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Aligning local governance with SDGs: a study of local government systems in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the experiences of local government councilors between 2013–2020 in four provinces of Pakistan. The study addresses three key questions: Firstly, it investigates the differences and commonalities in the local government structures across provinces and explores the potential for synchronization to enhance the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at the local level. Secondly, it examines the main challenges local councilors face in effectively delivering basic services, including water, sanitation, health, education, waste management, and transport, within both rural and urban contexts. Lastly, the study analyses the necessary changes or reforms at the provincial level within the existing local government system in rural and urban areas to ensure the delivery of basic services in alignment with SDGs. The findings reveal that a powerful bureaucracy and political influence at the intermediate to upper levels of the government hierarchy exert significant control over administrative, fiscal, and political.

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1. Introduction

Sustainable development encompasses a comprehensive and multidimensional approach that recognizes the significance of the social, economic, environmental, cultural, and institutional aspects of human-nature interaction for the well-being of both present and future generations. The idea of adopting a global framework for sustainability governance gained prominence following the publication of the Limits to Growth report by the Club of Rome. This report highlighted the pressing need to address the long-term challenges associated with sustainable development and catalysed global discussions on the subject. (Meadows et al. 1972).

Nonetheless, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) at the turn of the century failed to demonstrate a strong commitment to social, environmental, and cultural sustainability, resulting in missed opportunities (UN 2015). This lack of commitment can be attributed, in part, to the disregard of global policymakers for local realities and constraints of local governance institutions, particularly in the Global South (Churchill 2020). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for the 2015–30 global development agenda, which aim to integrate social, economic, and environmental sustainability

objectives through local efforts, offer hope for increased involvement of local actors and the strengthening of local institutions through active participation, monitoring, accountability, and partnerships (Krantz and Gustafsson 2021). The overarching objective is to create a cooperative framework that encompasses the three universal values of human rights, leaving no one behind, and gender equality (UNESCO 2022). However, the predominant anthropocentric discourse of the SDGs has been criticized for its neoliberalist growth-driven agenda, which may not be ecologically sustainable, as it tends to prioritize economic growth and environmental protection at the expense of the reduced welfare function of the state (Adelman 2018). The mere recognition of social, economic, and environmental goals is deemed insufficient for effective planetary governance of environmental resources (Kumi, Arhin, and Yeboah 2014). At the grassroots level, local governments continue to play a crucial role in achieving sustainability objectives, especially by translating global goals for localized actions and support (Ansell, Sørensen, and Torfing 2022).

In particular, the study aims to address three key questions. Firstly, the study analyses the variations and similarities in local government structures across

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different provinces through selected districts based on the corresponding Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) ranking, identifying strategies for synchronizing these structures to effectively implement the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at the local level. Secondly, the study aims to identify the major challenges faced by councilors in delivering essential SDG-related services, such as water, sanitation, health, education, waste management, and transport. This analysis also includes an examination of service delivery efficacy in rural and urban contexts by localizing the SDGs. Lastly, the study aims to determine the necessary reforms and critical changes required in each province's current local government system, both in rural and urban areas, to empower local councilors and ensure the delivery of basic services in adherence to key SDG principles.

Section 2 of this study provides a brief review of the localization of the SDGs, specifically highlighting the role of local governments. It introduces the Integrated Area Development approach as a potential framework that can effectively engage local governance actors in sustainable development initiatives, and help better understand the SDG implications at the local levels (Moulaert and Mehmood 2011). Section 3 elaborates on the research methodology employed. The findings are presented in Section 4. Section 5 offers a thorough analysis and discussion of these findings and finally, the study concludes with section 6.

2. Localization of SDGs and the role of local governments

The policy context of the localization of sustainable development could be associated with Local Agenda (LA) 21 from the Rio Earth Summit (UNCED 1992). As a non-binding process for sustainable local development conceived at the global level, LA21 offered an intersectoral and transitory action plan by implementing the principles of sustainability at the local level. The key tenet was to find ways to empower local support and resources for sustainable development (Mehmood and Parra 2013). Though LA21 proved remarkable in articulating the role of local actors, it failed to provide substantive policy instruments to implement the sustainability objectives for the local governments (Doyle 2023; Feichtinger and Pregernig 2005). In other words, LA21 was too bottom-up to avail support from the governmental actors from the top down, whilst local governments could not generally act.

With a slew of external social, economic, environmental, and political factors influencing local operations, local government is sometimes perceived as a movement towards local governance (Andrew and Goldsmith

1998). Local governments possess increased ownership along with enhanced capacity, which would lead to a system of coordinated governance among public authorities, viable for the localization of SDGs (Horan 2019). The relationship among different tiers of government and different actors of governance – such as legislative and administrative branches – can be collaborative, confrontational, assertive, or subservient following the nature of policies and actions at different points in time. These spatiotemporal interactions can have corresponding consequences for local development and democratization (Jones and Comfort 2020).

These concerns have given rise to the aspects of 'green colonialism' where institutions keep enforcing a vicious circle of dependency with uneven distribution of skills, capacities and resources for the lowest tiers to attain SDGs (Claar 2022). A major criticism of the localization of SDGs refers to the capacity of local governance institutions to interpret, communicate and resolve the complex sets of targets and indicators that have been set and agreed upon at the national and international levels (Tan et al. 2019). Another key issue of concern is the 'localism trap' wherein 'local' may become confined to particular spatial boundaries (Davoudi and Madani-pour 2015). This caution argues that scale is socially produced and hence may not necessarily be independent of the specific agendas and vested interests of a few local actors (Frank Moulaert and Mehmood 2020).

SDG localization focuses on grassroots and collective support from central governments in the respective states (Barbera et al. 2017). On the other hand, evidence from countries like Malawi and Kenya shows that disruption and delayed local elections and involvement of external agencies and donors mainly paralyzed local governance. Moreover, case studies of Cambodia, China and Australia indicate that autonomy in revenue generation leads to efficient local governments and achieving SDGs (Tambulasi 2010). In Pakistan, local government systems have lacked continuity and remained experimental and episodic, thus hindering transition and growth. Meanwhile, Pakistan's progress on SDGs remains marginal (Cheema et al. 2022). This has led to occasional paralysis of local governance at times, with a lack of collaboration between different counterparts such as civil administration and the Members of Provincial Assemblies (MPAs) (Javeed et al. 2022).

2.1. Integrated area development and the localization of SDGs

Integrated Area Development is a multi-dimensional approach to sustainable development that emerged in the 1990s to level up the disintegrated neighborhoods

and suburbs across Europe (Moulaert 2000). The focus was more on the impacts of globalization dynamics on local development based on collaboration between local actors and communities (Nussbaumer and Moulaert 2004). Strategies devised were grounded on local development-based reconciliation of social, ecological, economic, and political agendas that would help achieve national targets through socio-economic local development actions centered on poverty reduction, education, mobility, housing, service provision and labor market (Rodríguez 2004).

The Integrated Area Development approach is useful in identifying key challenges associated with the localization of SDGs through a better understanding and achievement of the LA21 objectives (Mehmood and Parra 2013). The foremost challenges that emerged from the review of the literature above and background analysis of the case studies in Pakistan, include a general lack of access to authentic data, setting realistic targets, and absence of monitoring and sensitization of the communities to SDGs. In addition, limited access to own-source revenue, high dependency on transfers of funds from higher tiers of government and increased involvement of multiple private sector or civil society actors with limited understanding of the governance processes can lead to a greater proportion of decisions being taken outside the control of public representatives. Though SDG localization might hold keys to success, a lukewarm approach can equally cause further complications and inefficiencies. Therefore, a strong local government system is a prerequisite for SDG acceleration and attainment.

3. Methodology

The case study districts were selected based on the corresponding Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) ranking (Ministry of Planning Development and Reform 2016) provided in Table 1, selecting one district from middle and low-ranking districts each in the four provinces as shown in Table 1. The MPI method was purposefully selected as it goes beyond income-based measures of poverty and considers various deprivations that individuals and households might face in multiple dimensions of well-being, such as health, education,

Table 1. District selection based on Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI).

Province	Selected districts
Punjab	Rajanpur (64.4%) and Rahim Yar Khan (56.8%)
Sindh	Umerkot (84.7%) and Khairpur (51.6%)
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	Tank (71.1%) and Kohat (47.5%)
Balochistan	Ziarat (90.3%) and Pishin (82.2%)

and living standards. The MPI provides a more comprehensive understanding of people's overall quality of life thus strongly linked to the objective of this study to examine the delivery of essential SDG-related services.

The study adopted a two-stage research strategy to develop an understanding of the financial, administrative, and political issues faced by the elected local councilors in the dispensation of their duties (Hashim 2010). In the first stage, a thorough review of the Local Government Acts of each of the four provinces was conducted to analyse and assess the constitutional structure provided to Union Councils. The desk review provided the basis for the discussion of the functions and responsibilities – especially those related to spending and taxation – endowed to the Union Councils. In the second stage, a field research team conducted face-to-face in-depth interviews with randomly selected rural and urban Union Councillors/Union Chairpersons in each district of Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Separately, telephonic interviews from randomly selected rural and urban Union Councillors/Union Chairpersons were conducted in Sindh and Balochistan. A total of 32 in-depth semi-structured interviews, covering four union councils from each province were carried out in March-April 2021.

Interviews were arranged with Union Councillors who willingly took part in the research, sharing their insights, experiences, and concerns regarding the provision of essential SDG-related services at the grassroots level. The interviews were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis, which involved organizing the experiences of Union Council Members into distinct dimensions of financial, administrative, and political autonomy. The qualitative data analysis process employed line-by-line coding, the development of thematic categories, and the utilization of triangulation techniques (Ercan and Vromen 2023).

This study adhered to the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and its subsequent amendments, as well as comparable ethical standards. The Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE) Ethics Committee granted ethical approval for this study. Despite conscientious attempts, it was regrettably not possible to recruit any female participants for the interviews.

4. Findings

4.1 Review of the provincial local government regulations

4.1.1. Punjab Local Government Act 2013

Article 13 of Chapter IV in the PLGA outlines the framework of the union council structure. As depicted in

Table 2. Composition of Union Council in Punjab.

Election Mode	Members of the Union Council
Direct	Chairman and Vice Chairman as the joint candidate
Direct	Six general councilors, one from each ward
Direct	Two women members
Direct	One non-Muslim member in an area having 200 non-Muslim registered votes
Direct	One youth member
Direct	One farmer member in the rural union council or one worker member in the urban union council on reserved seats

Table 2, the individuals elected directly to the Union Council office in Punjab are enumerated.

In the province of Punjab, an urban union council assumes the appellation of 'City Council,' whereas its rural counterpart is designated as the 'Village Council.' The Chairman, who presides over the union council, whether it be urban or rural, assumes the role of the executive head. In instances where the Chairman is unavailable, the Vice Chairman assumes the responsibilities and duties of the office. Though each Union Council has a representation of women (Table 2), the number explains the underrepresentation of 49 percent of the female population. Reserved seats are important mainly to counter cultural barriers in Pakistan. The lack of social and economic empowerment of women has a strong bearing on SDGs localization that is primarily linked to household units (which in Pakistan are predominantly anchored by women).

Article 72(1) of Chapter VII outlines the specific responsibilities of the Urban Union Council, primarily focusing on water, sanitation, solid waste management, tree plantation, and other related areas. Notably, the union councils in Punjab do not possess any jurisdiction over crucial sectors such as education, health, and transport. These sectors are being looked after by the provincial government's appointed Chief Executive Officers and bureaucrats.

Despite the implementation of local government elections and the establishment of local governments, the PLGA 2013 presents a compromised system and mechanism for devolving political, administrative, and financial powers to the local representatives at the lowest level, namely union councils. This undermines the objective of promoting good governance and efficient public service delivery through active engagement of local institutions.

Furthermore, both urban and rural union councils lack independent authority to formulate and amend rules and by-laws about the management of civic affairs, as defined by the provincial government. All functions of the union council, whether in a city, urban area, or village/rural setting, are performed with the assistance of District Councils, Municipal Committees,

Municipal Corporations, and Metropolitan Corporations, where the principal accounting officer is a bureaucrat appointed by the provincial government. Thus, local decisions are subject to bureaucratic approvals, which are susceptible to influence from a local member of the national/provincial assembly.

Another manifestation of how eager political actors are to influence local decisions is in the establishment of 'Authorities', which are subservient to provincial government, being their appointing and monitoring authority. On August 7, 2017, the Government of Punjab issued a notification establishing District Education Authorities, with a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) serving as the administrative head. These authorities were entrusted with the administration of school education and related departments, including special education, across all 36 districts of Punjab, effective from January 1, 2018. Similarly, on October 5, 2016, District Health Authorities were notified, with a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) as the administrative head. Their responsibility included managing health facilities such as basic health units, rural health centers, rural dispensaries, and maternal and child healthcare centers, as well as Tehsil and District Headquarters hospitals in all 36 districts of Punjab, under the direct supervision of the Punjab Primary and Secondary Health Care Department.

In addition, urban Solid Waste Management Companies continue to operate under an autonomous framework established by the Punjab Company Act in each district. Similarly, the role of the union council is limited in transportation matters, as urban and rural transport in Punjab is directly controlled by regional transport authorities in each district. Similarly, the Punjab Metro Bus Authority, which operates in Lahore, Rawalpindi, and Multan, lacks coordination mechanisms with local governments. Similarly, water and sanitation responsibilities in urban union councils are assigned to the Water and Sanitation Agency at each tehsil (sub-district) level.

4.1.2. Sindh Local Government Act, 2013

The composition of the Union Council is determined by Article 18(2), which outlines the representation based on the Universal Adult Franchise within the jurisdiction of

Table 3. Composition of Union Council in Sindh.

Election Mode	Membership
Direct	Chairman and Vice Chairman as the joint candidate
Direct	Four general councilors, one from each ward
Direct	One woman member
Direct	One non-Muslim member
Direct	One farmer member in the rural union council or one worker member in the urban Union Committee

the respective Union Council as presented in Table 3. Only one seat is reserved for women, hence females are underrepresented here too as were in Punjab.

As in PLGA 2013, the Sindh Local Government Act 2013 also refrains from conferring any authority to create or modify regulations and by-laws at the union council/committee level. However, unlike the PLGA 2013, the Sindh Local Government Act 2013 incorporates the responsibility of monitoring, supervision, and initiatives about SDG indicators, encompassing areas such as education, health, water, sanitation, and waste management within the purview of the union council. Union councils are entrusted with the task of providing essential services such as water supply infrastructure, sanitation facilities, waste management, cleanliness, and general facilitation. Notably, the transport sector is not explicitly mentioned in the framework governing union councils and committees.

Moreover, in contrast to the PLGA 2013, the Sindh Local Government Act 2013 stipulates the establishment of a separate local fund at the union committee/council level. This fund is designed to include various revenue sources such as taxes, tolls, rents, rates, fees, annual budgets allocated by the local government, grants for development projects, and special grants. Consequently, union councils in Sindh possess a more comprehensive capacity to undertake and implement the SDGs at the local level. Like the PLGA 2013, the Sindh Local Government Act 2013 also provides for a structure of various establishments to facilitate the prospect of comprehensive planning and execution, akin to the principles advocated for in the earlier discourse on the integrated area approach.

4.1.3. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Local Government Act, 2013

The structure and composition of these councils are presented in Table 4.

Article 29 of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Local Government Act 2013 designates significant responsibilities to Village Councils and Neighbourhood Councils, commonly known as Union Councils in other provinces.

Table 4. Composition of Union Council in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Election Mode	Membership
Direct	Nazim (highest votes) and Naib Nazim (second highest votes)
Direct	5–10 general members (multimember ward)
Direct	Two women members
Direct	One non-Muslim member
Direct	One youth member
Direct	One farmer member in VC and one worker member in Neighbourhood Council.

The Act states that these Councils are required to support the district government and Tehsil Municipal Administration in various tasks, such as conducting surveys, collecting socio-economic data, and identifying suitable locations for municipal and social facilities and services.

Similar to PLGA 2013 and Sindh Local Government Act 2013, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Local Government Act 2013 does not grant union councils the authority to create or modify any legislation, regulations, or by-laws. However, in terms of *functions and* sector coverage, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Local Government Act 2013 shares more similarities with the Sindh Local Government Act 2013 than PLGA 2013. The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Local Government Act 2013 incorporates education, health, sanitation, and waste management within the framework of union councils' responsibilities, aligning with SDG indicators. It also includes a provision for a Local Fund, resembling a similar provision in the PLGA. Nonetheless, both acts (Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) fail to mention funding sources specifically at the union council level, indicating limited emphasis on the financial capacity of the local government's lowest tier. The distinctive characteristic of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Local Government Act lies in its provision for heightened decision-making powers accorded to the union council Nazim, a notable attribute that is notably absent in the local government acts implemented in the provinces of Sindh and Punjab. This legislation surpasses comparable enactments in all other provinces with regard to its efficacy in establishing distinct institutions imbued with proper autonomy, thereby fostering an environment conducive to multifaceted planning and implementation. This resonates with the fundamental principles underpinning the integrated area approach elucidated earlier.

4.1.4. Balochistan Local Government Act, 2010

An important feature of the Local Government system is its provision for representation of diverse segments such as women, farmers, workers, and non-Muslims. Article 10 Chapter III presents the composition of rural Union Councils as shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Composition of Union Council in Balochistan.

Election Mode	Membership
Direct	Chairman and Vice Chairman
Direct	7–15 general members
Direct	One woman member (33% of general members)
Direct	One non-Muslim member
Direct	One youth member
Direct	One farmer member or one worker member in rural union council (5% of general members)

According to Article 81, Chapter VII of the Balochistan Local Government Act 2010, a *Musalihat Anjuman* (Reconciliation Council) is established in each union council. This *Anjuman* (Council) consists of a three-member panel, with at least one female member. It is important to note that the Chairman of the union council is prohibited from serving as a member of the *Musalihat Anjuman*. The primary role of the *Musalihat Anjuman* is to facilitate the amicable resolution of disputes among community members within the union council. This is achieved through the means of mediation, conciliation, and arbitration.

The Balochistan Local Government Act 2010 stands out as the sole legislative act that comprehensively encompasses the various sectors within the functions of union councils. In addition to addressing areas such as health, education, drinking water, and sanitation, the Act also assigns the responsibility of traffic regulation to the union councils. This inclusion of traffic regulation distinguishes the Balochistan Local Government Act 2010 from other Local Government Acts. Notably, waste management is not explicitly listed among the functions of union councils under this legislation. Moreover, this Act provides representation to 'women' and 'worker' members in proportion to general seats, which is appreciable in comparison to the other provinces.

The explicit recognition of the provision of transportation services within the purview of the union council in the Balochistan Local Government Act of 2010 demonstrates the prominence accorded to this aspect, thereby distinguishing the Act from other local government legislations. This legislation, akin to its counterparts, establishes provisions for the strategic formulation and execution of targeted developmental measures that align with the comprehensive framework of Integrated Area Development.

4.2. Reflections on the roles and functions of union councils

The subsequent distribution of discussion summaries, presented here on a provincial basis, encompasses both urban and rural Union Councils in the designated districts.

4.2.1. Punjab

In contrast to Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the respondents from Punjab demonstrated a lack of enthusiasm. The majority of respondents, particularly those from opposition parties, viewed the local government system as a futile endeavor with limited opportunities for performance due to the absence of political

support from the provincial government. Respondents strongly advocated for financial and administrative autonomy, as well as the authority to oversee the performance of local government officials. Most respondents recommended the reinstatement of the local government setup of 2001, as it allowed them access to funds without political interference and faced no administrative obstacles in managing local affairs. Another significant proposal was to hold direct elections for the positions of Tehsil and Municipal Committee Chairpersons, Municipal Corporation, and District Mayor, rather than relying on the votes of union chairpersons. This change aimed to eliminate political victimization and blackmailing. According to the majority of respondents:

Local Government was never functioning in Punjab; we had no practical mandate to perform because major functions were performed either by companies or by district authorities – Punjab Union Council/1.

Currently, the delineation of Union Council boundaries, particularly in rural regions, has been influenced by political motivations and advantages, aiming to secure maximum votes for influential Members of the National Assembly/Members of the Provincial Assembly and devoid of any considerations for Integrated Area Development approach.

4.2.2. Sindh

After completing their 2016–2020, the respondents engaged in a thoughtful discussion about their roles and responsibilities within local government. Union Council members from Sindh expressed their limited involvement in the administrative and financial aspects of the education, health, and transport sectors. This contrasted with Article 72, Schedule IV of Sindh Local Government Act 2013, which mandates union councils to act as a construction agency for primary, middle, and secondary schools, rural health centers, family welfare clinics, and basic health units. However, in practice, these facilities are constructed, managed, and controlled by the respective departments of the Sindh Government. Union councils are responsible for water schemes, sanitation, and waste management.

The respondents from Sindh proposed that the process of fund utilization and budget allocation should be flexible, and devoid of traditional financial and audit delays. They recommended that local government elections, from the union council to the district level, should be conducted on a non-party basis. The respondents expressed concern about the reserved members (youth, women, and worker/farmer representatives) of the union council/committee and

considered them inefficient. They argued that these reserved members, not being directly elected, did not accept responsibility or feel public pressure, thereby inefficiently influencing decisions in union council meetings. The interviewees suggested that involving union councilors in decision-making processes related to the construction and maintenance of school infrastructure (such as classrooms, washrooms, and playgrounds), student enrollment programs, provision of furniture to schools, and implementation of teacher-student monitoring systems could significantly enhance efficiency and effectiveness in these areas.

4.2.3. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

All eight participants expressed their dissatisfaction with the lack of assigning effective role in the education, health, and transport sectors, despite the inclusion of education and health in their jurisdiction and responsibilities in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Local Government Act 2013. Concerning education, the union councilors were assigned only the task of monitoring and reporting on schools. Their role was limited to reporting agents to higher authorities, lacking the authority to take any action at their level. Nevertheless, there was unanimous agreement among the study participants that their concerns and suggestions regarding the improvement of school affairs were disregarded, posing a serious challenge to the implementation of the Integrated Area Development approach, and reaping collective benefits for the local people.

Neither our reports were taken seriously, nor was any action taken so there was no point in continuing to monitor educational and health facilities – Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Union Council/1

A similar response was gathered concerning healthcare, with participants expressing that they lacked direct or indirect oversight over even the most fundamental healthcare facilities. Despite being mandated to monitor such matters according to the act, union council members had no authority over the allocation of staff, equipment, and medicine in these health units. However, in areas where union councilors could effectively contribute, they took the initiative in implementing schemes and development projects related to drinking water, sanitation, waste management, and street maintenance and construction. There was a single exception, where a Union Council member managed to exert personal influence and secure development assistance for their specific area:

Being a social worker, I used my public relations and goodwill to bring improvements in my area. I leveraged my connections with civil administration and politicians

to facilitate the people of my area. I donated my ancestral land and secured 9.5 million rupees from the local MPA to build a Girls' high school. In addition, I was able to raise voluntary funds from local people and completed various development projects in my area – Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Union Council/3

Respondents expressed their strong desire to actively participate in the planning, administration, and execution of development projects related to education and health facilities within the jurisdiction of the union council. They emphasized the need for an active role rather than being limited to a consultative and monitoring capacity in these projects. The union councilors believed that they could bring about positive changes if they were given effective control and responsibility over the education and health facilities in the community.

4.2.4. Balochistan

One prominent issue raised by respondents was the scarcity of clean drinking water in Balochistan compared to other regions in the country. They expressed significant concern about ensuring access to clean drinking water during their time in office. Additionally, they had to tackle challenges related to sanitation and waste management. However, their work was hindered by problems of funds, administrative control, and extensive political interference. These obstacles compromised their ability to deliver effective public services, placing them in a difficult position.

Participants from Balochistan, like respondents from Punjab, expressed dissatisfaction regarding their experiences during their tenure in office. Despite the stipulations outlined in Article 81 Chapter VII, the fifth schedule of the Balochistan Local Government Act 2010, which defines the functions of a union council such as the provision of primary education, rural health centers, family clinics, and basic health units, union council members from Balochistan raised similar concerns regarding education, health, and transportation, like their counterparts in other provinces. However, the limited availability of development funds hindered their ability to undertake large-scale projects to address the basic needs of the sparsely populated province's residents.

There is no administrative or financial room to perform. Available funds are insufficient to provide basic infrastructure like piped water or sanitation in these vast areas. Parties will find it hard to find candidates for next elections. – Balochistan Union Council/1

5. Discussion

The discussion section is arranged as per the three research questions.

Table 6. Comparative Financial, Administrative and Political Autonomy at the Union Council Level across Provinces.

Type of Autonomy Province	Comparative Decision Space Financial, Administrative and Political Autonomy			
	Financial Autonomy		Administrative Autonomy	Political Autonomy
Budget Allocation	Revenue Generation			
Punjab	No mandated budget Only quarterly releases for utilities and wages	Can levy taxes but only after seeking approval from the provincial government (local taxes have low yield potential)	High level of control by bureaucracy and corporate management structure	No independent political, administrative or financial decision authority
Sindh	Sufficient allocation (with stringent approval process)	Can levy taxes (local taxes have minimum yield in rural areas)	Low bureaucratic hurdles	No independent political or administrative decision authority
KPK	Meagre quarterly allocations for utilities, daily expenses and local Initiatives	Can levy taxes with approval from District Local Governments (local taxes have minimum yield in rural areas)	Low bureaucratic hurdles	Union Councils enjoy political and administrative decision-making authority
Balochistan	No mandated budget. Only quarterly releases for utilities and wages	Can levy taxes (however, local taxes have minimum yield)	Politically backed bureaucracy	No independent political, administrative or financial decision authority

5.1. Similarities and differences among the local government structures

Table 6 shows a comparative understanding of the financial, administrative, and political autonomy experiences of union councils across four provinces. The comparison makes it obvious that union councils in two provinces (Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) have significant decision space due to low bureaucratic hurdles. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is even better in comparison as union councils enjoy political and administrative autonomy, which can prove instrumental in SDG localization. The whole premise though is compromised by the sub-optimal allocation of funds and a compromised mandate to generate own-source revenues (due to low-yielding sources).

5.2. Major challenges in the effective delivery of essential services

Addressing the second research question of this study, our analysis reveals that, except in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, union councils lacked autonomy in decision-making processes and were required to seek permission from provincial governments before taking any further action in specific cases (such as auditing, accounting, or engaging the services of a firm). This lack of autonomy resulted in each of the four provincial governments exerting their influence as oversight authorities for local governments, leading to significant potential efficiency losses. The said oversight makes the union councils vulnerable to bureaucratic and political influence, undermining local decision-making authority.

In Punjab, union councils did not have a separate budget allocated for development projects. A monthly grant, aside from the salaries of the union council

chairman/vice chairman, councilors, and the secretary, was provided to cover utilities and wages of sanitary staff. However, this fund fell short of meeting the needs of the union council. Construction, repair, and maintenance of infrastructure such as roads, water schemes, and drinking water supply lines depended on grants from Members of the National Assembly/ Members of the Provincial Assembly or the funds of the district mayor.

In Sindh, there was a separate budget allocated for development projects in addition to covering salaries and utilities of union council offices. Union councils in Sindh had a relatively larger budget allocation for development works. However, respondents expressed concerns about the slow processing of fund release and auditing procedures. Although the union councils prepared the budget layout and development schemes, the final approval was undertaken by the Secretary of Local Government at the provincial government level. Furthermore, union councils received significant special grants from Members of the National Assembly/ Members of the Provincial Assembly and the Sindh Government, often based on political considerations. Urban union councils had more potential for revenue collection compared to rural ones.

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, a nominal amount was allocated to each union council for routine matters, utilities, and monthly salaries of union council staff. Union councils had the freedom to decide how to use their available funds without seeking permission from the government, granting them partial autonomy.

In Balochistan, a nominal amount was credited quarterly to each union council for utilities and staff wages. Similar to Punjab, respondents in Balochistan relied on Members of the National Assembly/ Members of the Provincial Assembly and provincial ministers for fund

allocation. The high incidence of poverty in Balochistan resulted in limited prospects for revenue collection in both rural and urban union councils. Union councils lacked sufficient funds to undertake development projects related to water supply, sanitation, or street paving, which required significant resources not available through local funds.

In Punjab, the local government system was limited in utility due to bureaucratic and corporate management structures. Balochistan had a politically backed bureaucracy that left little decision-making space for local governments. In contrast, Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa faced fewer bureaucratic hurdles in running the affairs of local government. All four provinces had a top-down hierarchical structure for running local government affairs, with the upper tiers wielding more power. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, union councils had the freedom to allocate funds but were accountable to the upper tiers of local government. In the other provinces, union councils had to seek approvals from the Secretary of Local Government (provincial government) for fund allocation and utilization.

In Punjab and Balochistan, union councilors had limited political, administrative, and financial decision-making authority due to extensive political interference and bureaucratic hurdles. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, union councilors, being members of the ruling party, had more decision-making space. Political interference was present in all four local government systems, directly impacting the independent decision-making capability of union councils. Union councils in Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa enjoyed greater public approval and acceptance, with the community endorsing their decisions. This was not the case in Punjab (due to a

limited mandate) and Balochistan (due to inadequate funds allocation to address cost disabilities).

5.3. Necessary steps to ensure delivery of basic services

The third research question addressed in this study examines the necessary steps to enable councilors to ensure the delivery of basic services while adhering to the principle of leaving no one behind, thereby contributing to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Table 7 provides a summary of the functions and mandates of union councils, as reported by their councilors, demonstrating their capacity to facilitate the implementation of SDGs. Among the four provinces, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Sindh were found to be better positioned, with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's union councilors being the most capable at the lowest level of the state hierarchy to lead SDG implementation. On the other hand, union councils in Punjab and Balochistan were found to be least equipped for facilitating SDG implementation. Notably, the responsibility for transportation falls outside the domain of union councils in all provinces except Balochistan.

6. Conclusion

The study highlights the challenges and policy gaps that arise due to the limited autonomy granted to Union Councils, the lowest tier of local government in Pakistan. This limited autonomy allows powerful bureaucracy and political elites at different levels of government to exert greater control over administrative, fiscal, and political

Table 7. Functions and Mandate of Union Councils for SDG implementation.

Thematic Area	Link to SDGs	Punjab		Sindh		Khyber Pakhtunkhwa		Balochistan	
		Union Councils (City Council and Village Council)		Union Councils (Union Committee and Union Council)		Union Councils (Neighbourhood Council and Village Council)		Union Councils (Urban Council and Rural Council)	
		As per Act	As per Practice	As per Act	As per Practice	As per Act	As per Practice	As per Act	As per Practice
Education	Goal 4	No	No	Yes	No	Yes *	No **	Yes	No
Health	Goal 3	No	No	Yes	No	Yes *	No **	Yes	No
Water supply	Goal 6	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Sanitation	Goal 6	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Transport	Goal 11	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
Street lighting	Goal 11	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
Tree Plantation	Goal 13	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Community Mobilization	Goal 11	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Execution of Development Work	Goal 9	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Sports and Culture	Goal 11	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Agriculture	Goal 1 & 2	No	No	Yes	No	Yes *	No	Yes	No
Livestock	Goal 2	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes *	Yes	Yes	No

*: Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Local Government Act assigned the monitoring and supervision role to Union Councils in these sectors.

** : No action was taken on the reports from the Union Council members; therefore, this practice was discontinued later by Union Council members for being ineffective.

decisions that impact the functioning of Union Councils. Although legislative and regulatory provisions allocate certain public service delivery functions to local government actors, in practice, sectors such as education, health, transport, and development planning remain centralized within provincial ministries.

What factors impede the effectiveness of Union Councils? It appears that members of provincial assemblies perceive proactive local government representatives as a threat to their political careers, which hinders their willingness to provide necessary support to the local government system. Furthermore, the party-based elections at the local government level can result in excessive political interference in the affairs of Union Councils. These factors, in general, curtail the ability of Union Councils and local governments to fulfill their statutory roles in decision-making related to local development initiatives. Here is a set of three overarching recommendations for policymakers to consider:

First, ensuring constitutional and legal protection for the duration of local bodies' tenure holds considerable significance. It is imperative to establish measures that prevent provincial governments from prematurely suspending the local governance structure unless such actions are legally justified and accompanied by specific regulations applicable to all individuals holding public office.

Second, in line with the Integrated Area Development approach argued here, the upper tiers of local government (district and tehsil levels) be entrusted with the responsibility of prioritizing, sequencing, executing, and overseeing development plans across various areas.

Third, if union councils are granted the prerogative to independently acquire and allocate revenue generated within their jurisdiction, the notion of collecting local taxes for redistribution at the cost of their political influence becomes an illusory prospect. Consequently, union councils ought to be permitted to formulate local budgets without necessitating pre-emptive endorsement from the provincial government.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data availability statement

All data generated or analysed during this study are included in this published article.

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