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Public Perceptions of Local Government in Pakistan: A Survey-Based Assessment

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ABSTRACT

Decentralization is theorized to improve service delivery and democratic accountability, yet evidence from citizen perspectives remains scarce in many developing contexts. This study investigates public perceptions of local government in Pakistan across four dimensions: awareness, service delivery, civic participation, and institutional trust. Drawing on survey data from 180 respondents across multiple districts, the study employs descriptive statistics and reliability analysis (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.916$). Findings reveal that while basic awareness of local government existence is moderate (mean = 3.81/5.00), deeper structural and functional knowledge remains limited. Service delivery satisfaction is low, with over 40% dissatisfaction regarding rural roads and development projects. Civic participation is confined to electoral turnout, with minimal engagement in ongoing governance processes. Trust is mixed: citizens acknowledge some responsiveness but widely perceive political interference, weak anti-corruption mechanisms, and non-meritocratic selection. These findings suggest that Pakistan faces not institutional absence, but what we term 'decentralization without transparency' characterized by information asymmetries and procedural illegibility. The study concludes with policy implications for institutional clarity, merit-based recruitment, and citizen feedback mechanisms.

1. Introduction

Effective subnational governance is widely recognized as a cornerstone of democratic consolidation and service delivery, particularly in developing states grappling with multi-sectoral crises (Kameshwara et al., 2020). In Pakistan, persistent deficits in community well-being, manifested as severe ambient air pollution, unsafe potable water supplies, recurrent infectious disease outbreaks, and chronic food insecurity, underscore the urgency of responsive local institutions. Empirical evidence links industrial emissions to adverse household health outcomes (Ebenstein et al., 2017; Landrigan et al., 2018), while waterborne pathogens remain a leading cause of pediatric morbidity, including diarrheal diseases (Troeger et al., 2017). Concurrently, the cyclical burden of vector-borne illnesses such as dengue fever exacerbates economic vulnerabilities among marginalized populations, a situation aggravated by pandemic-induced

food system shocks. These interdependent challenges reorient scholarly attention toward the performance of grassroots governance mechanisms.

Local governments constitute the administrative tier constitutionally mandated to address such quotidian public welfare issues through service provision, public health programming, infrastructural investment, and citizen engagement. Functionally, local government denotes a system wherein elected representatives manage district, municipal, or community-level affairs serving as the polity's most proximate authority to citizens. In Pakistan, while provincial governments retain supervisory control, local bodies are conceptually designed as decentralized units responsive to heterogeneous local demands. The provincial and local government framework, integral to Pakistan's governance architecture, has historically contributed to democratic decentralization and localized development by

devolving administrative and fiscal authority from higher tiers to locally elected representatives ((Cheema et al., 2024; Ali and Rafi, 2026).

The genealogy of local governance in Pakistan predates national independence in 1947, originating under colonial British administration. Scholars argue that the system inherited from colonial rule emphasized administrative control rather than genuine local autonomy. Post-independence, successive regimes have periodically restructured local government systems, often driven by political expediency or personal inclination rather than institutional logic. Research indicates that decentralization efforts in Pakistan have been inconsistent due to political instability and power struggles between federal, provincial, and local tiers of government ((Cheema et al., 2024; Sayeed & Mustafa, 2022). A recurrent pattern of disruption has emerged: military administrations have typically prioritized local administration, while civilian governments have unevenly demonstrated commitment to genuine devolution. A pivotal constitutional moment occurred with the 18th Amendment (2010), which formally recognized the principle of subsidiarity, devolving substantial powers to provinces and, by implication, to local governments thereafter. Implementation, however, has diverged markedly across Punjab, Sindh, Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the Islamabad Capital Territory, Gilgit-Baltistan, and Azad Jammu and Kashmir, each region operating under distinct legal frameworks governing local body organization, functional assignments, and electoral cycles, thereby producing significant jurisdictional variation in governance outcomes. Studies show that provincial governments often retain substantial control over financial and administrative matters, limiting the autonomy of local institutions (Zahra and Bouckaert, 2022).

Beyond urban service delivery, Pakistan's rural economy, overwhelmingly dependent on agriculture for both GDP contribution and employment, presents additional governance imperatives. Farming communities contend with climate volatility, constrained access to formal credit, escalating input costs, and widespread adulteration of agrochemicals. Empirical research associate's pesticide exposure and unsafe agricultural practices with serious occupational health hazards, while financial exclusion depresses productivity and household food security (Khan et al., 2020; Rehman et al., 2021). Within this domain, local governments are potentially pivotal actors: facilitating agricultural extension services, regulating farm input quality, improving credit access, and supporting climate adaptation strategies at the community level (Kassem et al., 2021; Al-Zahrani et al., 2019). Nevertheless, systematic

evidence on citizen assessments of local government performance, across awareness, service delivery, participation, and accountability, remains scarce. Existing research has predominantly focused on legal-institutional arrangements and elite-level politics, with limited empirical attention to citizens' own perceptions of local governance (Khan et al., 2020; Farooqi & Forbes, 2024).

This study therefore investigates public perceptions of local government in Pakistan, guided by the following research questions: (1) What is the level of public awareness regarding local government structures and functions? (2) How do citizens perceive the effectiveness of service delivery? (3) What factors influence civic participation in local governance? (4) To what extent do citizens trust local government institutions? By addressing these questions through a survey-based assessment, the study aims to generate empirically grounded insights into institutional reform and democratic accountability.

2. Literature Review

Theoretical and International Perspectives on Decentralization

Local government and decentralization have been widely studied as essential components of democratic governance and effective public service delivery. In developing countries like Pakistan, decentralization is often viewed as a mechanism to enhance citizen participation, accountability, and administrative efficiency. International literature on decentralization highlights that effective local governance depends on fiscal autonomy, institutional capacity, and accountability mechanisms. (Mookherjee, 2015) argue that decentralization improves service delivery only when local institutions are empowered and transparent. In many developing countries, weak implementation and political interference limit the success of decentralization reforms, a pattern also observed in Pakistan.

Historical Evolution and Institutional Trajectories in Pakistan

Historically, the local government system in Pakistan has evolved through various phases, beginning from the British colonial period where the foundations of administrative decentralization were first introduced. Scholars argue that the system inherited from colonial rule emphasized administrative control rather than genuine local autonomy. Over time, successive governments attempted to reform local governance structures; however, these reforms often lacked continuity and sustainability. Research indicates that decentralization efforts in Pakistan have been inconsistent due to political instability and power struggles between

federal, provincial, and local tiers of government. Although decentralization is a key feature of federal systems, its implementation in Pakistan has been irregular, with democratic governments often showing limited commitment toward empowering local institutions (Cheema et al., 2006). This inconsistency has weakened the effectiveness of local governments in delivering services and promoting grassroots democracy.

Institutional Weaknesses and Administrative Failures

Local government systems in Pakistan is not due to the concept itself but rather due to weak institutional frameworks, lack of political will, and administrative inefficiencies. For instance, Hussain and Qureshi (2021), notes that inadequate implementation, elite capture, and poor governance mechanisms have significantly hindered the performance of local governments. These issues have resulted in limited public trust and reduced citizen engagement. Furthermore, the relationship between provincial and local governments has remained a critical challenge. Studies show that provincial governments often retain substantial control over financial and administrative matters, limiting the autonomy of local institutions, (Shah, 2006). This dependency restricts the ability of local governments to respond effectively to community needs. Despite its potential benefits, decentralization in Pakistan often remains "decentralization without empowerment," where authority is devolved in theory but not in practice. Studies on regions like Balochistan highlight that lack of fiscal autonomy and administrative capacity continue to undermine the effectiveness of local governance systems.

Evidence on Service Delivery, Participation, and Reform Outcomes

Recent research also emphasizes that decentralization can improve service delivery and citizen participation if implemented effectively. For example, evidence from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa suggests that reforms promoting political inclusion and citizen engagement have led to improvements in governance and service delivery outcomes. Similarly, local governments are considered vital for achieving development goals, as they are closest to the community and better positioned to implement localized policies. Overall, the literature suggests that while local government systems in Pakistan have the potential to strengthen democracy and improve service delivery, their success largely depends on consistent political support, institutional reforms, and genuine devolution of power (Jameel, 2026).

Collectively, the reviewed literature establishes three key insights. First, decentralization's success is contingent upon genuine fiscal and administrative empowerment, a condition repeatedly unmet in Pakistan due to provincial overreach and political instability. Second, institutional weaknesses (elite capture, poor governance mechanisms, and lack of political will) have systematically undermined local government performance, eroding public trust and civic engagement (Faguet, 2014). Third, while certain provincial reforms (e.g., in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) demonstrate that political inclusion and participatory mechanisms can improve outcomes, such cases remain exceptional rather than systemic (Mansuri & Rao, 2013; Dick-Sagoe, 2020).

Despite this rich body of institutional and policy analysis, significant gaps persist. Existing research has predominantly focused on legal-institutional arrangements, elite-level politics, and administrative failures, with limited empirical attention to *citizens' own perceptions* of local governance. Specifically, there is a dearth of survey-based evidence examining: (a) how aware ordinary citizens are of local government structures and functions; (b) how they evaluate the effectiveness of actual service delivery on the ground; (c) what factors, beyond institutional design, drive or inhibit their participation in local governance; and (d) the extent to which they place trust in local government institutions as service providers and accountability forums. These gaps are particularly consequential in a context where local governments are constitutionally mandated but practically constrained, and where citizen feedback loops remain largely absent from reform debates. The present study directly addresses these lacunae by systematically investigating public perceptions across the four research questions outlined in the introduction.

3. Materials and Methods

Research Design Research Design and Rationale

The local government system constitutes a crucial component of Pakistan's governance framework; however, as established in the literature review, existing research has predominantly focused on institutional arrangements and elite-level politics rather than citizen perceptions. To address this gap, the present study adopted quantitative, cross-sectional survey design. This approach is particularly appropriate given the study's four guiding research questions concerning public awareness, service delivery effectiveness, civic participation, and institutional trust, constructs best captured through structured, replicable measurement tools administered to a broad sample of citizens.

Questionnaire Development and Structure

A structured questionnaire was developed as the primary data collection instrument. The instrument was designed following a comprehensive review of the decentralization literature, which underscores that effective local governance depends on accountability mechanisms, institutional capacity, and citizen engagement (Mookherjee, 2015). The questionnaire comprised six thematic sections: (1) demographic information (age, gender, education, occupation, and district of residence); (2) awareness and knowledge of local government structures and functions; (3) perceptions of local government structure and functioning; (4) public participation in local governance processes; (5) service delivery effectiveness; (6) responsiveness, accountability, and transparency of local institutions. Each item in sections 2 through 6 was measured using a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree). The instrument was pilot tested for clarity and comprehension prior to full deployment.

Sampling Strategy and Data Collection

The target population consisted of adult citizens residing in selected urban and semi-urban areas across multiple districts of Pakistan. A simple random sampling technique was employed to minimize selection bias. The sampling frame was constructed from electoral rolls and community directories, supplemented by venue-based recruitment in public spaces (markets, parks, and government offices) to ensure geographic and demographic diversity. Data were collected from 180 respondents. Respondents were approached through both online (via structured Google Forms distributed through community networks) and in-person (face-to-face interviews administered by trained enumerators) methods to enhance representation across age groups, digital literacy levels, and accessibility constraints. While efforts were made to maintain strict randomness, the study acknowledges limitations related to accessibility and time constraints, which may have marginally influenced sample distribution, a common trade-off in survey-based research in low- and middle-income country contexts.

Analytical Framework

Quantitative methods were employed for data analysis. For descriptive statistics, mean scores and percentages were calculated for each Likert-scale item to summarize central tendencies and response distributions across the four research questions. Specifically, mean scores above 3.0 indicated positive perceptions (agree/strongly agree), while scores below 3.0 indicated negative perceptions

(disagree/strongly disagree), with the neutral midpoint (3.0) representing ambivalence or lack of knowledge finding of substantive interest given the literature's emphasis on low public awareness (Hussain and Qureshi, 2021).

Reliability Assessment

To assess the internal consistency and reliability of the scale items across all six thematic sections, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was computed. This test, first introduced by Cronbach (1951), measures the degree to which items within a scale reflect the same underlying construct without assessing dimensionality per se. Mathematically, Cronbach's alpha (α) is expressed as:

$$\alpha = \frac{k}{k-1} \left(1 - \frac{\sum \sigma_i^2}{\sigma_t^2} \right)$$

where k is the number of items, σ_i^2 is the variance of the i -th item, and σ_t^2 is the variance of the total summed scores across items. Cronbach's alpha ranges from 0 to 1, with values equal to or above 0.70 conventionally considered acceptable for social science research, indicating good internal consistency. The result of Cronbach's alpha for the current study was 0.916, demonstrating a high level of internal consistency among the questionnaire items and confirming the reliability of the instrument for subsequent analysis.

4. Results and Discussion

Results

Descriptive Overview of Sample

The questionnaire was circulated to 180 respondents across multiple districts. All 180 participants completed and returned the questionnaire, yielding a 100% response rate. The sample comprised adult citizens from diverse demographic backgrounds, including variations in age, education, occupation, and district of residence. The following sections present findings organized by the four thematic dimensions corresponding to the research questions, followed by an integrated discussion relating these findings to the existing literature.

Dimension 1: Awareness and Knowledge (Research Question 1)

The first research question asked: *What is the level of public awareness regarding local government structures and functions?* Figure 1 presents a horizontal bar chart showing mean scores (1-5) for four awareness items. From highest to lowest: awareness of existence (3.81), understanding of basic structure (3.71), knowledge of functioning (3.53), and

perceived effectiveness of media/education (3.40). Error bars represent standard deviations.

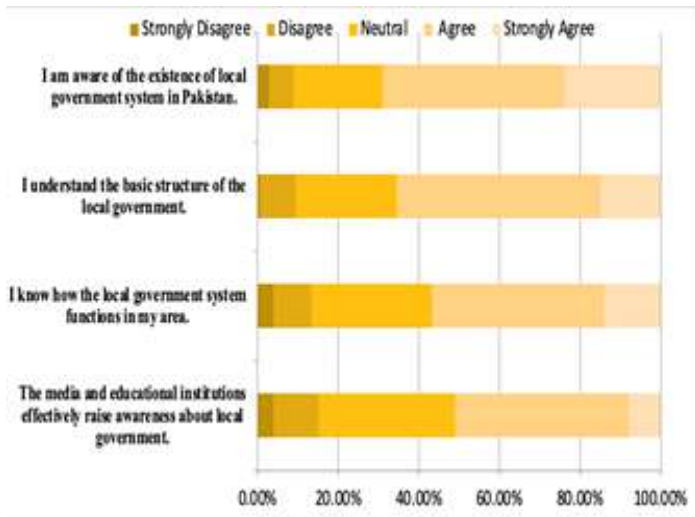


Figure 1: Awareness and Knowledge of Local Government

The mean score for awareness of local government existence (3.81/5.00) indicates a positive level of basic awareness among respondents. However, declining mean scores across items measuring structural understanding (3.71), functional knowledge (3.53), and institutional awareness-raising (3.40) suggest that while citizens know *that* local government exists, their deeper knowledge of *how* it operates remains limited. This finding aligned inadequate implementation and poor governance mechanisms have resulted in limited public understanding of local institutions. The relatively lower score for media and educational institutions (3.40) corroborates the literature's emphasis on weak civic education and communication gaps. From the perspective of international decentralization theory, citizen awareness is a precondition for accountability; where awareness is shallow, mechanisms of citizen oversight remain ineffective.

Dimension 2: Structure and Functioning of Local Governments

The structure and functioning dimensions assessed citizens' perceptions of institutional clarity, electoral regularity, official accessibility, and intergovernmental coordination. Figure 2 displays a group bar chart with five items. The highest mean score is for regular elections (3.42), followed by provincial-local coordination (3.39). The lowest scores are for role clarity (3.15) and official accessibility (3.08). A horizontal reference line at 3.0 (neutral) highlights that all scores are marginally above neutral but below 3.5, indicating lukewarm perceptions.

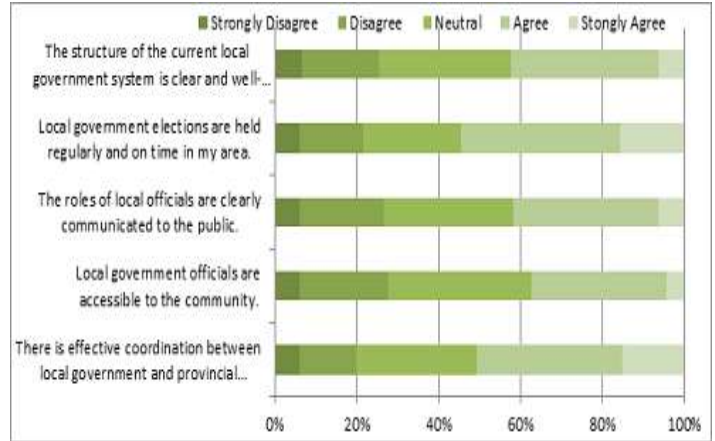


Figure 2: Structure and Functioning of Local Government

Several noteworthy patterns emerge. First, the mean score for "structure is clear and well-defined" (3.16) and "roles of officials clearly communicated" (3.15) suggest that citizens perceive the institutional architecture as ambiguous. This finding directly echoes Hussain and Qureshi (2021), who identified weak institutional frameworks as a primary hindrance to local government performance. Second, the score for official accessibility (3.08, the lowest in this dimension) indicates that citizens struggle to reach their local representatives, perhaps due to bureaucratic gatekeeping or limited outreach, consistent with Malik and Iqbal's (2018) observation that provincial overreach restricts local responsiveness. Third, the relatively higher scores for regular elections (3.42) and provincial-local coordination (3.39) suggest that procedural aspects (e.g., electoral schedules) function more consistently than substantive ones (e.g., role clarity, accessibility). However, the irregular implementation of decentralization has historically undermined these procedural gains. The variability in electoral responses may also reflect regional disparities in implementation across Punjab, Sindh, Balochistan, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, as discussed in the introduction.

Dimension 3: Service Delivery and Public Participation (Research Questions 2 and 3)

Research question 2 asked: *How do citizens perceive the effectiveness of service delivery?* Research question 3 asked: *What factors influence civic participation in local governance?* Figure 3 presents a diverging stacked bar chart. For water supply, approximately 30% of respondents fall in the satisfied (positive) region, over 40% in the dissatisfied (negative) region, and 30% neutral. For rural roads and development projects, dissatisfaction exceeds 40% in each case. Participation items show over 50% of respondents in the neutral/disagree range for active participation and town hall attendance, indicating low civic engagement.

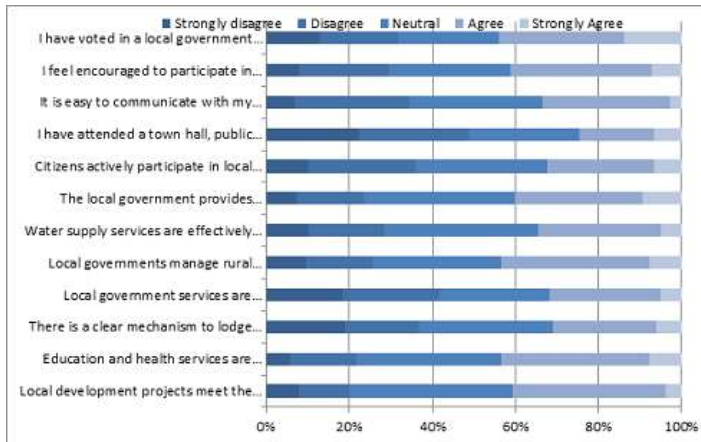


Figure 3: Service delivery and public participation

The findings reveal a striking disconnect between the normative promise of local government and citizens lived experiences. Satisfaction with basic water supply, health, education, rural roads, and development projects ranges from low to moderate, with dissatisfaction exceeding satisfaction for most indicators. Specifically, only around 30% of respondents expressed satisfaction with water supply services, while more than 40% showed dissatisfaction with rural road infrastructure and development projects. These statistics highlight significant gaps in service delivery and infrastructure management at the local level.

This pattern is consistent with the observation in the literature that decentralization in Pakistan often remains "decentralization without empowerment" (Malik and Iqbal, 2018), where authority is devolved in theory but not in practice. The low satisfaction with health and educational services is particularly concerning given that these are core local government responsibilities. Decentralization improves service delivery only when accompanied by fiscal autonomy and accountability mechanisms, conditions evidently unmet in the studied areas.

Turning to participation, while voter turnout in local elections was moderate-to-high, active participation in governance processes (e.g., attending meetings, engaging with officials) was notably low. Citizens may feel insufficiently empowered or motivated. Identification of elite capture and poor governance mechanisms as barriers to citizen engagement. The neutral-to-disagree responses regarding town hall meetings suggest a lack of well-publicized platforms, reducing public involvement in decision-making.

Dimension 4: Responsiveness, Accountability, and Trust (Research Question 4)

Research question 4 asked: *To what extent do citizens trust local government institutions?* Figure 4 presents a set of Likert-scale distribution bars. For "political influence affects local government," approximately 60% of respondents fall into the agree/strongly agree region. For "anti-corruption mechanisms are effective" and "merit-based selection," approximately 50-55% fall in the disagree/strongly disagree region. For transparency and formal evaluation items, 35-40% are neutral, indicating uncertainty or lack of awareness. Trust and accountability items show bimodal distributions: roughly 40% agree, 30% disagree, and 30% neutral, reflecting mixed confidence.

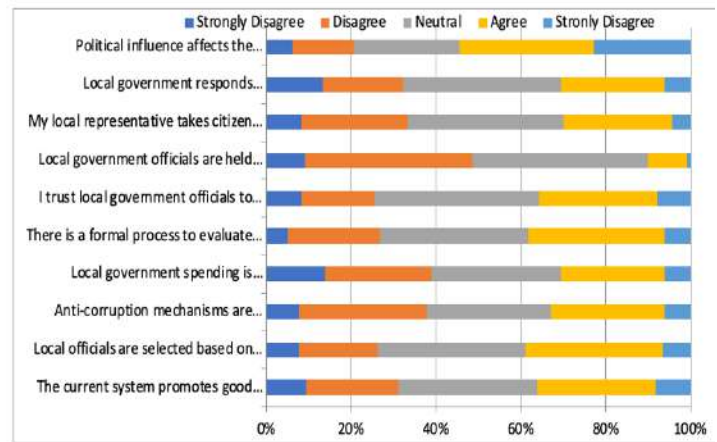


Figure 4: Responsiveness, Accountability, and Trust

The findings reveal a complex and partly contradictory picture. On one hand, a significant proportion of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that political influence affects local government, an acknowledgment that aligns with the literature's emphasis on political interference as a barrier to decentralization. Simultaneously, respondents agreed that local government responds promptly to issues, suggesting that responsiveness, when it occurs, is recognized.

However, this apparent responsiveness is undermined by deep skepticism about procedural fairness. Statements such as "anti-corruption mechanisms are effective" and "local officials are selected based on merit" received high disagreement, indicating a lack of trust in the fairness and transparency of the system. Who identified elite capture and poor governance as key impediments to institutional legitimacy. The large proportion of neutral responses to statements like "local government spending is transparent" and "there is a formal process to evaluate performance" is equally telling. Neutrality may reflect either genuine ambivalence or, more troublingly, a lack of awareness,

suggesting that even when mechanisms exist, they are not effectively communicated to citizens.

Moderate agreement was observed for "I trust local government officials" and "local government officials are held accountable." However, the presence of notable disagreement alongside agreement indicates a mixed and polarized level of confidence. Trust in local institutions is cumulative, emerging from consistent, transparent, and accountable performance, conditions that remain unevenly realized in Pakistan.

Moderate agreement was observed for "I trust local government officials" and "local government officials are held accountable." However, the presence of notable disagreement shows a mixed level of confidence in local officials.

The findings indicate that only around 30% of respondents expressed satisfaction with water supply services, while more than 40% showed dissatisfaction with rural road infrastructure and development projects. These statistics highlight significant gaps in service delivery and infrastructure management at the local level.

Integrated Discussion and Theoretical Implications

Taken together, the findings reveal a coherent pattern: Pakistani citizens possess basic awareness of local government's existence but lack deeper structural and functional knowledge; they perceive institutional clarity and official accessibility as weak; they report low satisfaction with core service delivery; they participate electorally but not in ongoing governance processes; and they harbor mixed trust, recognizing some responsiveness while doubting fairness, transparency, and meritocracy.

These findings confirm that decentralization's implementation has been irregular, weakening service delivery and grassroots democracy. Weak institutional frameworks, elite capture, and poor governance mechanisms emerge as central barriers not the concept of decentralization itself. Provincial-local coordination appears compromised, limiting local autonomy. Decentralization without fiscal autonomy and accountability fails; the present study provides empirical evidence of precisely such failure from a citizen perspective.

Theoretically, the results suggest that Pakistan's local governance predicament is not one of institutional absence but of *institutional opacity and unaccountability*. Structures exist on paper, elections occur (irregularly), and some responsiveness is evident. However, citizens cannot clearly describe how these structures work, cannot reliably access

officials, perceive political interference as pervasive, doubt merit-based selection, and see anti-corruption mechanisms as ineffective. This constellation of findings points to what might be termed "decentralization without transparency", a variant of the "decentralization without empowerment" framework (Malik and Iqbal, 2018), but one specifically characterized by information asymmetries and procedural illegibility.

5. Conclusion and Policy Implications

In This study examined public perceptions of local government in Pakistan across four dimensions: awareness, service delivery, civic participation, and institutional trust. The findings reveal that while citizens possess basic awareness of local government's existence (mean = 3.81/5.00), deeper structural and functional knowledge remains limited. Service delivery satisfaction is consistently low, with over 40% dissatisfaction regarding rural roads and development projects. Civic participation is confined to electoral turnout, with minimal engagement in ongoing governance processes. Trust is mixed: citizens acknowledge some responsiveness but widely perceive political interference (approximately 60% agreement), weak anti-corruption mechanisms, and non-meritocratic selection (50-55% disagreement).

Practically, these findings necessitate six policy interventions: (1) mandated Citizen's Charters specifying official roles, budgets, and service standards; (2) mobile-based citizen feedback systems for real-time service failure reporting; (3) independent Local Government Civil Service Boards for competitive, merit-based recruitment; (4) Independent Local Government Commissions to curb political interference and review provincial encroachments; (5) participatory budgeting pilots to stimulate active civic engagement beyond electoral turnout; and (6) integration of local government literacy into school curricula and public media campaigns. Implemented sequentially, prioritizing transparency and feedback mechanisms followed by institutional reforms, these measures can shift Pakistan's local governance from opacity toward legible, accountable, and citizen-responsive administration. Future research should extend this survey-based approach to rural populations and evaluate reform impacts through longitudinal designs.

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