

Local government system in Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh: Review of research priorities and gaps

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ABSTRACT

This study presents a systematic mapping of research on local government systems in three South Asian countries - Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh - with the aim of identifying key features, comparative differences, and critical research gaps. Drawing on 42 studies published over the past two decades, this review explores three core dimensions of local governance: decentralization, citizen participation, and public service delivery. The findings indicate that while political decentralization has received substantial academic attention, market decentralization remains largely neglected. Similarly, although decision-making processes under citizen participation are relatively well-studied, citizen feedback mechanisms are under-explored. Service delivery, particularly in terms of accountability, is discussed to a limited extent with other related aspects such as affordability and quality, receiving minimal focus. The review underscores that Pakistan's local governance reforms have often reinforced centralized control under the guise of decentralization, while Bangladesh faces challenges of excessive central interference and limited autonomy. India, in contrast, has implemented several successful reforms, though smaller urban bodies remain underrepresented. This study concludes by highlighting the need for more interdisciplinary and multidimensional research approaches to address these gaps and strengthen local governance frameworks across South Asia.

1. Introduction

South Asia has a significant position on a global scale as it constitutes almost one-third of the world's population. Countries within this region have complicated governance systems at the central as well as at the local level. Local governance plays a pivotal role in fostering democratic participation, ensuring service delivery, and promoting grassroots development. This study conducts a systematic mapping exercise of studies focusing on local government systems in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India. These countries share the same colonial past; that's why there are various factors that are similar in their local system. The local government system in these countries has undergone multiple transformations or reforms due to shifting political regimes. India has well-structured local governance as compared to Pakistan and Bangladesh because of various constitutional amendments (Ali & Savoia, 2023). Pakistan has experienced various reforms and amendments, but still, there is large room to expand. Bangladesh is working on a decentralized governance model.

Local government is the administration of a particular country or district, with representatives elected by those who

live there. Its primary role is to provide essential services, manage local infrastructure, and represent citizens' needs at the central level. In this article, we review the available studies, analyze the ways in which local government is working, and identify research gaps and priorities (Yigitcanlar et al., 2024). Through a systematic mapping process, we will explore the following research questions: (1) What are the key features of local governance systems in Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh? (2) How do these systems differ in terms of decentralization, citizen participation and service delivery? (3) What are research gaps and policy recommendations for improving local government system in Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh? Our research examines the usefulness of the local government system for improving its working conditions and suggests possible modifications to its research priorities related to South Asia (Katsir et al., 2024). This study makes three key contributions to the literature on local governance in South Asia. First, it contributes methodologically by applying a PRISMA-guided systematic literature review to synthesize two decades of research on decentralization, citizen participation, and service delivery across Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh.

Unlike previous narrative or country-specific reviews, this study adopts a transparent and replicable mapping approach. Second, the study contributes to comparative governance scholarship by systematically examining cross-country variation within a shared colonial and administrative legacy. By identifying structural differences in fiscal autonomy, political incentives, and institutional embedding, the review provides a comparative analytical framework for understanding why decentralization outcomes diverge within similar regional contexts. Third, the study contributes to theory development by linking empirical patterns from South Asia to broader political economy and fiscal federalism frameworks. It moves beyond identifying research gaps to explaining decentralization outcomes through institutional and incentive-based mechanisms. These insights generate implications for both governance theory and policy design in developing democracies.

2. Theoretical framework

To critically examine the evolution and functioning of local government systems in Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh, this study draws upon key theoretical perspectives in decentralization and governance. One of the foundational frameworks is offered by Rondinelli (1983), who defines decentralization as the transfer of authority and responsibility for public functions from the central government to subordinate or quasi-independent government organizations. They categorize decentralization into four major forms: political, administrative, fiscal, and market decentralization. This typology enables researchers to assess how decentralization affects governance, service delivery, and citizen empowerment in various political contexts. Expanding on this, Litvack (1998) argues that successful decentralization is context-specific, requiring clarity in the distribution of responsibilities, adequate financial resources, and institutional capacity at the local level.

Their framework stresses the importance of intergovernmental fiscal relations and the risks of decentralizing without proper institutional support. In evaluating governance outcomes, this study also refers to the UNDP's governance framework (1997), which emphasizes five key principles: accountability, transparency, participation, effectiveness, and rule of law. These are particularly relevant when assessing citizen participation mechanisms and service delivery systems across the region. Finally, the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) framework especially the dimensions of voice and accountability and government effectiveness provides a comparative benchmark to evaluate the progress and shortcomings of local government systems globally. These theoretical models serve as the analytical lens through which we interpret the empirical findings on

decentralization, citizen engagement, and service delivery in the selected South Asian countries. They also help situate South Asia's local governance trajectories within broader global trends in decentralization.

Analytical Expectations

While the preceding frameworks outline conceptual approaches to decentralization and governance, this study derives several analytical expectations to guide the interpretation of empirical findings.

First, based on Rondinelli et al. (1983), effective decentralization requires meaningful transfer of political, administrative, and fiscal authority. Therefore, we expect that countries with limited fiscal autonomy will exhibit weaker service delivery outcomes and constrained local accountability. Second, drawing on Litvack et al. (1998), decentralization reforms are likely to produce substantive governance improvements only when supported by adequate institutional capacity and clearly defined intergovernmental fiscal relations. Accordingly, where decentralization is implemented without sufficient financial resources or administrative capacity, outcomes are expected to remain symbolic rather than transformative.

Third, grounded in political economy theory, decentralization reforms introduced primarily for regime legitimacy rather than institutional restructuring are expected to result in pseudo-decentralization, characterized by formal devolution without real autonomy. Fourth, following governance principles outlined by UNDP (1997), we expect stronger citizen participation and accountability mechanisms to correlate with improved governance effectiveness, particularly in contexts where participatory institutions are constitutionally embedded.

These analytical expectations provide a theoretical lens through which cross-country variation in decentralization, citizen participation, and service delivery is interpreted in subsequent sections.

3. Materials and Methods

This study performs a systematic mapping of local governance system-related research in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India. Systematic mapping has been used in this document. A systematic mapping, like a systematic review, uses a transparent protocol to document each step of the research process. A systematic mapping review is a secondary empirical study that provides overviews of a research area to identify which topics are well-studied and which need additional study. The stages of our systematic mapping exercise are presented in Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram of the systematic literature review process, showing identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion stages and further explained below.

Information sources and search strategy.

An electronic search was conducted from three different databases: Science Direct, JSTOR, and Google Scholar. The review was limited to ScienceDirect, JSTOR, and Google Scholar due to their multidisciplinary coverage and relevance to governance and public administration research. While other databases such as Scopus or Web of Science may offer broader indexing, preliminary scoping indicated significant overlap with the selected databases. Therefore, the chosen databases were deemed sufficient to capture the relevant literature within the defined scope.

Computerized research was restricted to publications of the last twenty years. This period was chosen to focus specifically on reforms introduced related to local government’s decentralization, public service delivery, and citizen participation activities. All databases were searched following the same strategy for keywords in the abstract, paper title, or full text of the publication. Keywords used were “local government” or “decentralization” or “citizen participation” or “public service delivery” and “Pakistan” or “Bangladesh” and “India”.

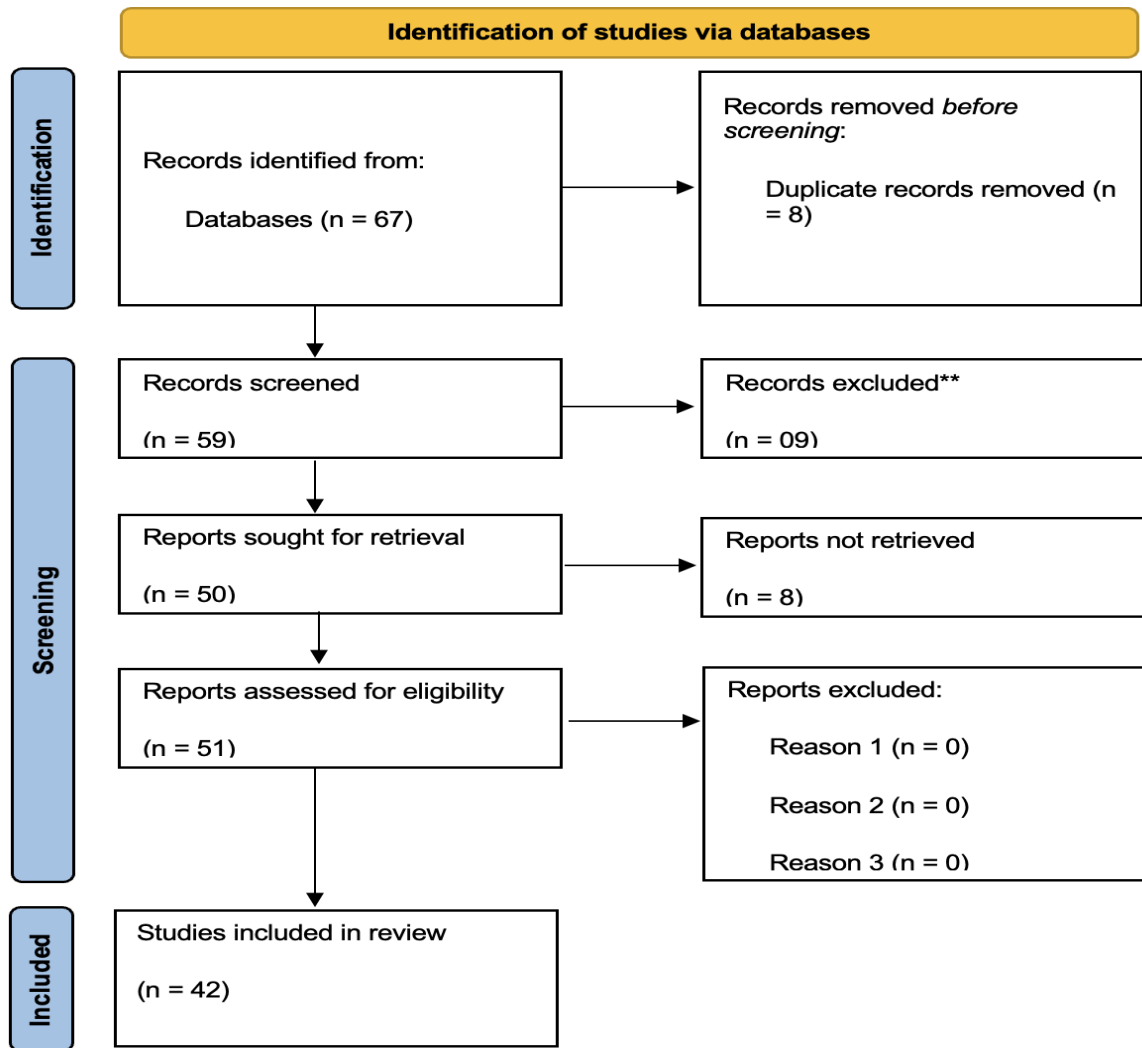


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram of the systematic literature review process, showing identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion stages.

Screening

Our review was focused on studies that provide insight to the local government system in three selected South Asian countries: Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India. To be included, studies had to (1) have a focus on at least one of the selected countries; (2) be related to the research title of this study; and (3) be written in English.

Eligibility criteria

This figure 1 illustrates the systematic process used to identify and select studies for inclusion in the review. The selection procedure is presented in four main phases: identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion. In the identification phase, a total of 67 records were retrieved from various electronic databases. Before moving to the screening stage, duplicate entries were removed. In this case, 8 duplicate records were identified and excluded. After removing these duplicates, 59 unique records remained for further screening. During the screening phase, the 59 records were examined based on their titles and abstracts to determine their relevance to the study objectives. At this stage, 9 records were excluded because they did not

meet the predefined criteria. As a result, 50 reports were considered potentially relevant and were sought for full-text retrieval. However, 8 of these reports could not be accessed, reducing the number of studies available for detailed assessment.

In the eligibility phase, 51 reports were assessed against the established inclusion and exclusion criteria. The figure indicates that no studies were excluded at this stage based on the listed reasons, meaning that all assessed reports met the eligibility requirements. Finally, in the inclusion phase, a total of 42 studies were included in the review. This final number represents the studies that satisfied all selection criteria and were incorporated into the analysis. Overall, the figure demonstrates a structured and transparent study selection process, clearly showing how the initial pool of identified records was narrowed down to the final set of included studies.

Following this screening process, 42 studies met the inclusion criteria and were subjected to detailed review, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Tabulated review of local government system studies.

References	Design	Time horizon/ sample	Dimensions	Model	Findings
Pakistan					
Khan, 2021	I	80	Decentralization	QA	Shifting power reshaping governance structure
Barrs, 2005	I	32	Decentralization	QA	Community organizations positively impact teacher
Rafique and Khoo, 2018	II	90	Participation	QA	CBOs failed to promote citizen participation
Rahman et al., 2024	I	2023-2024	Service delivery	QA	Local governance tries its best to provide services
Adil & Anwar, 2015	II	1990-2020	Decentralization	RA	Fiscal decentralization has positive significant
Seddiky, 2020	II	91 sectors	Decentralization	BCA	Health sector should be more dec. to improve
Rahim & Shirazi, 2018	II	14,413	Participation	RA	Citizen satisfaction with local services declined
Rafique et al., 2020	I	1947-2020	Participation	QA	Regimes aimed to legitimize authority
Batool, 2014	I	1996-2010	Decentralization	QA	LGs failed to achieve meaningful decentralization
Malik & Rana, 2019	I	1990-2015	Decentralization	QA	The purpose to decentralization was not to decentralize
Jabeen, & Jadoon, 2009	I	106	Participation	QA	33% reserved seats for women, participation
Shaikh et al., 2016	I	208	Participation	QA	Efforts face barriers like low ICT adoption

Ali, 2022	I	70	Participation	QA	Suppress citizen participation due to elite capture
Cheema et al., 2018	I	384	Decentralization	QA	Reforms failed to improve universal service delivery
Ali, 2022	I	103	Decentralization	QA	Political dynamics overshadowed technical factors
Cheema et al., 2005	I	1956-2002	Decentralization	QA	Regimes driven by political needs
Tehseen, 2021	I	2004-2018	Decentralization	QA	Reforms ultimately served to centralize military
Cheema, 2005	I	8 Districts	Participation	QA	JDCs provided symbolic empowerment to rural.
Bangladesh					
Ali & Savoia, 2023	II	2005-2009	Decentralization	PD	The allocation of developing spending is significantly influenced by political patronage.
Pandy, 2011	I	1757-2010	Decentralization	TA	Local govt. system remains largely centralized
Huq, 2014	I	36	Citizen participation	QA	Citizen participation has been nominal in the local governance process
Waheduzzaman & As-Saber, 2015	I	106	Citizen participation	QA	Efforts to achieve community participation in local governance have mostly been fertile.
Khan & Syrett, 2022	I	290	Citizen participation	QA	A range of social, political, and psychological factors affecting participation.
Pandy, 2017	I	150	Decentralization	QA	A lack of proper transfer of power has limited the capacity of UZP to operate effectively.
Islam, 2019	I	77	Citizen participation	QA	A number of elected members lack knowledge of laws, hinders women's activity
Uddin, 2019	I	138	Citizen participation	QA	Effectiveness in empowering marginalized groups remain limited.
Sharmin, 2012	I	1998-2012	Decentralization	QA	Local governments remain weak due to excessive central control and political influence.
Pandey, 2019	I	56	Citizen participation	QA	Despite constitutional decentralization LG remain weak due to financial dependency
Cheema et al., 2005	I	78	Citizen participation	QA	Effective service delivery requires improved fiscal sustainability and budgeting.

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Biswas, 2020	I	385	Citizen participation	QA	UP struggle with ineffective service delivery due to central govt. control.
Ferdaus & Hossain, 2020	I	67	Decentralization	QA	LGIs suffer from excessive central control, political interference and bureaucratic elitism.
Swapan, 2016	I	290	Citizen participation	QA	A range of social, political, and psychological factors affecting participation.
India					
Alathur et al., 2012	I	130	Citizen participation	QA	Adequate citizen participation before and after the electronation.
Sharma, 2020	I	2013-2017	Decentralization	QA	The reform mainly favored large urban local bodies; smaller urban local bodies ignored.
Biswass, 2020	I	1970-2020	Decentralization	QA	74th CAA established metropolitan govt. but failed to achieve decentralization.
Heller et al., 2006	I	858	Decentralization	QA	Kerala's decentralization campaign empowered marginalized groups.
Kaur et al., 2012	I	1992-08	Service delivery	QA	Decentralization has improved the functioning of health services to some extent in India.
Yigitcanlar et al., 2024	I	60	Service delivery	QA	AL adoption in LGs has grown exponentially, but ethical considerations remain represented.
Katsir et al., 2024	II	104	Service delivery	QA	NSP, supported by Panchayats, aims to combat soil delegation
Mohapatra, 2012	I	1992-201	Decentralization	QA	Incomplete devolution of fiscal powers to PRIs, leading to dependency on state govt.
Ratra and Dahiya, 2022	I	2011-20	Decentralization	QA	PRIs heavily rely on central got. Funds due to inadequate own source revenue
Mehta & Sahu, 2024	II	2016-19	Citizen participation	DID	Utilization of ICDS services improved more in experimental villages.

Note: I= Qualitative, II= Quantitative, QA= Qualitative approach, RA= Regression analysis, BCA= Binary Correlation analysis, PA= Panel analysis, TA= Trend analysis, DID= Difference in Difference

Data extraction for systematic mapping:

To facilitate systematic mapping, we created an Excel spreadsheet to classify the final 42 studies by study design,

sample type and size, research questions addressed and methods used results, and conclusions. From the Excel spreadsheet, the frequencies of publication in each disciplinary field can be estimated. Research on local

government systems has largely been published in social science or developmental journals indicating that research may have largely focused on decentralization of local government and citizen participation, while public administration-related research on service delivery is sparser.

Study Quality Assessment and Coding:

Each study was evaluated based on its methodological rigor, clarity of research questions, alignment with decentralization or governance themes, and relevance to one or more of the three core dimensions: decentralization, citizen participation, and service delivery. Quality assessment involved screening for peer-reviewed status, methodological transparency (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods), and sufficient data or conceptual grounding. Studies that lacked relevance to any of the core dimensions or failed to meet a basic threshold for academic reliability (e.g., non-scholarly sources, duplicated data, or absence of findings) were excluded.

Coding categories included:

- Country Focus (Pakistan, India, Bangladesh)
- Governance Dimension (Political, Administrative, Fiscal, Market decentralization; Citizen Participation; Service Delivery)
- Research Methodology (Qualitative, Quantitative, Mixed Methods)
- Sample Size/Time Horizon

To enhance methodological rigor, study screening and coding were conducted independently by two researchers. Inter-rater reliability was ensured through independent assessment of titles, abstracts, and full texts. Although a formal statistical reliability coefficient such as Cohen's Kappa was not calculated due to the qualitative nature of categorization, discrepancies were resolved through structured discussion and consensus. This process minimized selection bias and enhanced consistency in coding decisions.

4. Results and Discussion

Results

The results are organized thematically across three governance dimensions: decentralization, citizen participation, and service delivery. Rather than presenting findings country by country, this section synthesizes patterns across the three countries to highlight similarities, differences, and structural trends identified in the reviewed studies.

Distribution of Studies

Of the 42 studies included in the final synthesis, 22 (52%) focused on Pakistan, 12 (28%) on India, and 8 (19%) on Bangladesh. These percentages represent the proportion of studies included by country focus. The studies were categorized across three governance dimensions: decentralization, citizen participation, and service delivery.

Decentralization Patterns

Across the reviewed literature, decentralization reforms exhibit notable variation. India demonstrates constitutionally embedded local governance structures following the 73rd and 74th Amendments, providing formal institutional continuity. In contrast, Pakistan's decentralization reforms have fluctuated across political regimes, with authority frequently retained at higher administrative levels. Bangladesh reflects administrative decentralization with persistent fiscal dependency on the central government. Fiscal decentralization emerges as the least developed dimension across Pakistan and Bangladesh, whereas selected Indian states demonstrate comparatively stronger fiscal autonomy.

Citizen Participation

Citizen participation mechanisms are more formally institutionalized in India, particularly in states with active civil society engagement. In Pakistan and Bangladesh, participation mechanisms are present but largely consultative rather than decision-making. Feedback systems and accountability channels remain underdeveloped in all three countries.

Service Delivery

Service delivery outcomes vary across contexts. Studies suggest that improvements are more likely where fiscal autonomy accompanies administrative delegation. In contexts characterized by financial dependency, service delivery gains remain inconsistent. Accountability receives greater scholarly attention than service quality, accessibility, or affordability.

Synthesis of Findings

Overall, three consistent patterns emerge. First, decentralization reforms in Pakistan and Bangladesh remain fiscally constrained despite administrative delegation. Second, India demonstrates comparatively stronger institutional embedding of local governance structures. Third, service delivery outcomes appear more strongly associated with fiscal autonomy than with administrative decentralization alone. These patterns provide the foundation for theoretical interpretation in the discussion section.

Table 2: Percentage of studies in given dimensions in different countries

Country	Decentralization	Citizen participation	Service delivery
Pakistan	52%	41.17%	75%
India	28%	11.76%	25%
Bangladesh	19%	47.05%	0%

Research priorities and gaps

The dimensions of the local government system are summarized in Figure 2 in Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh. Research priorities and gaps were identified by Green (representing “mostly studied”), yellow (representing “partially studied”), or red (“mostly neglected”), which serves to demonstrate which dimensions of the local government system there is a shortage of publications. We identified that political decentralization was largely studied; market decentralization is totally neglected in these countries.

Citizen participation’s dimension of decision-making was largely investigated, and citizen feedback was totally neglected. In service delivery, accountability was the only dimension that was mostly studied, and other dimensions were mostly neglected.

Discussion

This review has mapped the research landscape of local government systems in Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh using a systematic and transparent methodology. The findings reveal critical gaps in literature, including limited attention to market decentralization, citizen feedback mechanisms, and non-accountability-related dimensions of service delivery. These gaps suggest an unbalanced focus on formal decentralization without sufficient analysis of actual autonomy, responsiveness, and local capacity. Anchored in decentralization theory (Rondinelli et al., 1983) and governance frameworks (UNDP, 1997; Litvack et al., 1998), the review highlights how South Asian local governments have struggled to translate structural reforms into meaningful local empowerment. For example, political decentralization reforms in Pakistan often serve to reinforce centralized military or bureaucratic control a pattern consistent with the notion of pseudo-decentralization described by Cheema (2007). Similarly, Bangladesh’s experience reflects the risks of decentralizing without adequate administrative and fiscal autonomy, as identified in comparative studies from Africa (Smoke, 2003) and Latin America (Grindle, 2007; Pandey, 2011).

Cross-Country Political Economy Explanations

The observed variation in decentralization outcomes across Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India can be better understood through a political economy lens rather than a purely institutional perspective.

Pakistan

The persistence of centralized authority in Pakistan reflects what decentralization scholars describe as *pseudo-decentralization*. Reforms have frequently been introduced during non-democratic or hybrid regimes seeking political legitimacy rather than structural transformation. Instead of transferring genuine fiscal and administrative autonomy, decentralization initiatives have often reconfigured power hierarchies while retaining central oversight. This explains why many empirical studies report limited improvements in service delivery or citizen empowerment despite multiple reform cycles.

Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, decentralization efforts illustrate the risks of administrative devolution without fiscal empowerment. Although formal structures for local governance exist, financial dependency on the central government constrains local discretion. From a fiscal federalism perspective, inadequate revenue authority undermines accountability and responsiveness. This structural imbalance helps explain why citizen participation remains largely procedural rather than substantive, and why local institutions struggle to deliver high-quality public services.

India

India presents a comparatively stronger institutionalization of decentralization, particularly following constitutional amendments that embedded Panchayati Raj Institutions within the governance framework. However, decentralization outcomes vary across states. The relative success of Kerala’s participatory campaign suggests that political commitment, social mobilization, and institutional safeguards are critical mediating variables. Unlike Pakistan and Bangladesh, decentralization in India has been constitutionally protected, which reduces the likelihood of reversal and enhances policy continuity.

Dimensions of LGs	Sub indicators	Pakistan	Bangladesh	India
Decentralization	Political	Green	Green	Green
	Administrative	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow
	Fiscal	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow
	Market	Red	Red	Red
Citizen participation	Electoral	Yellow	Yellow	Red
	Decision making	Green	Green	Green
	Citizen feedback	Red	Red	Red
Service delivery	Availability	Yellow	Yellow	Red
	Quality	Red	Red	Yellow
	Affordability	Red	Red	Red
	Accountability	Green	Green	Green

Green indicates “mostly studied”, Yellow indicates “partially studied”, and Red indicates “mostly neglected”.

Figure 2. Research priorities and gaps in local governance literature across Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh.

The theoretical frameworks introduced earlier can now be more directly applied to the findings of this review. For instance, the concept of "pseudo-decentralization" articulated by Cheema (2007) is reflected in Pakistan’s political reforms, which ostensibly promote local empowerment but, in practice, centralize authority under military or bureaucratic control. Similarly, the risks of decentralization without institutional support, as highlighted by Litvack et al. (1998), are evident in Bangladesh, where inadequate fiscal autonomy and bureaucratic interference undermine effective governance. In contrast, the participatory success of Kerala’s decentralization in India aligns well with the UNDP (1997) governance principles of participation, accountability, and effectiveness. The World Bank’s WGI indicators also offer explanatory power: countries scoring low on ‘voice and accountability’ tend to exhibit weak citizen feedback mechanisms and limited transparency in local governance. These theoretical lenses collectively help explain why decentralization outcomes in

South Asia vary and underscore the importance of contextualized, well-resourced, and inclusive governance reforms.

In contrast, India offers relatively successful cases such as Kerala’s participatory decentralization campaign (Heller et al., 2007), which mirrors global best practices in empowering marginalized communities and enabling accountability. This suggests that political will, local capacity, and institutional frameworks are decisive factors in achieving the intended outcomes of decentralization. Moreover, the neglect of market decentralization which involves transferring functions to private and non-government actors mirrors similar blind spots observed in Southeast Asian and African governance studies. Incorporating such perspectives can provide richer insight into public-private dynamics in service delivery. To advance research in this domain, future studies must adopt multidimensional, comparative, and interdisciplinary approaches. Drawing lessons from regions like Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia can help South Asian scholars and policymakers design more

effective local governance reforms. There is also a pressing need to enhance data availability and transparency to assess service delivery outcomes beyond accountability, including accessibility, affordability, and citizen satisfaction.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this review highlights that although decentralization reforms in South Asia have yielded measurable improvements in local governance structures and service delivery, considerable institutional, fiscal, and administrative challenges persist. Progress has been uneven across countries and regions, reflecting disparities in political commitment, capacity, and accountability mechanisms. Addressing these persistent gaps requires not only deeper empirical investigation into context-specific governance outcomes but also stronger theoretical integration drawing upon comparative global experiences and established governance frameworks. A more coherent alignment between theory and practice will be essential to designing reforms that are sustainable, inclusive, and responsive to local development needs.

Policy and Practical Implications

Based on the findings of this review, several actionable recommendations are proposed to help translate decentralization efforts into more effective and inclusive local governance. These are tailored for three key stakeholder groups:

Strengthening decentralization and local governance in South Asia requires coordinated action from multiple stakeholders. National and local governments should institutionalize structured mechanisms for citizen engagement, such as regular feedback systems and digital grievance redress platforms, to enhance accountability and responsiveness. Ensuring fiscal autonomy through legally mandated budgetary allocations to local governments is equally critical for effective service delivery. The adoption of integrated e-governance systems can further promote transparency, efficiency, and data-driven decision-making. Given spatial and demographic disparities, decentralization strategies should be tailored to address the specific needs of urban and rural regions, while sustained capacity-building initiatives must be implemented to equip elected representatives and administrative staff particularly in underserved rural areas with the necessary technical and managerial skills. International donors and development partners can complement these efforts by investing in digital infrastructure, supporting longitudinal research to evaluate decentralization outcomes, and fostering regional knowledge-sharing platforms across South Asia. Additionally, targeted pilot initiatives in areas such as market decentralization and climate-resilient local planning can address emerging governance challenges. Civil society

organizations and NGOs also play a pivotal role by facilitating community-based monitoring mechanisms, advocating for institutional reforms that strengthen local autonomy, and promoting civic education especially among women and marginalized groups to encourage meaningful participation in governance processes. Collaborative partnerships with media and academic institutions can further enhance oversight and public accountability. Collectively, these measures can reduce service delivery gaps, strengthen citizen trust, and contribute to more resilient, participatory, and responsive local governance systems across the region.

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