



EVALUATING THE ROLE OF URBAN PLANNING DEPARTMENTS IN ENSURING COMPLIANCE WITH LAND USE REGULATIONS IN FEDERAL INSTITUTIONS: A CASE STUDY OF ABUJA, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Abuja was conceived as a master-planned capital, yet contemporary land development continues to expose the gap between statutory land-use rules and actual urban practice. This study evaluates the role of urban planning departments in ensuring compliance with land use regulations in Abuja, treating “federal institutions” as the public planning and land-governance bodies that operate within the Federal Capital Territory’s federal administrative structure. Recent official records show that the Federal Capital Development Authority and the Abuja Metropolitan Management Council still rely on permit administration, site assessment, demolition, penalties, and title-related sanctions to enforce compliance. At the same time, recent Abuja scholarship shows that plan implementation remains weakened by poor coordination, political interference, regulatory inconsistency, sprawl pressure, and weak public confidence in enforcement. Using a descriptive and evaluative institutional case-study design, the paper synthesises official mandates, recent enforcement actions, and current academic evidence to assess agency effectiveness across five dimensions: mandate clarity, permit administration, monitoring and inspection, sanction credibility, and inter-agency coordination. The paper argues that Abuja’s planning departments are institutionally active but only partially effective. Formal controls have become more visible, particularly through digitalised application systems and renewed sanctioning signals, yet compliance remains uneven because regulatory institutions do not consistently convert rules into predictable, transparent, and coordinated outcomes. The study contributes an operational framework for evaluating planning departments in planned African capitals and recommends integrated digital compliance systems, clearer sanction regimes, stronger coordination between land administration and development control, and publicly traceable enforcement processes.

Keywords: *Urban Planning; Land Use Regulation; Compliance; Federal Institutions & Urban Governance*

Introduction

Land-use regulation is one of the clearest tests of whether urban planning institutions possess real implementation capacity or only formal authority. That test is especially sharp in Abuja, a planned federal capital that was designed to embody order, hierarchy, and controlled spatial growth, yet has increasingly faced land-use conversion, informal encroachment, speculative pressure, and uneven enforcement. Recent studies on the Abuja city-region show that regulatory gaps are not marginal disturbances but central features of contemporary urban growth, as rapid expansion, weak coordination, and inconsistent plan implementation continue to destabilise planned development outcomes (Enoguanbhor et al., 2021; Ismail, Adu-Ampong and Aceska, 2024; Mashi, Abdullahi and Jenkwe, 2025).

The institutional architecture for controlling land use in Abuja is substantial on paper. The FCDA states that its mandate is to oversee the infrastructural and physical development of the capital and to build the city in compliance with the Abuja Master Plan, while the FCT Department of Land Administration is formally responsible for the administration, control, management, registration, and allocation of land in the territory. Within the Abuja Metropolitan Management Council, the Department of Development Control is explicitly tasked with regulating planning, design, and construction so that developments align with the city's master plan (FCDA, 2026; FCTA, n.d.; AMMC Development Control, n.d.).

Yet the existence of institutions does not automatically produce compliance. Abuja-focused empirical work continues to report spatial inconsistencies between plans and actual development, weak regulatory enforcement, land speculation, and governance fragmentation. Enoguanbhor et al. (2021) identify inadequate implementation, insufficient funding, political interference, and poor interdepartmental coordination as major barriers. Adamu, Audu and Makwe (2025) show that some mechanisms such as permits and enforcement actions appear relatively stronger, but compliance with the Abuja Master Plan, public participation, and sanction credibility remains weak. More recent evidence on urban sprawl in Abuja similarly highlights residents' perceptions of weak regulatory enforcement and land speculation as drivers of unplanned growth (Mashi, Abdullahi and Jenkwe, 2025).

This paper therefore evaluates the role of urban planning departments in ensuring compliance with land use regulations in federal institutions in Abuja, Nigeria. For analytical clarity, the phrase "federal institutions" is used here to denote the planning and land-governance bodies operating within the federal administrative order of the Federal Capital Territory, rather than only individual campuses or ministries. The study asks four questions: What regulatory and administrative instruments do Abuja's planning departments use to secure land-use compliance? How effective are these departments in translating land-use rules into actual compliance outcomes? What institutional challenges undermine enforcement? And what reforms can improve regulatory performance?

Statement of Problem

The recent Abuja literature is rich on urban growth, environmental sensitivity, informal settlement dynamics, and land allocation, but relatively thin on the specific institutional performance of planning departments as compliance-producing organisations. One strand of work analyses environmental assessment and planning inconsistency in the Abuja city-region (Enoguanbhor et al., 2021; Enoguanbhor et al., 2024). Another examines how historical path dependencies and policy inconsistency shape informal urbanisation in the capital (Ismail, Adu-Ampong and Aceska, 2024). A more applied strand evaluates development control mechanisms and zoning administration (Adamu, Audu and Makwe, 2025; Ibrahim, Lay and Ekpo, 2025).

What is still underdeveloped is a focused institutional evaluation of how the key planning departments jointly produce, or fail to produce, compliance. Most studies identify planning failure as an outcome, but do not fully disaggregate how compliance depends on mandate clarity, permit processing, monitoring capacity, sanction credibility, and coordination across agencies. This paper contributes by treating land-use compliance as an institutional chain rather than a single enforcement event. It therefore develops an evaluative framework that can be used for Abuja and for other planned African capitals where strong formal plans coexist with uneven regulatory outcomes.

Methodology

The study adopts a descriptive and evaluative institutional case-study design. It does not treat compliance as a purely legal question; instead, it analyses how planning departments perform as administrative institutions that receive applications, verify titles, inspect sites, process violations, and apply sanctions. This design is appropriate because the Abuja case requires both documentary interpretation and institutional comparison. The study therefore relies on recent official materials, planning-department webpages, enforcement press releases, and current Abuja-focused scholarly literature.

The evidence base combines two sources. First, official sources were used to identify formal mandates, permit pathways, enforcement instruments, and recent regulatory actions. These include the FCDA website, the FCTA Department of Land Administration page, the AMMC Department of Development Control portal, and recent FCTA-linked news reports on demolition, penalties, and compliance drives. Second, recent scholarly sources from 2021–2025 were used to assess broader patterns of planning inconsistency, land allocation, development control, environmental conformity, and sprawl in Abuja.

Institutional effectiveness was evaluated through five dimensions derived from the literature and the formal enforcement chain in Abuja: mandate clarity, permit administration, monitoring and inspection, sanction credibility, and inter-agency coordination. This framework is preferable to a narrow demolition count because it captures whether institutions can prevent violations, detect them, process them, and close the regulatory loop.

Analysis proceeded in three steps. First, the formal roles of the main planning departments were mapped from official sources. Second, documentary evidence on recent enforcement actions was used to identify the current regulatory posture of the institutions. Third, the official picture was compared against scholarly findings on actual planning outcomes and enforcement weaknesses. The resulting interpretation is therefore an institutional effectiveness assessment rather than a purely legal review.

Institutional architecture for land-use compliance in Abuja

The institutional architecture is broad but fragmented. The FCDA presents itself as the body responsible for the infrastructural and physical development of Abuja and explicitly frames its mission around compliance with the Abuja Master Plan. This gives it the formal planning centre of gravity. The Department of Land Administration, by contrast, controls land titles, allocations, certificates of occupancy, registry functions, and the Land Use and Allocation Committee secretariat, making it central to the legality of land claims and the prevention of title-based irregularity. The Department of Development Control sits closer to day-to-day compliance, because it processes building plans, checks documentation, undertakes site assessment, and moves applications through approval and compliance verification (FCDA, 2026; FCTA, n.d.; AMMC Development Control, n.d.).

In principle, this division of labour is rational: planning defines the spatial order, land administration secures legal title, and development control regulates actual development activity. In practice, however, the very need for multiple institutional hand-offs introduces coordination risk. Abuja-focused research repeatedly shows that overlapping functions, weak coordination, and inconsistent implementation are not minor administrative irritants but major explanations for planning failure (Enoguanbhor et al., 2021; Ibrahim, Lay and Ekpo, 2025).

Table 1. *Main planning departments and their compliance roles in Abuja*

Institution	Formal role	Compliance function	Observed limitation
FCDA	Physical and infrastructural development of the capital	Provides master-plan authority and overall planning direction	Strategic authority does not itself guarantee field-level compliance
Department of Land Administration	Administration, control and management of land in the FCT	Secures titles, allocations, registry integrity and land-use legality	Title administration can be separated from field enforcement
AMMC Department of Development Control	Regulates planning, design and construction	Processes permits, site checks, compliance review and enforcement referrals	Operational efficiency still depends on inspection reach and sanction follow-through
Linked FCTA enforcement system	Applies penalties, demolitions, revocations and recovery actions	Creates deterrence for land-use contraventions	Actions are visible, but predictability and consistency remain contested

Enforcement instruments and current signs of effectiveness

Recent official evidence shows that Abuja's planning authorities still rely on a classic enforcement chain: title verification, permit approval, site assessment, inspection, demolition, financial penalty, and possible revocation. The AMMC Development Control portal now emphasises digital submission, real-time tracking, and same-day Site Assessment Report processing, suggesting that at least part of the approval system has become more proceduralised and potentially more transparent. That is an important improvement because cumbersome permit systems often create the administrative conditions in which non-compliance becomes normalised (AMMC Development Control, n.d.).

However, enforcement effectiveness cannot be inferred from digital processing alone. The stronger evidence comes from recent sanctioning actions. In October 2024, FCTA reported demolishing over 50 illegal structures in areas such as Gosa, Lugbe and Apo Tarfi for lacking necessary approvals. In September 2025, the FCT Minister approved a ₦5 million penalty for land-use violations and warned that non-payment could lead to title revocation. In March 2026, the FCTA publicly reaffirmed that it would enforce compliance on land-use contraventions and ground-rent defaults. Taken together, these actions indicate that enforcement tools remain active and visible (Abuja Digest, 2024; Abuja Digest, 2025; Abuja Digest, 2026).

Yet visibility is not the same as systemic effectiveness. Adamu, Audu and Makwe (2025) report that while building permits and enforcement actions displayed comparatively strong compliance signals, deeper components of regulatory order, especially fidelity to the Abuja Master Plan, public participation, and sanctions for violations, showed pronounced weakness. This is analytically significant because it suggests Abuja's planning system may be better at episodic response than at routine, rule-bound compliance production. In other words, enforcement exists, but the regulatory environment is still too uneven to guarantee orderly development.

Table 2. *Recent documentary evidence on compliance enforcement in Abuja*

Year	Source	Regulatory signal	Implication for effectiveness
2024	Abuja Digest report on demolition exercise	Over 50 illegal structures reportedly demolished for lack of approvals	Shows active field enforcement, especially against visible contraventions
2025	Abuja Digest report on ministerial penalty approval	₦5 million penalty approved for land-use violations; threat of revocation for non-compliance	Signals stronger financial sanctioning and title-linked deterrence
2026	Abuja Digest report on compliance drive	FCTA announced enforcement on land-use contraventions and ground-rent defaults	Shows continuing political emphasis on compliance restoration
Current administrative workflow	AMMC Development Control portal	Online submission, tracking, and faster SAR processing	Improves procedural efficiency but does not, by itself, solve uneven enforcement

Why compliance remains uneven

The strongest explanation in the recent literature is not the absence of planning law but the weakness of institutional conversion. Enoguanbhor et al. (2021) identify inadequate implementation of land-use plans as a central driver of haphazard urban expansion and link this to insufficient funding, weak political will, manpower shortages, interference by developers and other actors, and corruption. These are classic state-capacity constraints: rules exist, but institutions cannot apply them evenly, at scale, and over time.

A second explanation is governance inconsistency. Ismail, Adu-Ampong and Aceska (2024) show that Abuja's current planning problems are shaped by historical policy inconsistencies and path dependencies, especially around land rights and tenure insecurity. This matters because compliance departments do not operate on a blank slate; they inherit older conflicts, fragmented land claims, and uneven legitimacy. Where citizens see planning as selective, delayed, or politically mediated, compliance becomes harder to secure through routine administration alone.

A third explanation is spatial growth pressure. Mashi, Abdullahi and Jenkwe (2025) show that recent urban sprawl in Abuja is associated not only with demographic and spatial expansion but also with weak regulatory enforcement and land speculation. This indicates that non-compliance

is not merely a matter of individual deviance. It is structurally reinforced by land markets, rapid peri-urban growth, and the difficulty of extending planning control fast enough into changing urban edges. The result is a planning system that often acts after contravention has materialised, rather than preventing it in advance.

Finally, zoning and land-allocation processes themselves matter. Ibrahim, Lay and Ekpo (2025) argue that FCDA land allocation and zoning processes significantly affect urban planning outcomes in Abuja. Where zoning compliance, allocation transparency, and stakeholder coordination weaken, the broader compliance system is destabilised from the beginning. This implies that land-use compliance should be assessed across the entire administrative chain, not only at the demolition stage.

Table 3. *Documented challenges undermining land-use compliance in Abuja*

Challenge	Recent evidence	Operational consequence	Compliance effect
Weak inter-agency coordination	Enoguanbhor et al. (2021) identify poor coordination and overlapping functions	Breaks information flow between planning, title and enforcement units	Rules become inconsistently applied
Political interference / weak political will	Enoguanbhor et al. (2021); Abuja enforcement literature	Reduces sanction certainty and administrative autonomy	Selective enforcement and delayed compliance
Manpower and funding constraints	Enoguanbhor et al. (2021)	Limits inspections, monitoring reach and technical review	Violations persist before detection
Land speculation and rapid sprawl	Mashi, Abdullahi and Jenkwe (2025)	Expands non-compliant development faster than controls can respond	Reactive rather than preventive regulation
Historical policy inconsistency and tenure complexity	Ismail, Adu-Ampong and Aceska (2024)	Complicates legitimacy, land claims and compliance acceptance	Higher conflict and weaker regulatory trust
Weak master-plan fidelity and sanction depth	Adamu, Audu and Makwe (2025)	Creates gap between formal rules and lived enforcement	Moderate, uneven rather than robust effectiveness

Conclusion

The Abuja case shows that urban planning departments remain indispensable to land-use compliance, but their effectiveness is only partial. The regulatory system is institutionally alive: there are formal mandates, permit procedures, title controls, inspections, demolitions, penalties, and revocation threats. Recent digitalisation within development control has also improved parts of the approval pathway. Yet the same body of evidence shows that compliance remains uneven because the system is fragmented, reactive, and vulnerable to coordination failure, growth pressure, and weak sanction consistency.

This study therefore concludes that Abuja's planning departments are better described as administratively active than fully effective. They can intervene, but they do not yet produce a sufficiently predictable, integrated, and trusted compliance regime. The critical problem is not the absence of rules; it is the uneven institutional conversion of rules into orderly land-use outcomes.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Integrate planning, land administration, AGIS-linked title verification, and development-control data into a shared digital compliance platform so that permit approval, title status, inspection history, and contraventions are traceable across agencies.
2. Publish a clearer and graduated sanction schedule for land-use violations, showing when contraventions trigger warning, fine, demolition, or revocation, so that enforcement becomes more predictable and less discretionary.
3. Strengthen field inspection capacity through dedicated staffing, geospatial monitoring, and periodic compliance audits in fast-growing peripheral districts where sprawl pressure is strongest.
4. Institutionalise inter-agency compliance meetings between FCDA, the Department of Land Administration, AMMC Development Control, and related FCTA bodies so that zoning, title, and enforcement decisions are better aligned.
5. Improve public transparency by making approval pathways, processing timelines, contravention categories, and enforcement outcomes easier to access, because opacity weakens both deterrence and public confidence.
6. Link master-plan review and enforcement strategy more closely, since repeated non-compliance may reflect not only weak enforcement but also outdated implementation instruments in fast-changing urban districts.

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