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Investigating socioeconomic development in the absence of local government in Gilgit Baltistan, Pakistan

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Abstract:

This paper examines the extent to which local governance serves as a foundation for socio-economic development at the grassroots level. Local government is pivotal in fostering citizen participation in decision-making processes, promoting community development, enhancing inclusivity, and implementing welfare initiatives. The Gilgit-Baltistan Governance Order 2018 marked a significant legal and political milestone, laying the groundwork for decentralized governance. This study explores the socio-economic development of Gilgit-Baltistan in the absence of a functioning local government system. Data was collected through interviews with key stakeholders, including bureaucrats, Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs), and local NGOs. The findings reveal that bureaucratic inertia and a lack of political will among leadership have hindered the establishment of a "democratic nursery" in the region. Participants strongly recommend reinstating local governments and delegating powers to these bodies to enhance socio-economic development, enforcing zoning regulations to prevent unregulated development, and preserving green spaces to maintain ecological balance through checks and balances.

Keywords: Local government, Socio-economic development, Decentralization, Citizen participation, Social welfare, Governance, Community development, Inclusivity.

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1. Introduction

Local government is an imperative tier of governance at the grassroots level to ensure the participation of citizens engaging in the decision-making process. It plays a pivotal role in socio-economic development worldwide. It emphasizes the decentralization of power to achieve socioeconomic development and ensure democracy at the grassroots level (Malik, 2016; Rehman et al., 2020). It delivers service to end users and fosters public trust in governments (Malik & Rana, 2019). Lord Ripen illustrated local government as a nursery of democracy (Jabeen, 2024). The local governance landscape in South Asia is an amalgamation of success and challenges. The Panchayati Raj in India resembles rural empowerment by devolving power to the grassroots level. In the states of Gujrat and Karnataka, the Panchayati Raj has significantly contributed to public service delivery and infrastructure development despite challenges like corruption and elite dominance (Bhattacharya, 2024). According to the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992), there are three tiers of Panchayati Raj. Gram Panchayat is at the village level, Panchayat Samiti acts as a bridge between the village and district, and Zila Parishad is at the district level. The introduction of the Women's Quota in the union councils of Bangladesh through the Local Government Municipalities Act (2009) was a significant move that resulted in better educational and healthcare facilities in rural areas. The prioritization of health initiatives for women leaders has increased the immunization rate up to 20% in the earlier underserved regions (Bangladesh, 2009). Similarly, the Devolution Plan 2001 in Pakistan was a significant move aimed at devolving administrative and financial powers to local levels, leading to rural development. However, with time, the government tried to accumulate power through inadequate allocation of budgets to the local governments; only 17% of Pakistan's development budget is allocated to local governments, which is comparatively less than the developed countries' 30-40% (Alam, 2013; Khan et al., 2022).

This lack of interest and financial support from the central government has mainly affected marginalized areas like Gilgit Baltistan. Article 140 of the constitution of Pakistan depicts the establishment of local government in every province and devolves the power at the local level to ensure effective local governance. Article 32 emphasizes promoting the institution of local government and ensures that the unique representation of unmarginalized women and minorities is ensured. Gilgit Baltistan was ruled under the Frontier Crime Regulation (FCR) till 1970 and then by the Northern Areas Council before the Gilgit Baltistan Self-Governance Order 2009 (Ali, 2022; Rehman et al., 2023). This has kept the region away from the mainstream political landscape of Pakistan. The Gilgit Baltistan Legislative Assembly was introduced after the GB Self-Governance Order 2009, which was a meaningful shift in development. Order 2009 gave the region hope for self-governance and autonomy by establishing a chief minister and legislative assembly (Qasim et al., 2024). The role of the Gilgit Baltistan Order (2018) emphasizes the establishment of local governments in the region. In 2014, the government introduced a bill in the Gilgit Baltistan Legislative Assembly named "The Gilgit Baltistan Local Government Bill 2014", which was made an Act after passing by the House. It was to provide a robust and practical structure for local governments in the region and to be implemented accordingly. The various provisions of the act stated:

> "The Government shall, by notification in the official Gazette, divide each District into urban and rural areas. Government may, by notification in the official Gazette, alter the limits of a local area and declare that any area shall cease to be a Union Council, Tehsil Council, District Council, Town Committee, Municipal

> Committee, Municipal Corporation, or a City Metropolitan Corporation." (Article 5, The Gilgit Baltistan Local Government Bill 2014).
>
> "Subject to other provisions of this Act, the Local Councils constituted under this Act shall be: (a) A City Metropolitan Corporation for Gilgit; (b) A City Metropolitan Corporation for Skardu; (c) A Town Committee, a Municipal Committee or a Municipal Corporation for urban areas other than the cities of Gilgit and Skardu; (d) A Union Council, a Tehsil Council, and a District Council for rural areas." (Article 6, The Gilgit Baltistan Local Government Bill 2014).

This bill further addresses the structure of local councils as:

> "The election to the Local Councils shall be held on a party-basis as regulated by the Chief Election Commissioner. Save as otherwise provided, election of members of all Local Councils shall be held through secret ballot based on adult franchise in such a manner as may be prescribed." (Article 18; The Gilgit Baltistan Local Government Bill,2014).

Local governments play a vital role in ensuring socio-economic development in Gilgit Baltistan. They can introduce cutting-edge initiatives to enhance the socio-economic landscape of Gilgit Baltistan. (Avdic, 2015). Local governments can play a crucial role in making those policies that can guarantee the long-term economic stability of the region to elevate the healthcare & education facilities and facilitate the public service delivery process (Dinar, 2020).

The socio-economic development in Gilgit Baltistan has been facing challenges due to the absence of a local government structure for a long time. Gilgit Baltistan Order 2009 was a step forward towards self-administration and governance, but it has failed to provide the implementation of an effective local government in the region. Similarly, the Gilgit Baltistan Order 2018, despite enhancing the local governance structure through the Gilgit Baltistan Legislative Assembly and introduction of a bill in the same house in 2014 named "The Gilgit Baltistan Local Government Bill 2014", again failed to provide any roadmap towards the implementation of an effective local government in the region. Without effective local government, the town planning system in Gilgit Baltistan has suffered significantly, especially in rural areas, because of the lack of adequate infrastructure and inefficient building regulatory measures. The mechanism of public participation in decision-making has also diminished over the period, particularly in the rural areas where there is no platform for the people at the grassroots level to participate in the decision-making process. It has been communicated to the higher authorities. All these problems have emerged because of the absence of local governments.

2. Literature review

In the world, the success of socio-economic development is widely dependent on local governments. Local governments have played a crucial role in socio-economic development and ensuring service delivery locally (Walker & Andrews, 2015). The division of powers among different governance structures has ensured effective public service delivery, accountability, and transparency (Holden, 2023). Morgan (2009) enthralled that effective local governments lead to better public participation, town planning, resource allocation, and disaster

management in Nordic countries. Sub-Saharan regions have brought significant intervention in public involvement and town planning sectors through local governments. According to Lockwood (2024), countries like Latin America and Brazil have also incorporated effective local governments, which played a pivotal role in reducing poverty. The role of local governments in fostering socio-economic development in a region can be seen through these examples (Scott, 2023).

Political interference and limited financial opportunities and autonomy challenge the effectiveness of local governments (Holden, 2018). Local governments in developing countries have always been crucial for grassroots-level participation. The Panchayati Nizam in India has been legitimized and revamped to citizen participation at the local level (Bansal, 2008). However, implementation faced significant challenges because of bureaucratic hurdles and political resistance, as Gilgit Baltistan has always faced the same challenges (Hussain, 2024). Socioeconomic development in African countries has been ensured through local governments (Koma, 2010). The role of local governments is pivotal for the development of these countries. Delivery of necessities like water, electricity, and sanitation in South Africa is the responsibility of local governments (Winter, 2003). This decentralization has also impacted the improved education and healthcare system through the effective allocation of resources in South Africa (Saqib et al., 2019). The local governments have also played a crucial role in socio-economic development in Brazil, ensuring poverty reduction and adequate resource allocation (Ansell et al., 2022). The rural areas of Colombia have also experienced improvement in participation in decision-making and infrastructure development due to an effective local government system. In Italy, the Municipal Administration Quality Index depicts the quality of local government. The indicators are bureaucratic capacity, local politicians' quality, and municipal administrations' fiscal performance (Cerqua et al., 2025). Unfortunately, in Gilgit Baltistan, political executives have not devolved power at the local level.

Pakistan has a history of decentralizing administrative and political authority to lower tiers of governance. An attempt to decentralize was made in 2001 in the wake of the Devolution Plan under General Pervez Musharraf's reign (Arif et al., 2010). This Devolution Plan enhanced service delivery areas such as infrastructure development and town planning in rural areas. The frequent dissolution of local bodies has also led to the erosion of this trust in the system and to compound governance problems in decentralized regions (Singh, 2013).

Disaster and risk preparedness, town planning, and participation in Pakistan's decision-making process were evident in local governments' contributions to the country's socioeconomic development (Gerber & Robinson, 2009). The context of Gilgit-Baltistan offers a parallel series of experiences and challenges for local governance, particularly the role of local government in economic development. Unlike Gilgit, Baltistan does not have a fully devolved local governance system. The absence of local governance caused imbalances in the socioeconomic development of the region, particularly in areas such as town planning, disaster and risk preparedness, housing, and transportation (Deyle & Smith, 1998). The socio-economic imbalance creates the most significant challenge and makes it harder for local government to satisfy the citizens' needs (Andersson, 2025). The government of Gilgit Baltistan, through the Gilgit Baltistan Local Government Act 2011, gave a robust framework for local governance in the region (Ali, 2022). This Act was later amended by the Legislative Assembly of Gilgit Baltistan and named “The Gilgit Baltistan Local Government Act 2014” This act provides a robust framework for local governments.

> "Subject to other provisions of this Act, the Local Councils constituted under this Act shall be: (a) A City Metropolitan Corporation for Gilgit; (b) A City Metropolitan Corporation for Skardu; (c) A Town Committee, a Municipal Committee or a Municipal Corporation for urban areas other than the cities of Gilgit and Skardu; (d) A Union Council, a Tehsil Council, and a District Council for rural areas." (Article 6 of The Gilgit Baltistan Local Government Act 2014).

The above-mentioned act provided the initial structure of local government in Gilgit Baltistan. Similarly, another Article of the act states:

> "The Government shall, by notification in the official Gazette, divide each District into urban area and rural area. The government may, by notification in the official Gazette, alter the limits of a local area and declare that any area shall cease to be a Union Council, Tehsil Council, District Council, Town Committee, Municipal Committee, Municipal Corporation, or a City Metropolitan Corporation." (Article 5, The Gilgit Baltistan Local Government Act 2014).

In another provision of the act, the Gilgit-Baltistan Government has clarified a person as a voter stating:

> "A person shall be entitled to be enrolled as a voter if he: (a) is a citizen of Gilgit-Baltistan; (b) is not less than eighteen years of age; and (c) fulfils such other conditions as the Chief Election Commissioner may specify." (Article 21, The Gilgit Baltistan Local Government Act 2014).

The Gilgit Baltistan region has also been experiencing a lack of an efficient local governance system. Due to weak institutional development for local governance, the region's public participation and disaster and risk preparedness remain underdeveloped (Lapov, 2018). For example, Gilgit Baltistan is the most vulnerable to natural disasters in Pakistan with more than 5000 glaciers Saeed (2017) which are melting due to the climate change effect, and it is common to find no town planning mechanism in the rural region of Gilgit Baltistan.

Previous research has addressed the local governance landscape in Gilgit Baltistan, focusing on the legal and constitutional challenges in the region. However, these studies fail to address the socio-economic development in Gilgit Baltistan, especially indicators like disaster and risk management, community participation in decision-making, and town/village planning. To fill this gap, this study will briefly overview socio-economic development in the absence of local government and key recommendations to mitigate the challenges in implementing an effective local government in the region.

3. Theoretical framework

The Principal-Agent Theory, developed by economists Michael C. Jensen and William H. Meckling, emphasizes two key variables: the principal, who is responsible for delegating authority, tasks, and responsibilities, and the agent, who performs tasks on behalf of the principal. The Gilgit-Baltistan Governance Order 2018 legitimately underscores the principle of delegating political and administrative authority to local governments to foster socio-economic development and promote local initiatives. In this study, the Gilgit Baltistan acts as principal and the districts/union council acts as agent. The Gilgit Baltistan Assembly delegates

power to the local level through local governments in the districts and union councils. This delegation of power is defined in the Local Government Act 2014 and the Gilgit Baltistan Governance Order 2018.

4. Research methodology

Qualitative methodology is used for this research paper. The data was collected from different vital informants, including bureaucrats, Members of the legislative assembly (MLA), and Local NGOs. The authors collected data through an in-depth interview of 15 critical informants comprised of bureaucrats (n=09), Members of the legislative assembly (MLA), (n=06), and local NGOs (n=05). The sample size of this research paper is n=20. Purposive sampling techniques are used for this research paper. The interview was conducted through a semi-structured questionnaire. The in-depth interview was conducted in Urdu. Further, it was transcribed through Otter. Clarke & Braun (2017) used six thematic analysis phases for this research study. After the translation and transcription, the data was read and reviewed in breadth and depth for familiarization. In the next phase, the transcript coding was concluded through Microsoft Excel, and themes were developed as an outcome of the coding. After naming and interpreting the theme, the final analysis is done, which is shown in the finding section below.

4. Findings and data analysis

4.1. Disaster Management and Local Government

According to Alam (2013) local governments are integral to disaster preparedness, response, and recovery. In their absence, responses will be delayed, coordination will not be adequate, and resource allocation will be insufficient; therefore, crises will become more severe. Sharing his view on the role of disaster management in local government, according to the bureaucrats of Gilgit Baltistan Disaster Management Authority,

> The lack of local governance magnifies the problems during these calamities. The primary threat we face is the participation of local stakeholders during mitigation and adaptation strategies. The engagement of local bodies is necessary to overcome the peril. Unfortunately, bureaucrats do not want to engage local stakeholders on board because it leads to oversight threads, loss of influence, and enhancement of the culture of accountability (Personal communication, December 2024).

Sharing his view on the role of disaster management in local government, the founder of a non-governmental organization in Gilgit Baltistan, He mentioned:

> Prioritising the disaster in Gilgit Baltistan, local civil society organizations (CSOs) play an immensely vital role that cannot be negated. Conversely, government machinery is reluctant to engage us in hazardous challenges and take feedback /input for effective public policy. Government institutions receive funding from international organizations to tackle natural calamities, wildly erratic weather patterns, Glacial Lake Outburst Floods (GLOF), etc. They need to enhance the financial and human capital of an organization to ensure the effective delivery of service (Personal communication, October 2024).

A politician from the Ghizer district his their views in this regard. He stated:

> "Gilgit Baltistan Order (2018) emphasized the establishment of local government. Unfortunately, members of the legislative assembly are unwilling to delegate their political and fiscal responsibility to the foundational level. Different tiers of local government, including union councils, tehsil councils, and district councils, could play a substantial role in carrying out awareness sessions pertinent to disaster management and arranging training sessions at the local level to enhance the capacity of local citizens."

4.2. Town/village planning and local government

Urban planning literature emphasizes that local governments are essential for sustainable development and environmental conservation. Poor planning, particularly in environmentally sensitive regions, leads to ecological degradation and heightened risks from natural disasters. Uncontrolled development and its associated environmental degradation were found to be the most pressing issues. Bureaucrats of the LGRD department from Gilgit Baltistan illustrated their views and experience about village planning as follows:

> Extensive construction harms local ecosystems." "Haphazard development destroys natural habitats and increases ecological thread. Floods and debris accumulation damage roads and landscapes, leaving scars in the environment." The lack of zoning laws and supervision also resulted in deforestation and urban sprawl making the ecological balance unstable. The lack of planning undermines sustainable environmental development and strains on local resources (Personal communication, December 2024).

4.3. Impact of poor town/village planning on ecology

Ali (2022) emphasizes that planning leads to ecological degradation. Local governance is important for ensuring zoning laws, conserving habitats, and protecting environmental standards. During the conversation with bureaucrats of the Chief Minister (CM) secretariat, Gilgit Baltistan, on the impact of town planning on ecology. He mentioned:

> Unregulated development, lacking adherence to strict regulations, results in urban sprawl, deforestation, and biodiversity loss, disrupting the ecological balance of ecosystems. Poor waste management exacerbates the problem, as floods contaminate water sources, impacting human and aquatic life. Additionally, increased flooding and soil erosion, driven by inefficient infrastructure and planning, have made local habitats more vulnerable to these environmental challenges (Personal communication, December 2024).

Local Civil Society Organization members emphasized the importance of town planning in Gilgit Baltistan. According to him:

> Without appropriate town planning, the eco-balance in Gilgit-Baltistan remains large. Local government plays a substantial role in building approvals and integrating sustainability in infrastructure planning and development (Personal communication, September 2024).

4.4. Social welfare initiatives and local government

Ansell et al., (2022) explained that local authorities are important to sustainable development and environmental protection. Ecological degradation and increased dangers from natural calamities occur due to poor planning, especially in ecologically sensitive regions. The most urgent problems identified were uncontrolled development and the accompanying environmental degradation. Stakeholders of local government shared his view regarding social welfare initiatives. He stated that unrestricted construction and improper disposal of wastes damage local biota, destroy natural habitats, and aggravate pollution levels.

4.5. Grass root level participation

Participatory governance fosters citizen engagement, accountability, and trust in institutions (Bhattacharya, 2024). Its absence often results in top-down decision-making, marginalization, and community disempowerment. Bureaucrats from the Gilgit Baltistan assembly shared their views in this regard. He said:

> The erosion of participatory governance is a significant consequence of the lack of local government. Without local representation, communities cannot influence policies that affect their lives. Depoliticization and supply-oriented policies ignore contextual realities and local needs (Personal communication, September 2024).

An additional secretary from the Finance department of Gilgit-Baltistan shared his view about grass-level participation, He stated that:

> Local government acts as a political nursery, nurturing leaders and improving local governance through grassroots participation. Erosion leaves citizens with feelings of disconnection and disenfranchisement, weakening civic engagement and local accountability. We need to ensure citizens' participation at the local level for better policy outcomes and strengthen democratic values" (Personal communication, October 2024).

4.6. Community voice and local government

Effective communication channels between local communities and higher authorities are critical to responsive and inclusive governance (Bhattacharya, 2024). Without such communication channels, trust breaks down, and policymaking becomes ineffective. A key informant from a non-governmental organization (NGO) stated:

> Without local leadership, People feel powerless to raise their voices and address their concerns. Leadership who himself can recognize the problem before it becomes an emergency and emphasize the role of local governments as bridges between citizen and government at the grassroots level to higher authorities." While this gap has been partially filled through grassroots organizations and NGOs, respondents agreed that these are only partial substitutes for institutionalized governance (Personal communication, October 2024)

4.7. Challenges to implement local government in Gilgit-Baltistan

Gilgit-Baltistan's historical, legal, and political complexities make it challenging to implement local governance. Pakistan's unclear constitutional status regarding Gilgit-Baltistan complicates governance structures and limits the autonomy of the local authority, further undermining development work.

A member of the legislative assembly pointed out numerous challenges for implementing local government in Gilgit Baltistan. He stated:

> The absence of political will and opposition from bureaucracy is the biggest obstacle because the devolution of power deters the control of power at the center. Bureaucracy often undermines local governance initiatives as they are not ready to lose control over resources and decision-making power respectively (Personal communication, December 2024).

Key informants from the bureaucracy of Gilgit Baltistan stated that:

> The deficient finance and inadequate infrastructure make establishing an efficient local governance system challenging. The lack of civic engagement and political awareness has again reduced public pressure on its implementation. Geographical and cultural barriers contribute to the challenges. "The region's remote terrain and reliance on traditional leadership complicate the establishment of modern governance mechanisms" The multi-faceted nature of these problems highlights the need for across-the-board reforms to make such local governance possible in Gilgit-Baltistan (Personal communication, November 2024).

5. Conclusion

The absence of local government in Gilgit-Baltistan has resulted in significant socio-economic challenges, especially in disaster preparedness, town planning, and public participation in decision-making processes. Legislative efforts such as Gilgit-Baltistan Orders 2009 and 2018 and Local Government Acts 2011 and 2014 have failed to make headway because of bureaucratic resistance, lack of political will, and inadequate resource allocation. This is to say that, without adequate fiscal and administrative decentralization, overcoming the said challenges would be very impossible, especially in regions that experience significant regional differences in regional needs. Thus, Local governments have a crucial role in the success of sustainable development, since region-specific needs will require more decentralized governance.

Following are the recommendations of the study:

- Improving disaster management systems demands a multi-dimensional approach. Emergency preparedness needs to be built through the establishment of effective local government. At the same time, infrastructure needs to be resilient, such as flood barriers and early warning systems. All this can only be possible if robust local governance is incorporated alongside the participation of locals.

- Promoting sustainable town and village planning should involve enforcing zoning regulations to prevent unregulated development and preserving green spaces to maintain ecological balance through checks and balances. Additionally, centralized waste management systems should be developed to combat environmental pollution and enhance sustainability.

- Social welfare initiatives can only be strengthened if an inclusive local government system has been established to identify and accurately address community needs. Public-private partnerships would be crucial, as these would collaborate with NGOs and private entities to expand healthcare, education, and other essential services.

- Equitable resource distribution should be ensured by implementing transparent mechanisms, particularly to less privileged communities through local governments. In participatory governance, locals must be encouraged to engage in decision-making. Platforms in the community must be provided to allow residents' voices to be heard and to take active roles in decision-making. There is a need to increase awareness through civic education campaigns regarding the significance of local governance.

- Ensuring public engagement becomes part of the policymaking process. Improving communication between local communities and higher authorities involves the development of formal advocacy channels that connect local communities and provincial authorities. Local governments are empowered to act as mediators, which can strengthen community voices. The establishment of effective local governments would enhance responsiveness

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