, a [statement by NADRA](#) (National Database and Registration Authority) boasted about a visit by a World Bank delegation, which demonstrated 'strong optimism' regarding the progress of Pakistan's [DEEP](#) (Digital Enhancement Economy Project) project. This unbridled optimism about tech-enabled governance by state actors is concerning given the serious human rights consequences this World Bank supported project will have in Pakistan.

Recently, Pakistan's fixation with techno-solutionist projects, under the guise of efficiency, economic progress, improving the public's access to essential services and governance, has spread faster than a keystroke. DEEP aims to accelerate the digitisation of Pakistan's economy through several measures including enhancement of the current digital ID systems, promoting financial inclusion, and enhancing citizens' access to essential government services ranging from access to education to healthcare through National Data Exchange Layer (NDEL) portals.

From [Ethiopia](#) to [Brazil](#) to [Kazakhstan](#), the World Bank has taken center stage to back the implementation of such digital enhancement and Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) projects across countries in the Global Majority. However, these projects have also come under intense scrutiny from civil society actors for their insufficiency in ensuring such projects do not perpetuate ongoing human rights violations. With an approved budget of almost USD 78 million, Pakistan's project DEEP is yet another effort among the Bank's global DPI drives, and it is not surprising that no consideration is being taken to prevent human right violations that may occur.

Many marginalized groups face significant barriers that render their data less accurate due to the difficulties they face in keeping it up to date. This may include literacy barriers that make it harder to complete paperwork, digital barriers that make it harder for people to access digital services, working in precarious employment or living in informal settlements. Data intensive systems often do not recognize the complexities and realities of people's lives and minor errors in data can lead to devastating consequences, with people removed from the support that they are reliant on and often pushed into destitution.

At the outset, the expansion of Pakistan's digital ID system is problematic. The current system in place by NADRA—rolled out without any [human rights due diligence or human rights impact assessment](#)—has itself displayed a track record of human rights abuses. Such as [exclusion](#) of gender diverse individuals, arbitrary and discriminatory [cancellation of ID cards based on ethnicity](#) and frequent data [breaches](#). Further, the Digital Nation Pakistan Act was passed earlier this year has the explicit aim of leveraging the “transformative” power of DPI, but it does little by way of ensuring equity and inclusion.

DEEP will also expand Pakistan's mass surveillance arsenal as it will allow mass data harvesting of individuals (including their biometric data), sharing and exchange among various government databases and agencies without safeguards. This will be forcing people to unwillingly – or even unknowingly – forfeit their right to privacy. The introduction of such interconnectivity between databases, in the absence of regulation and safeguards, potentially paves the way for unknown – and unknowable – human rights abuses linked to the exploitation of personal data.

It is also important to question which private companies are, or will be, responsible for the development of these systems, given how private companies are usually at the forefront for developing such databases, often striking opaque procurement deals with governments and escaping accountability and oversight. Rights holders often have little by way of recourse against such companies, particularly if they don't have a legal presence in Pakistan and are left at the mercy of companies' internal policies and weak voluntary compliance mechanisms.

In the absence of a data protection law or any meaningful judicial guardrails to protect the right to privacy in Pakistan, the World Bank's decision to move ahead with the project risks making it complicit in Pakistan's ever-expanding surveillance dragnet. Even if a data protection law is passed in the future, it will have to adhere to international human rights law standards if it hopes to provide any meaningful protection against the centralized nature of surveillance DEEP might enable.

The automation and digitalisation of essential public services through the unchecked expansion of digital public infrastructure can also deny access to basic social safety net to groups already facing subjugation, bias and societal discrimination. Time and again, [research by Amnesty International has shown](#) that unchecked digitalisation and automated decision-making in the public sector has exacerbated pre-existing exclusion and inequalities faced by marginalized groups.

The Pakistani government needs to urgently reconsider its plans for DPI expansion by orienting its efforts to ensure inclusion of marginalized communities and must guarantee the right to privacy in line with its international human rights law obligations.

The World Bank, as a funder and promoter of DPI systems, needs to be held accountable for the role that it is playing by supporting a project that is a risk to human rights. Urgent and thorough human rights impact assessment must be conducted, and essential safeguards need to be made pre-requisites if the project is to continue.