

CPEC through the Lens of Locals: A Study of Gwadar

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Abstract

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was launched in 2015 as one of the flagship projects of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and it is expected to greatly boost economic development and connectivity in the region. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has been billed as one of the flagship projects of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and is expected to have a significant impact on the economic development and connectivity of the region, particularly in the port of Gwadar. The project was anticipated to bring benefits in terms of infrastructure, jobs creation and socioeconomic development of the local communities. But many of those living in Gwadar and other areas of Balochistan are claiming that these expectations have not been met. Rather it is concerns regarding the lack of benefits from the project, lack of participation in development planning and the inequitable distribution of project benefits that have led to a growing discontent of the public. The grievances have played a part in the development of the Haq Do Tehreek movement, which is an articulation of larger demands for social justice and inclusive development. The same sentiments have been expressed in previous development projects in Balochistan such as Sui Gas, Saindak Copper-Gold and Reko Diq projects, where the local people believe that they are benefiting little from the use of their own resources. In this context, the present research study focuses on the local perceptions of

CPEC using Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) approach in Gwadar. The study is based on primary data gathered from members of the community, which helps to highlight the challenges and expectations of the project. The study suggests the need to enhance the involvement of the community, take care of local grievances, and make sure to spread the development benefits fairly. These measures can boost public confidence, minimise resistance, and aid both Gwadar and Pakistan in achieving sustainability and success for CPEC in the long term.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative, China Pakistan Economic Corridor, Development, Local Community, Participatory Rural Appraisal, Participatory Development

1. Introduction

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is the flagship bilateral project under the China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aims to enhance the economic cooperation among Asia, Europe and Africa. The BRI aims to promote regional integration, international trade, and economic development via a vast network of highways, railways, ports and maritime connections. Called for by Chinese President Xi Jinping, the project has been inspired by the historic Silk Road, which for centuries linked the Chinese continent with major trade hubs throughout Eurasia. The BRI is a core component of China's long-term national strategy, encompassing more than merely infrastructure-building, but also strategic connectivity and China's growing economic footprint in the world. The initiative is also consistent with China's overall development goals: to reach about 70% self-reliance in advanced technology industries by 2025, and to consolidate its global leadership by 2049. Besides pledging to promote economic development, the strategy is to safeguard China's national security interests and ensure the sustainable economic and industrial development by means of stable supply of energy resources (Gadde, 2024).

Balochistan is a region of strategic importance in the implementation of CPEC in the country, where Gwadar is the main gateway. The province serves as the focal point for key infrastructure developments, transport corridors, and economic development related to the corridor due to its geographic position. Given this strategic significance, the development and engagement of

Balochistan is crucial to the success of the economic goals and long-term benefits of CPEC (Muzaffar et al., 2021).

Balochistan is the biggest province in terms of land area in Pakistan, and is well endowed with explored and unexploited natural resources, yet it remains one of the least developed regions of Pakistan with regards to the economy. The province has tapped into very few of its socio-economic benefits from the resources, however. Besides, Balochistan has been witnessing a prolonged insurgency which has led to several major military operations in the region and consequently has significantly influenced its political, security and development trajectory (Maliha, 2013).

The problems facing Balochistan have been a festering problem since the independence of Pakistan and many of the longstanding political, economic, and social grievances have continued to impact the province's relationship with the federal government. The strategic significance of Balochistan has grown manifold with the advent of CPEC and the Balochistan's strategic location has become the focal point of the development discourse of Pakistan. With the arrival of CPEC, the strategic importance of Balochistan has escalated significantly, and Balochistan's strategic location is now a development focus point of Pakistan. Though Balochistan is the biggest province in the country with an abundance of natural and mineral resources, it remains lagging behind other provinces in socioeconomic development and public welfare. The idea that they are not getting their due from the province's resources is widely believed among residents. The sense of development deprivation and weak representation in the national decision making process and state agencies created an atmosphere of political and economic marginalisation for Baloch people (Gulyás, 2020).

CPEC is also facing resistance from the members of Baloch nationalist organizations who believe that the project's execution could have a major impact on the demographic equation of Balochistan. These fears suggest that more economic activity and development in the province may attract significant migration from other parts of Pakistan and alter the province's ethnic makeup. Demographic changes have been raised by critics as a threat to the political, cultural, and economic power of the indigenous Baloch people and a catalyst to further existing concerns about representation, identity, and control of local resources (Gulyás, 2020).

2. Geo strategic importance of Gwadar Port

Gwadar is situated at a strategic point on the southwest coast of Pakistan, on the shores of the Arabian Sea and is one of the most valuable maritime assets of Pakistan. The City continued to be ruled by the Omanis from 1797 to 1958 when it was transferred to the Pakistan government. Gwadar is located near important international shipping lanes such as the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab-el-Mandeb, making it an important geopolitical and economic hub. The city is a hub for the fishing industry, which has been established for over a century, and many people in the region rely on this industry as their main source of income. The city is also the center of Pakistan's maritime and regional connectivity initiative, known as the CPEC. The fishing industry is also a major source of employment for local people, and the city is the hub of Pakistan's maritime and regional connectivity initiative, known as the CPEC. Its deep-sea port will further enhance the participation of Pakistan in international trade, open new avenues to access international markets and make Pakistan's economy and strategic relations with Middle East and central Asia and other surrounding regions more vibrant (Jamali, 2014).

Gwadar has thus emerged as the focal point of CPEC and the most important project so far. The city is strategically located and has a deep-sea port, making it a potential regional trade and maritime hub like Dubai and Singapore. Gwadar's strategic location at the intersection of major international maritime lanes makes it a pivotal link between Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, bolstering shipping interconnections. Located at the crossroads of key shipping lanes, Gwadar is likely to enhance trade connectivity between Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. The port is a strategic economic asset for Pakistan, which has the potential to stimulate investments, expand business activities, and contribute to the nation's economic development. Additionally, its implementation will bring new opportunities for fisheries sector development, through the enhancement of infrastructure, market access, export potential, and support local livelihoods and the national economy (Jamali, 2014).

The majority of the population of Gwadar is the local Baloch community who have lived in the region since time immemorial, even before Pakistan's Independence. Most of the residents have fishing as their main source of livelihood and cross-border trade with Iran is also a source of income for the local residents. The establishment of Gwadar Port raised high hopes of the local

population, who was hoping for betterment in the socioeconomic condition and better opportunity for getting job and business opportunity. These expectations have been reinforced by the government's narratives on the future modernization of Gwadar as a modern port city. Since the official opening of CPEC in 2015, many residents were expecting a change for the better in Gwadar as the project would turn the city into a flourishing commercial hub, like Dubai and Singapore, with economic growth, good public services and enhanced quality of life (Gadde, 2024).

The CPEC has been touted as a game-changer project that can fast-track Pakistan's economic growth, especially in Gwadar, Baluchistan. The successive governments have been giving a particular attention to the development of Gwadar Port since its inaugural since 2007, stating that the development of port would enhance the livelihood of the local people by creating jobs and investment opportunities and providing better infrastructure. These hopes increased further when CPEC was launched in 2015 and was widely touted as a force for socioeconomic development of the region. In spite of these assurances, several residents from Gwadar complain about the lack of tangible gains from the construction of the port. Rather, they argue that previous socioeconomic difficulties have worsened and have led to higher levels of public discontent and multiple protests, including the emergence of protest groups claiming for better rights and equitable development.

In this context, the present study focuses on the socio-economic impacts of CPEC on the surrounding population of Baluchistan with a special focus on Gwadar. It aims to evaluate the impact of development of Gwadar Port and the implementation of CPEC on the livelihoods of the local communities, and the main challenges that have been experienced in achieving the benefits promised by the project.

The Gwadar Master Plan envisages that the city will greatly transform which will be achieved by implementing a number of big projects in the city. This includes the setting up of high-tech industrial zones and the generation of skilled and lucrative jobs, and the development of necessary public facilities such as hospitals, colleges, housing developments, and major shopping centers. The plan also includes plans for the development of Pakistan's largest international airport, which is expected to play a crucial role in enhancing the country's overall connectivity and developing the city of Gwadar into a key economic and logistical hub.

In this context, the impact of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) on local people of Gwadar is explored by looking at the socio-economic and political impacts from the local perspective. It discusses with residents the opportunities and challenges they perceive with respect to CPEC, as well as the key concerns that stem from its implementation. The research also explores the grievances voiced by the local communities against the continuous development projects and examines policy options that can be explored to resolve these concerns inclusively and sustainably. Furthermore, the study analyses some of the policies and development projects under CPEC to determine their impact on the livelihoods and welfare of the people of Gwadar. In conclusion, the study aims to find answers to the main question: what is the perception of the people of Gwadar regarding CPEC and what are their expectations, concerns and grievances related to the implementation of the project?(Jamali, 2014)

3. Economic Potential of Gwadar

Gwadar Port is located at a strategic position on the shores of the Arabian Sea which gives Pakistan a direct access to important areas like Middle East, South Asia, Central Asia and larger land mass of Eurasia. Its geographic location adds to its value for regional connectivity, international trade, sea security and fisheries. The port is also located close to the major shipping routes of the world, which also make it an important asset for the economic and strategic interest of Pakistan. There is a great potential in Gwadar for the fisheries sector with an estimated production potential of more than 100,000 tons of fish per annum. The port was developed from 2002 to 2013 by the Port of Singapore Authority (PSA), and then handed over to the China Overseas Ports Holding Company in 2013, marking its growing relevance in regional trade and its geopolitical importance, within the context of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) (Jamali, 2014, p. 85).

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) put more importance on Gwadar's strategic and economic value. The initiative is worth around \$62 billion and includes a variety of infrastructure, energy and connectivity initiatives, some of which are in place, others of which are being implemented. While Gwadar is the hub of CPEC, the development of the area is still at a slow pace and is not making all the residents happy. There have been promises from the government to address economic opportunities, public services, and quality of life, but many

people in the local community feel that these goals have not been met. Rather, they claim that CPEC has exacerbated current economic, political and social problems, leading to increased worries about equitable development and the benefits of the project. (Jamali, 2014)

4. Balochistan's Development Dilemma and State Narrative

The persistent unrest in Balochistan is partly due to the broad sense of the people that the province's rich natural resources have been exploited without any significant socioeconomic development having resulted from that. Gwadar Port and other mega development projects are considered important for Pakistan's economic future but some Baloch feel these have been deprived of their benefits. Concurrently, the provincial tribal organization has been presented as the main hurdle to development, sometimes masking long-standing issues of political marginalization, unequal access to resources and the real aspirations of the local peoples.

The traditional tribal system of Balochistan has been blamed by the elites of the rest of the country for constraining national development, modernization and economic progress for many years now. In this story, the Baloch population, and in particular the Sardars, have been often referred to as impediments to social reforms, educational progress and development in the region. From this angle, the continuation of tribal authority has held the province back from getting integrated into the country's modernization program. The latter has been consistently manifested in the official discourse and policy debates of over several decades. One such instance is the White Paper of 1974 during the government of Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto which claimed that the social and administrative structure of the province was the cause of its underdevelopment, rather than political grievances. The document highlighted that the main issues of Balochistan were the need for infrastructure, education, health and medicine, roads and electricity and not constitutional and political changes.

Remarks:

‘The main issue in Balochistan is not political but socio-economic and administrative. It is social because the feudal and tribal structure of society in Balochistan has inhibited progress and development. It is economic, because Balochistan has been relegated to backwardness for centuries. Its problem is that of an underdeveloped part of a developing country. It is roads and

Electricity, schools, and hospitals, rather than any constitutional change for which people of Balochistan yearn’.

In February 1973, Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto dismissed the democratically elected National Awami Party (NAP) government in Balochistan on charges which were considered as politically biased. The provincial government—under Nawab Khair Bakhsh Marri and Sardar Ataullah Mengal—face constant interference from the federal government, using administrative mechanisms such as the bureaucracy and police. These measures limited the provincial administration to be effective and exacerbated the conflict between Baloch and Islamabad leaders, and eventually reduced the political influence and developmental contribution that Baloch leadership could provide to the province and Pakistan. (Jamali, 2014)

The NAP government has been seen as one of the most reformist governments in the history of Balochistan's politics. It housed the first university of the Province, as well as the very first medical college, both of which were founded during its brief existence of almost 2 years. Its leadership was largely composed of Sardars and tribal elites but at the same time the Government took steps for legislative changes to minimize the impact of the tribal system and to ensure general social and institutional modernization (Ullah, 2023).

However, after the fall of the NAP government, there was a wide reaction against the Bhutto government throughout Balochistan. The subsequent political conflict then led to a resurgence of Baloch separatist violence against Pakistan (Ullah, 2023).

A similar story was repeated in official discourses over 40 years later. In his military rule, Gen. Pervez Musharraf had turned out the prominent Baloch nationalist leaders, including Ataullah Mengal, Khair Bakhsh Marri and Akbar Bugti, against development, claiming their political agenda and influence affected development efforts in Balochistan (Jamali, 2014). Musharraf told the Baloch nationalist leaders during this time that the government would deal with them in a way they would not expect. The conflict eventually turned to a military operation in 2006 which resulted in the death of Nawab Akbar Bugti, leading to further tensions and escalation between the Baloch nationalist movement and the Pakistani state.

The developments further aggravated political instability and unrest in Balochistan which helped in the persisting insurgency in Balochistan. Likewise, in Gwadar, hundreds of protesters were reportedly arrested after the December 2022 protests during the Haq Do Tehreek protests. Meanwhile, the Core Commander of Balochistan Frontier Corps held a meeting with the local residents of Gwadar during the similar period, and he warned of mass arrest and incarceration of protesters if the protesters obstruct the road to the port again (The Balochistan Post, 2023).

This one incident highlights the security measures taken by the state after the local grievances and is an example of how the top officials from Gwadar have dealt with public protests in the city. The protesters insisted that they were only protesting for fundamental socio-economic rights but in a peaceful manner. Under the Constitution of Pakistan, the citizens have the right of peaceful public gathering and protest which makes these events a critical issue to be discussed when examining the relationship between state and local community (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, 1973, art. 16).

The notion that Balochistan has been underdeveloped largely due to her tribal traditions, is a naïve perception of the situation in the province. This is a more challenging explanation in the Makran region, including Gwadar, where the role of traditional tribal leaders has not been as strong. (Sasoli, 2018) On the contrary, the occurrence of Haq Do Tehreek movement indicates the apprehensions of local communities on their limited involvement in decision making and their feeling of deprivation of the benefits of development of the area. (Notezai, 2021)

5. Perspective of Native Population in the context of Haq Do Tahreek (Rights Movement)

The port of Gwadar, the center of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), holds a critical position in the success of the project in the long run. Therefore, the opinions and backing of its local population is of great importance for the overall success of the corridor. The formation of Haq Do Tehreek (Gwadar Rights Movement) was the first time people in Gwadar had made a major public movement since the launch of CPEC, and it sparked renewed local concerns over the implementation of the project. The movement raised doubts on the meaningful

contribution of CPEC to the locals. It majorly called for scrapping of the system of token fishing by trawlers, giving free access to fishermen from other countries, the removal of the token system for cross border trade with Iran and increased job opportunities for Gwadar residents in the development of CPEC projects (Hafeez, 2023).

Despite extensive infrastructural development and investments in the Port of Gwadar in the last few years, the locals feel that these initiatives have provided them with little to no tangible gains. Many in the community feel left out of the opportunities of the continuing development programs. The sense of being excluded from their city, of being outsiders despite their long history of connection to the area, is reflected in many of their experiences (Jamali, 2014).

The residents of Gwadar have continuously urged the government to pay more attention towards their socio-economic requirements so that the development initiatives would help in uplifting their lives. The sustainability of projects like CPEC is greatly dependent on the project's capacity to bring concrete gains to the communities it will impact, many argue. In this context, Maulana Hidayat-ur-Rahman, a prominent leader of Haq Do Tehreek (Gwadar Rights Movement) has consistently stated that the gains of the CPEC and the natural resources of the province should be equitably shared with the residents of the province and that the local population should not be deprived of their rights and interests that they consider to be theirs (Baloch, 2021). After several big protests, the local government and the Gwadar Fisheries Department declared the initiation of continuous maritime patrols to prevent illegal fishing activities. The Fisheries Department has stepped up monitoring and enforcement and has pulled down 12 illegal trawlers in the territorial waters of Gwadar in the last two months, the Director General of Fisheries Department Saifullah Khetran told Dawn in an interview on January 3, 2023 (Wizarat, 2023).

In spite of these official steps, the residents of Gwadar, including the supporters of Haq Do Tehreek (Gwadar Rights Movement), voiced their discontent with the government's reaction as they believed that the government was not addressing their basic issues. Public anger was further fueled after the arrest of the movement's leader Maulana Hidayat-ur-Rahman which further strained the relationship between the authorities and the communities and raised further criticism regarding the government's response to the protests.

6. The Emergence of Haq Do Tahreek (Rights Movement) As A Local Perspective of Gwadar

Gwadar has immense potential to improve the socioeconomic situation of its residents by providing opportunities for sustainable economic growth, employment, better public services, better access to education and healthcare facilities. Plans by the government aim to transform the city into a duty-free port and a modern commercial centre that can rival big regional ports like Dubai and Hong Kong. In the context of the overall CPEC plan, suggestions were also made to develop the Makran coastal area and promote Jiwani as an international tourist destination. Furthermore, the Coastal Highway will enhance the connectivity between the region and its neighbouring areas, bringing greater economic opportunities to the community. The Gwadar Smart City Master Plan prepared by China Communications Construction Company in conjunction with the Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives, and the Gwadar Development Authority, estimates that Gwadar's economy will be more than US\$30 billion, which makes it the third largest urban economy in Pakistan. It also sets out six priorities for development – six major steps that involve supporting the setting up of high-technology industries and providing good wage-paying jobs, to improve the economic development of the area and to encourage Baloch young people to learn technical skills and vocational education (Wizarat, 2023).

The government of General Pervez Musharraf undertaken several significant development projects to enhance regional connectivity and development such as Makran Coastal Highway and Gwadar Port. These initiatives started to provide hope for the residents, who had been expecting better economic opportunities and better lives. As development began to grow, foreigners, especially investors, businessmen and government officials from outside the region were able to hold large tracts of land and increase their involvement in a wide range of businesses including fisheries, trade and real estate. This, in turn, led many local communities to see the region's economy evolving in a direction which offered better opportunities to outsiders than to locals (Wizarat, 2023).

Due to the exclusion of the Baloch community from decision making in matters of larger development projects such as Gwadar Port project, there were increasing sentiments of marginalization and displacement felt by the local communities. Then, two different types of mobilisation emerged. The first was a larger Baloch nationalist movement that challenged the state policies in Balochistan, and the second was the Med Ittehad movement which was established by fishermen of the province against the illegal trawling and for better representation in the issues affecting their lives. But the fishermen movement faced challenges from security forces and divisions, which caused the movement to lose its organizational ability and continuity (Jamali, 2014).

7. CPEC and the Origins of Haq Do Tahreek

With the advent of CPEC in 2015, the aspirations of Gwadar's populace for greater prosperity and better living conditions became vivid. But many residents said the project has exacerbated the economic and livelihood problems they are already facing. Poor technology in fishing (uncontrolled fishing methods and techniques) and the increasing number of large commercial fishing trawlers have caused severe problems for local fishermen. In response, Haq Do Tehreek, led by Maulana Hidayat-ur-Rahman, has demanded to remove unnecessary checkpoints, strict action against illegal trawlers, and the return of confiscated property of local residents (Haq Do Tehreek, 2021).

8. Major Grievances and Demands

8.1. Abolition of Trawler Mafia

The Haq Do Tehreek was originally established to challenge commercial trawler fishing activities which local communities considered to be a major threat to their livelihood. Local fishermen reported that the trawlers cut back on fishing because they took a lot of fish and they used huge nets that had an impact on the marine ecosystem, and on fish breeding. The problem became a matter of concern especially with the majority of inhabitants of Gwadar working in the fishing sector as their main source of livelihood was fisheries, which was also noted by the Fisheries Department.

8.2. bolition of Check Posts

Security checkpoints have been a recurring issue in Gwadar, as well as in various areas of Balochistan. Checkpoints that the local communities felt were not necessary formed one of the major demands of the Haq Do Tehreek. The movement says the checkpoints caused an inconvenience for residents as they were asked to show their identification documents every day they went for a trip, requiring a lot of time and effort to move around the province. (Haq Do Tehreek, 2021).

8.3. Free Border Trade

Next, the fisheries sector is the other important livelihood generating activity, which is followed by the cross-border trade, especially for people of Makran region. Illegal fishing activity decreased fishing opportunities and many residents resorted to border trade to earn a living. But they had to face two problems. First, traders complained that they had to pay unofficial sums of money at security checkpoints in the road while they were in transit. Secondly, they claimed that at times their commercial products were taken or broken by security officials, thus causing financial losses and not profits. Thus, the need for free and friendly trade on the border became one of Haq Do Tehreek's main goals (H. U. R. Baloch, personal communication, November 15, 2024).

8.4. Protection of Human Rights

Extra-judicial killing, enforced disappearances, and human dignity issues have been among the most controversial issues in Balochistan. The recent long march by Dr. Mahrang Baloch, which was well covered in the news in Pakistan and beyond, was focused on demands for protection of human rights and accountability. These were originally part of the larger issues raised by the Haq Do Tehreek, but these issues slowly became one of the major concerns of the movement, and a major topic of debate for rights and justice in the province.

8.5. Elimination of Drugs

Drug trafficking has become a serious concern in Balochistan because of the province's borders with two neighboring countries, providing opportunities for drug related activities.

Consequently, drug addiction has become a widespread problem among the youth of the country and especially in the Makran region. Development of social repercussions of this issue, Haq Do Tehreek has taken eradication of drug smuggling through border routes as one of its main demands. (H. U. R. Baloch, personal communication, November 15, 2024).

8.6. CPEC and Local Perception

One of the key goals of this research is to gain an understanding of the perception of the CPEC with its various implications among the locals. The findings show that in general, the citizens see CPEC as a potential opportunity for economic development and enhancement of their living standards; however, they stress that their concerns need to be taken care of and the benefits of CPEC need to be directed towards local communities. The study has clearly shown that the people of Balochistan and Gwadar are not against development, but want inclusive and equitable development. One of the interviewees emphasized that nobody would oppose enhancements in education, health care, infrastructure, and standard of living in general. Advancement is seen as a universal desire and the desire to progress is a desire of every society. However, when CPEC was proposed as a massive development project, local communities had initially high expectations that it will bring about substantial change and enhance various aspects of their lives.

The local population hailed the development of Gwadar port in 2002 as a game- changer, promising numerous opportunities and a better future. A renowned politician said:

'At the time of the port's development, locals in Gwadar and Balochistan expressed hope that it would transform their fate. However, twenty years later, the reality has fallen far short of initial promises. The city of Gwadar's tiny population has not benefited yet and the entire district and the rest of Balochistan is far away. The previous experience has led to grievances among locals, who believe that the developments under CPEC have primarily benefited a small portion of the population, primarily non-local capitalists, while local people have been neglected. Due to mismanagement and lack of inclusive policies CPEC has failed to address the issues of local people, therefore still local people have

grievances towards development projects under it'. (H. U. R. Baloch, personal communication, November 15, 2024).

The MPA of Gwadar expressed that:

'CPEC is a big project that deals with the entire state. But we need to look at what CPEC has given to Gwadar and its local people. The people of Gwadar have not seen the benefits of CPEC yet. The city remains underdeveloped, grappling with various issues such as water, electricity, drainage, among others. The people of Gwadar supported the CPEC and thought it would change their fate. But unfortunately, this did not bring change for local people, there is no big project of CPEC in Balochistan. Consider the motorway, which is a project related to public transport. For instance, motorways are operationalized inside Pakistan, many of them under CPEC, but in Balochistan there are no motorways even for a kilometer. No hospital and mega energy projects in Balochistan, and the Orange Train Project, which is a CPEC project operationalized in Lahore, not in Balochistan. Therefore, local people ask the authorities why Balochistan is being ignored when it comes to development.'

There is growing discontent in Balochistan because of the shortcomings of the provincial government and the exclusionary policies that many communities see at the federal level. These have led to some residents' view of the lack of even distribution of benefits from CPEC across provinces. As a result, one of the frequent criticisms voiced in Balochistan is that while the project is being described as the Pakistan-China Economic Corridor it seems to have brought concrete benefits to only Punjab, prompting some Balochs to dub it the 'Punjab-China Economic Corridor'.

Balochistan people are not against development, they want development in which they participate and get the benefit of it. Many local residents believe that development should not be at the expense of them being exploited, whilst local people remain at the margins. They feel

uneasy on the lack of opportunities created by development projects among them CPEC, which they have supported, but for which they are not benefiting equally. The first question they must ask is why the people of Balochistan who are host to these projects have not seen the benefits. (H. U. R. Baloch, personal communication, November 15, 2024).

In addition, some development projects have been launched under CPEC, but most of them have been inadequate on satisfying the concerns and expectations of the local population and there are still complaints from the residents of Gwadar. The difficulties faced are not just due to federal policies but are also a result of the inability of the provincial government to effectively address the longstanding problems experienced at the local level. Hence the effectiveness of CPEC in the benefit of Balochistan people is dependent on the policies, role and commitment of Balochistan government in bringing development opportunities to the masses.

Although CPEC has huge prospective for economic development and social development of Pakistan, the political and security scenario in Balochistan, willingness of Pakistani federal government and China's strategic interests affect its implementation. A well-defined and consistent policy framework was lacking on CPEC in recent years, notably during the tenure of the government of Imran Khan. These factors, in addition to political instability and economic issues, placed some doubts in the minds of some analysts about the success of the project. However, it's still too early to say if CPEC will fail. Meanwhile, China's stance on the larger Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) under which CPEC is a flagship project seems to be shifting, and now more focus is being given to smaller and more sustainable projects. Yet, fears over Chinese domestic economic conditions have also sparked discussion over its future overseas investment pledges (Maryam, personal communication, September 15, 2024). But if CPEC had placed a greater importance on human development rather than the economic and commercial aspects, then it would have been seen differently from local people's point of view. A local inhabitant of Gwadar said that, in the past, various schemes had been launched, such as infrastructure development, road construction, establishment of a new hospital, educational institutes and a university, which have developed along with the process of realization of CPEC. Yet all these developments have done little to make Gwadar a well-developed city. A number of basic facilities and basic public services needed to enhance the everyday lives of local communities are still lacking.

9. CPEC as a “game changer” for Locals?

There is nothing that anyone with sense of it can be against development; development and improvement in the standard of living are human aspirations of every rational person. In all societies, the government and citizens aim to achieve economic prosperity, social welfare and a higher standard of living. Development's core purpose is to meet human needs and improve people's lives. Likewise, the residents of Gwadar are not against development programs, they just want to enjoy the opportunities and advantages provided by the development programs like Gwadar Port and CPEC (Maryam, Journalist personal communication, September 15, 2024).

Gwadar's people ask a basic question about the essence of development. They say that ships in the port and flights from Gwadar Airport are not sufficient indicators of progress and the housing project and construction of elite facilities are not enough either. Local view: development can be assessed in more than just physical infrastructure and economic activities; in how it enhances human lives. Development that is meaningful is that which offers economic opportunities, fosters political inclusion and promotes social well-being. Thus, common measures of development are living standards, income and human welfare levels, all of which are measured on a global scale. This perspective is a reflection of the concerns and expectations of the communities of Gwadar and the wider Balochistan on inclusive and people-centred development.

For local communities, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was launched with great hope that it will enhance their lives by bringing economic development, job opportunities, and development to the region. Initially state authorities announced CPEC as a ‘game changer’ which will change the economic landscape of Pakistan and solve the other problems. There has also been a suggestion by some policy makers that the project may help to address political turmoil and conflict, especially in Balochistan, a region where conflict has been ongoing since Pakistan's inception in the early 1940s. CPEC was touted as a game-changer that would help tie the knot between the center and provinces, but many local residents think that the benefits have not filtered down. They believe that their socioeconomic situation has not changed significantly after the huge development projects were carried out in the area (R. Bamri, personal communication, November 15, 2024).

10. Local Perspectives on Haq Do Tehreek

The president of Haq Do Tehreek has stated that it is not in opposition of development or against CPEC but rather positioned as a proponent of CPEC who wants to make local communities more involved in it. The establishment of Haq Do Tehreek is a result of the growing frustration, concerns and dissatisfaction of the residents of Gwadar of the development initiatives not yielding the desired results. The local communities claim that they still suffer from security threats, lack of basic services, and lack of socioeconomic opportunities. Their point of view is that with all of the massive infrastructure projects -- the expressway, the port -- their lives aren't that much better now, and they feel things are pretty much the same. While protests over rights and concerns of the residents of Gwadar have happened quite a few times in the past, the Haq Do Tehreek brought these issues to the forefront of national discussion, through a more organized and impactful campaign. One of the interviewees pointed out that the movement was not only a critique of the flaws of CPEC, but it also led to asking the question: "Have the communities at the heart of the project been able to benefit from it?" It must also be noted that CPEC is not just limited to Gwadar but it also involves other projects in Pakistan including road, railway infrastructure, energy projects, and technological projects, etc. However, the formation of Haq Do Tehreek is an indication of the dissatisfaction, uncertainty and frustrations of the locals.

The movement launched some of the biggest public rallies in Gwadar's history, with women being an integral part of it. These mobilizations reflect that numerous issues the locals have not been addressed. Economic challenges, fishing restrictions, security checkpoint issues and water and electricity shortages remain issues for residents. This underscores the benefits of a project as vast as CPEC to significantly impact the lives of residents locally, if the benefits are distributed inclusively.

Local communities also voice concerns about demographic change and fear of becoming a minority in their own region, thereby calling for adequate legal protection. They say lack of public concerns can further fuel anti-CPEC sentiment. Minimal contact between the local community, government agencies, and development agencies is still a challenge. Public dissatisfaction is also driven by the issue of security.

11. Local Participation in CPEC

One of the key issues analyzed in this study is the level of involvement of the locals in the decision making in relation to CPEC. The results suggest that even in the provinces, there is limited influence of official decision makers. Whereas opportunities for local communities to participate in the process are even further constrained in the absence of meaningful participation by the Balochistan government. The residents of Gwadar, including elected representatives like Members of the Provincial Assembly (MPAs), have reportedly not been part of key policy discussions despite being directly affected by activities of the CPEC projects. Major decisions are made with little input from even those members of the provincial cabinet. Hamal Kalmati, a former MPA, for instance, said that he was not aware of some of the details of the Gwadar Master Plan (Bamri, personal communication, November 15, 2024).

Local representatives are usually notified of development projects at an implementation stage and not at the planning and decision making phase. This has led to a number of projects being started without sufficient consultation with the residents, and hence having been met with opposition. One such project is a fencing barrier, which was planned but stalled due to local opposition (R. Bamri, personal communication, November 15, 2024).

12. The issue of Fencing

The local communities have strongly opposed the proposed fencing of Gwadar, and the beginning of the construction of fences has triggered additional concerns among the residents. In early 2020, the Gwadar Development Authority introduced a revised master plan for the port city, which included the construction of a security barrier aimed at safeguarding CPEC-related projects. The project was part of a larger initiative called the Gwadar Safe City Project, which aims to improve security measures and implement surveillance cameras across the city, estimated to cost US\$10 million. A comprehensive monitoring system is yet to be fully established; however, some areas have already seen the installation of wire fencing. The project has been presented as essential to guarantee city security and protection.

Gwadar Deputy Commissioner Abdul Kabeer Zarkoon said in the interview held in March 2021 that the political groups in Balochistan had raised strong objections against the project of fencing and they had claimed that the concerns of the people have not taken into account, causing, as a result of which, there was a lot of opposition. Likewise, the leader of the Balochistan National Party (BNP) Mr. Sajid Tareen has opposed the installation of the barrier on grounds that it might divide the city and interfere with the movement and rights of the locals in the Balochistan High Court (Anees, 2024).

The fencing project has not only been met with opposition to the physical barrier but also with wider concerns over the freedom of movement of the local population, access to their traditional lands and a lack of involvement in decisions made which impact their lives. Balochistan's Maulana Hidayat-ur-Rahman, who was a member of the Balochistan Provincial Assembly, reportedly wasn't aware of the project details, pointing to the concerns of limited consultation with local representatives. In the meantime, the Chairman of Gwadar Port Authority, Naseer Khan Kashani, told that the proposed fencing would have a great impact on the security structure of Gwadar Port city (Anees, 2024).

The Balochistan government was to fence around about 24km² territory of the strategically significant location in the Gwadar part of the estimated US\$50 billion China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The intended restricted area would have had only a few entry points and access would be controlled with over 500 surveillance cameras. The project was justified mainly with security considerations with the argument that the project was required to protect CPEC projects which are funded by China and may be attacked by militant organizations against the corridor.

However, some political representatives of the Baloch and locals have voiced apprehensions that the fence would have a negative impact on the local population and may compel communities to move. The barrier is seen as losing control over their ancestral land and greater restrictions to their everyday lives for many residents. They believe that the measures could violate fundamental rights such as: the right to move freely, the right to personal liberty, the right to property, all of which are constitutionally guaranteed at national and international levels. In fact,

the fence has been seen by many in the area as yet another attempt of the state to control their personal and social environment (Anees, 2024).

13. Fear of Extinction: Fish and the Fishermen

Haq Do Tehreek began when people started asking what they saw happening to the traditional fishermen, who live in Gwadar and have a primary livelihood in fishing. Haq Do Tehreek's response to the growing concerns over the effects of commercial trawling on the traditional fishing community has resulted in the cessation of trawling in Gwadar waters. The concerns of the people regarding the impact of commercial trawling on the traditional fishing group has led to the stopping of commercial trawling in the waters of Gwadar. One of the main concerns raised by the movement is the large trawlers using destructive fishing techniques that catch large numbers of marine life, including juvenile fish. The practices are thought to be helping to bring down the fish stocks and affect the fishers' economic security and the sustainability of the marine environment in the long run (H. U. R. Baloch, personal communication, November 15, 2024).

Trawling operations have led to adverse environmental and socio-economic impacts for local communities of Gwadar. Over fishing and indiscriminate fishing practices, such as taking juvenile fish, upset the marine ecology and impact fish reproduction adversely leading to reduction in fish availability in the long run. Fish is one of the main sources of livelihood for the majority of people in Gwadar (more than 80% rely directly or indirectly on fishing), so loss of fish stocks could have a negative effect on household income and on the overall situation of the economy. Moreover, the prevailing unemployment issues in Gwadar could worsen, leading to increased poverty, social instability, and economic instability among the residents (Anees, 2024).

Overfishing of marine resources is also a more general problem for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which aims to make Gwadar a major regional trade and economic hub. In this regard, Haq Do Tehreek aims to raise awareness about these issues and calls for better regulation of trawling operations, conservation of marine resources, the adoption of sustainable fishing practices, and improved support for fishermen. Fishing communities relying on almost purely on fish for their livelihood would be severely

affected by depletion or even possible extinction of fish stocks. A loss of marine resources would not only affect the livelihoods of the fishermen, but also their economic security and traditional way of life. Many fishermen may be subjected to further poverty, marginalisation and displacement without alternative employment opportunities. Moreover, fishing is inextricably linked to the local culture and social fabric of Gwadar's inhabitants, meaning that the decline of this industry would impact not only on their livelihoods but also on their traditions and social networks. Improving the situation with unsustainable fishing practices, is therefore, paramount to safeguard the fishing industry and the future health of the coastal population of Gwadar.

14. The Local Suggestions

Local communities should be brought into the decision making and policy foreworking processes in relation to CPEC projects, first and foremost. Prior to the beginning of any development project, residents should have their concerns, needs and expectations measured and taken into consideration as part of the planning process. Secondly, the government must address essential problems of the people of Gwadar such as: water, electricity and sustainable fishing opportunities. Involving local communities in the process of CPEC policy would help to create trust and greater acceptance of the project by the people. Thirdly, CPEC shall provide a wide range of employment opportunities other than the fishing industry through skills training and other livelihoods. This would help make the CPEC project more effective and help the population of Gwadar as well as Pakistan benefit from its work. To achieve sustainable development, the provision of basic services such as clean water, reliable energy supply, healthcare facilities, security, environmental protection, pedestrian infrastructure and effective urban planning is necessary. In addition, capacity building of schools and universities for quality education and technical skills should be emphasized to allow local youth to actively engage in and contribute to future development initiative.

Furthermore, these measures are just the minimum required to secure inclusive development and successful implementation of CPEC projects in Gwadar. As its size is small – about one hundred and fifty thousand people – Gwadar is not a very big city and therefore effective governance and planning should be able to solve these basic issues.

Various challenges faced by Gwadar can be tackled through timely action, comprehensive planning and coordination with local communities by both federal and provincial governments. Residents also have concerns about possible demographic changes, and that they may be a minority in their region in the future. Hence, it is necessary to have appropriate legal protection and policies in place to tackle such fears and safeguard the interests of the local community. However, if the government does not act on the needs and concerns of citizens, discontent and opposition to CPEC could grow. In addition, low levels of community engagement and communication around development projects are still a challenge. Residents are also concerned about security issues. Haq Do Tehreek is a reflection of the compounded sense of frustration, uncertainty and discontentment among the local population about their inclusion, rights and future.

15. Discussion

As the hub of CPEC, Gwadar was the focus of the attention of the State authorities which described it as “new Dubai” and “future Singapore” of the region. Traditionally, Gwadar was a small fishing village, where almost 90% of the population were engaged in fishing business. But, the port development and the introduction of CPEC has changed the political economy, social structure, spatial organization and demography of the town. Many people living in the area have a very different experience of the “crown jewel of CPEC” than is depicted in official narratives. Local communities, however, claim they have not enjoyed the same benefits of development; instead they say that they have been displaced, securitized and socially marginalized. Moreover, participation and representation of locals in the decision making processes of CPEC is limited. One local resident said in an interview:

“Within Gwadar there are two Gwadars one is for Hakim(Ruler) and other is for Mahkoom (subordinates)” (M. J. Marri, personal communication, December 15, 2024).

In addition, the interviewee pointed out that the dominant economic and administrative groups, who are controlling Gwadar are mostly outside the region. He said that about 99% of this

influential group are outsiders who have access to advanced facilities and enjoy a relatively privileged lifestyle. The indigenous people, on the other hand, are still grappling with lack of basic services, such as a steady supply of electricity, water and other basic amenities. This is indicative of the local communities feeling the needs and concerns of that community have not been addressed by either Federal or Provincial levels. A key political figure also raised concerns about the under-representation of the local population in CPEC development processes.

“The people of Balochistan are treated as slaves, their representatives are kept away from major decisions and the people can’t think of participation. The negligence and ignorance can be seen in this context that projects under CPEC are developed in Punjab like Orange Line Train Project in Lahore and the recent Motorway projects in Punjab and other provinces, therefore we can view CPEC as China Punjab Economic Corridor instead of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (H. U. R. Baloch, personal communication, November 15, 2024).

The above-mentioned highlights the perception of many people residing in Balochistan that they are still marginalized and deprived of benefits of CPEC. Local communities report that the project has failed to deliver the economic transformation, development and betterment of their lives promised by the project. This has led to a rise in the population's sense of disappointment, uncertainty, and frustration. Unless the concerns are addressed, there is a possibility that in the future, locals may act against CPEC or any other development project. One of the interview participants said:

”We the people of Balochistan are pro- development but the development is done on our caste by exploiting our resources and benefiting themselves and then entitling us anti-development. We do not understand development as the development of Sea and Airport but we believe in human development which benefits local people, addresses their local issues” H. U. R. Baloch, personal communication, November 15, 2024).

In addition, as fishing is the main source of livelihood for the indigenous people of Gwadar, the industry has been considerably impacted since the start of CPEC-related development. The rising issues of commercial trawling operations in the sea and the problem of the local fishermen who were not able to access their traditional fishing zones were one of the major reasons for the formation of Haq Do Tehreek. Meanwhile, job opportunities created by CPEC projects have also resulted in unhappiness among residents. In employment at the Gwadar International Airport, for example, some 50% of the work has been given to Chinese, 48% to people from other provinces, and 2% to local residents of Gwadar. These inequities in benefits and realization have added to local dissatisfaction and concerns about economic viability.

16. Conclusion

This research, started with the aim of examining the perceptions of the indigenous people of Gwadar about CPEC and to see the extent of their involvement in the development process of CPEC. It examined the difference between the official perception of CPEC and what is actually working on the ground and critically reviewed the state narrative of the project as a “game-changer.” The results suggest that the expected advantages of development are not yet being enjoyed by the population locally as was promised in the beginning. The study first put current CPEC projects in context of the development projects in Balochistan’s past to understand the failure of earlier projects to yield significant returns to local communities. It also delved into the discourse of underdevelopment of Balochistan under state’s umbrella and the new tensions arising out of CPEC.

While the existing literature has been plentiful in discussing the economic, strategic and political importance of CPEC, there was a significant void related to the perception, experience and involvement of Gwadar's local residents in CPEC development. The study has revealed many commitments linked with CPEC that encompass employment creation, improved standard of living, provision of better education and healthcare facilities etc. But the situation faced by the local community is different. Economic conditions of many residents are still more or less unchanged from before CPEC. Furthermore, the findings of the primary data and research indicate that development of

CPEC has changed the traditional livelihoods of fishermen as well as traditional way of life in Gwadar, which has given rise to the feelings of uncertainty, insecurity and discontentment among the people. While the local communities are impacted by the CPEC projects, there is a dearth of local representation in major decision making processes. Many local elected officials, such as MPs and MNAs, are not involved in the planning process and are only first told about a project when it is being implemented. A major worry of residents is the fencing of Gwadar which is seen as infringing on their rights of ownership, movement and communication with their land. Overall, though, the extent of local communities' positive attitude to development initiatives, such as the CPEC, is demonstrated in the research, despite the grievances. The findings question the narrative of the state that blamed the Baloch people for their opposition to development because of the social structure in their community. Rather, local communities are supportive of development, but yearn for their rights to be respected, for development to provide them with an equitable distribution of benefits, and a meaningful role in the development process.

The central debate is not against this CPEC, but the lack of local community participation in policy and decision-making processes. The inability of both federal and provincial governments to address longstanding issues reflects a lack of political commitment, inadequate consultation, and administrative negligence. Ensuring inclusive development and addressing local grievances are therefore essential for the long-term sustainability and success of CPEC in Gwadar and Balochistan.

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