

BRIDGING POWER AND PARTICIPATION: INSTITUTIONAL PATHWAYS TO MULTIDIMENSIONAL POVERTY REDUCTION IN PAKISTAN

Dr. Abdul Rehman Khan

Development Professional, Researcher, and Educationist , Former Pro Vice Chancellor – BUITEMS

arkhan.uw@gmail.com

Corresponding Author: *

Dr. Abdul Rehman Khan

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ABSTRACT

Participatory development has been central to Pakistan's poverty reduction efforts over the past three decades; however, overlapping deprivations in income, education, health, assets, and political voice persist throughout rural and peri-urban regions. This study investigates the conditions under which participatory approaches either entrench or alleviate multidimensional poverty. The analysis draws upon Choguill's participation ladder, Mansuri and Rao's sandwich framework, empowerment scholarship, and empirical material from Pakistan's Rural Support Programmes, local government experiences, and cross-regional comparisons with South Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Findings reveal that participation becomes a mechanism of poverty reproduction where elite capture goes unchallenged and technical capacity remains absent. Where participation operates within responsive state institutions, deliberately confront gender and class hierarchies, and function through bridging governance structures, measurable reductions in multidimensional deprivation occur. Pakistan's legislator-controlled development funds systematically undermine local governance, while international donors perpetuate fragmentation through parallel implementation structures. Seven evidence-informed interventions are advanced, including 1) poverty diagnostics integrated into programme design, 2) gender quotas in governance bodies, 3) district-level technical support mechanisms, 4) bottom-linked governance experiments in poverty hotspots, 5) participatory monitoring frameworks, 6) legislative elimination of discretionary development funds, and, 7) donor harmonization protocols. Two operational models, that is a Hybrid State-Civil Society Partnership and a Multi-Tiered Accountability structure, offer implementable pathways forward.

Keywords: community participation, multidimensional poverty, empowerment, Pakistan, gender inclusion, local governance, rural development, donor coordination

1. Introduction

Since the 1990s, Pakistan has systematically mobilised communities through rural support programmes, local government initiatives, and donor-funded projects, influenced by global shifts towards participatory and community-driven development. These interventions were premised on Amartya Sen's capability approach: poverty is not merely income deprivation but the inability to live a valued life due to overlapping deficits in education, health, security, voice, and dignity. Pakistan's official Multidimensional Poverty Index reveals that 38.3% of the population

experiences overlapping deprivations, with rural areas and specific districts showing acute concentrations of poverty across multiple dimensions (UNDP & OPHI, 2023). Proponents expected participation to broaden capabilities through enhanced service delivery, altered power configurations, and strengthened collective action (Mansuri & Rao, 2012).

Three decades later, however, outcomes diverge sharply from expectations. Comprehensive assessments reveal systematic underperformance, particularly regarding structural poverty and inequality. Projects consistently underestimate

entrenched power relations, overvalue social capital's transformative potential, and reduce participation to bureaucratic procedure rather than engaging it as political challenge (Cleaver, 1999; Mansuri & Rao, 2012). Pakistan's experience offers instructive examples, such as elite domination of nominally inclusive community organizations (Khan & Eversole, 2024). Additionally, quality deterioration in technical components where communities possess insufficient expertise (Khwaja, 2004).

The international donor community, including UN agencies, the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, bilateral actors like USAID, EU and FCDO, and various multilateral bodies, has profoundly shaped Pakistan's participatory landscape. Although this influence remains inadequately examined. While donors introduced participatory methodologies, their impact has been constrained by short project timeframes, sector-fragmented approaches, insufficient engagement with local power dynamics, and parallel implementation architectures that circumvent local government structures (George et al., 2015; Pilkington et al., 2018).

Pakistan's political economy compounds these challenges distinctively. Development initiatives flow predominantly through Members of Provincial Assemblies, National Assembly members, and Senators via discretionary allocations rather than through elected local bodies and community institutions. According to Raahim (2021) this arrangement corrodes participatory principles, strengthens patron-client networks, and cultivates dependency rather than sustainable governance capacity.

Indeed, successful models do exist internationally. Kerala and Dar es Salaam demonstrate how community-led housing, backed by supportive state policy, has expanded land access, improved shelter conditions, and strengthened urban poor livelihoods (Oates et al., 2024). Rural social innovation in Costa Rica, linked to higher-level governance through bridging actors, has addressed unmet needs and democratised decision-making (Castro-Arce & Vanclay, 2020). These cases suggest that context, institutional design, and power relations determine whether participation alleviates or reproduces multidimensional poverty.

This paper explores answers to a few questions, such as, i) Under what institutional and political conditions does community participation in Pakistan contribute to multidimensional poverty reduction? ii) What can be learned from comparable contexts in South Asia, Africa, and Latin America? and, iii) What reforms are needed in donor practices and political economy to enable genuine participatory governance?

The analysis integrates theoretical frameworks with empirical evidence and concludes with actionable policy recommendations for government and donors, alongside two workable implementation models.

2. Conceptual Foundations: Participation, Power, and Multidimensional Poverty

2.1 From symbolic consultation to genuine empowerment

Choguill (1996) proposed a ladder of participation ranging from conspiracy and informing (where participation legitimises predetermined plans) through conciliation and partnership (where communities co-finance and co-manage) to empowerment and self-management (where communities exercise substantive control). Goulet (1989) characterized authentic participation as fundamentally challenging structural inequality rather than simply extracting unpaid labor. These analytical tools prove particularly valuable for Pakistan, where participatory language frequently obscures persistent elite control.

Mansuri and Rao's (2012) "sandwich model" reconceptualized the terrain. The model argues that community-driven initiatives yield superior poverty and service outcomes when situated between capable state support above and organized civic mobilization below. Absent either element, participatory interventions typically worsen existing inequalities. This framework illuminates Pakistan's predicament, weak local government capacity, fragmented civil society, and fiscal concentration create institutional voids that elites readily colonize.

2.2 Multidimensional empowerment and gendered exclusion

Scheyvens and van der Watt's (2021) framework identifies six empowerment dimensions, including economic, social, psychological, political, environmental, and cultural. They argue

that empowerment cannot be understood through individual agency alone but must be analyzed in relation to enabling or constraining conditions. Popay and colleagues (2020) distinguish between emancipatory forms of power, that is collective agency, solidarity, mutual support, and limiting expressions of domination, resource monopolization, disciplinary control. This conceptual apparatus clarifies how participatory processes may either contest or reinforce the power structures sustaining multidimensional poverty.

Zulu and colleagues' (2025) work documents how patriarchal structures systematically exclude women from communal land development. Their argument for inclusive participation foregrounds ecofeminism, social capital cultivation, and social acceptability. For Pakistan, where gender gaps in land ownership, literacy, and political participation are among South Asia's widest, addressing gendered power is central to any participatory poverty reduction strategy.

2.3 Bottom-linked governance and transformative change

Castro-Arce and Vanclay's (2020) concept of bottom-linked governance captures how local initiatives and higher-level policies interact through bridging roles like network enabling, resource brokerage, conflict resolution, and shared vision building. This model explains why isolated community projects often fail: without institutional linkages connecting grassroots action to policy reform, budget allocation, and legal protection, participatory gains remain fragile and localised.

2.4 Analytical framework

This paper employs a composite framework integrating: (1) Choguill's participation ladder to classify forms of participation; (2) Mansuri and Rao's sandwich model to assess institutional embedding; (3) empowerment and power frameworks (Scheyvens, Popay, Zulu) to analyse outcomes across multiple dimensions; and (4) Castro-Arce and Vanclay's bottom-linked governance to examine bridging mechanisms. Multidimensional poverty is operationalised as overlapping deprivations in income and assets, education and skills, health and basic services, political voice and participation, and social status, gender equality, and security, following the

Alkire-Foster methodology employed in Pakistan's national MPI (Alkire & Santos, 2014; UNDP & OPHI, 2023).

3. Evidence from Pakistan: How Participation Reproduces Poverty

3.1 Elite capture and strategic compliance

Khan and Eversole's (2024) ethnographic investigation of Pakistan's Rural Support Programmes Network in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa challenges the assumption that participation automatically generates empowerment. Their findings reveal a pattern they term "strategic compliance", where traditional elites publicly endorse inclusive processes while privately ensuring outcomes serve their interests. Formally, disadvantaged groups participate in community organizations, however, elites substantively monopolize decision-making and resource allocation, restricting poor households' programme access and constraining both income and non-income poverty reduction. This pattern extends across Pakistan's local governance architecture, where informal power hierarchies consistently subvert formal participatory institutions (Gazdar, 2011; Cheema et al., 2006). These observations echo Mansuri and Rao's (2012) caution, saying that induced participation may fail or cause harm absent institutional support deliberately addressing power asymmetries. Operating at Choguill's conciliation or partnership levels, where communities receive consultation but hierarchies persist, proves insufficient for multidimensional poverty reduction.

3.2 Technical failure and the limits of local knowledge

Khwaja's (2004) econometric analysis of Northern Pakistan development projects yields counterintuitive results. He argues that community participation improves non-technical outcomes (site selection, labor organization) while degrading technical outcomes where local actors lack specialized knowledge (water engineering, infrastructure specifications). His property-rights framework demonstrates that participation simultaneously transmits information and redistributes influence; consequently, expanded participation absent adequate technical support produces worse results.

This evidence undermines simplistic assertions that equate community ownership with superior outcomes. Multidimensional poverty reduction frequently depends on water supply improvements, sanitation systems, health facilities, and education infrastructure; the domains where technical quality matters enormously. Participation lacking technical backstopping leaves communities with dysfunctional assets, perpetuating service deprivation.

3.3 Gender exclusion and asset deprivation

Multiple constraints limit women's participation in Pakistan's community development: patriarchal norms, exclusion from male-dominated networks, restricted control over household and communal resources. Research on communal land and business development documents how these barriers curtail women's access to land, credit, and information, sustaining gendered poverty patterns (Zulu et al., 2025). Work on women's local council participation reveals that formal representation gains through gender quotas have not translated into substantive participation because of mobility restrictions, cultural devaluation of women's public voices, and absent gender-responsive institutional support continue limiting impact (Bari, 2005; Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987). Participatory projects failing to deliberately engage gendered power relations cannot significantly reduce multidimensional poverty and may worsen gender inequality by channeling benefits toward male household heads and community leaders.

3.4 Legislator-led development

Pakistan's development practice contains a fundamental structural flaw as projects' implementation are directly taking place through MPAs, MNAs, and Senators using discretionary funds. These allocations, ranging between PKR 30 to 50 million or more per legislator annually, bypass elected local governments and community institutions, constructing parallel governance structures that corrode participatory principles through several mechanisms.

Legislator-led projects privilege visible, short-cycle infrastructure (roads, drainage, paving) over sustained capacity development, institutional strengthening, or integrated poverty reduction

approaches. They reinforce patron-client relations, transforming citizens from rights-holders engaging accountable institutions into supplicants approaching individual legislators. Decision authority concentrates among legislators typically lacking technical expertise in development planning, needs assessment, or participatory methodology (Raahim, 2021; Cheema et al., 2006). Development efforts fragment across political constituencies serving personal and partisan interests, preventing coordinated, area-based responses to multidimensional poverty.

Historical analysis traces these practices to Pakistan's entrenched political economy of patron-clientelism. Wherein provincial and national elected representatives actively resist genuine fiscal and administrative devolution which would empower local governments while reducing their discretionary resource control (Wilder, 1999).

This arrangement directly contradicts the sandwich model's logic. Rather than strengthening state institutions above and civil society below, it weakens both by cultivating dependency on individual politicians while marginalizing local government. International donors bear complicity, tolerating or inadvertently reinforcing these structures by channeling resources through parallel PIUs and PMUs rather than conditioning support on local government and community institutional strengthening.

4. Comparative Evidence: When Participation Reduces Multidimensional Poverty

4.1 Community-led housing with state support

Oates and colleagues' (2024) comparative analysis of Kerala (India) and Dar es Salaam (Tanzania) housing initiatives conclude how community-led models, when undergirded by state policies providing legal tenure, subsidized financing, and technical assistance produce positive outcomes. They result in expanded urban poor access to land, improved housing conditions, strengthened livelihoods, and built social cohesion. These interventions simultaneously addressed shelter, health, security, and social status through participatory planning and implementation.

Success hinged critically on active state involvement, not withdrawal favoring market or community self-help, but deliberate construction

of legal and financial conditions enabling equitable participation. This confirms the sandwich model's prediction, i.e. responsive state institutions above, organized civic mobilization below.

4.2 Bottom-linked governance

Castro-Arce and Vanclay's (2020) study of the ADEZN rural social innovation initiative in Costa Rica showed how bridging actors, i.e. individuals and organisations mediating between local communities and government, enabled unmet needs to be addressed and governance structures to become more participatory. Specific bridging functions included network cultivation (connecting isolated actors), resource brokerage (channeling funds and technical support), conflict mediation, and vision articulation. This bottom-linked governance architecture sustained improvements across livelihoods, service access, and political inclusion. They demonstrate that transformative participation requires institutional linkages rather than merely grassroots organization.

4.3 Participatory rural appraisal and capacity building

Nigerian rural development synthesis by Awoonor's (2025) emphasizes that participatory tools like Participatory Rural Appraisal, enhance ownership, accountability, and poverty reduction where combined with capacity development, institutional strengthening, and technology transfer targeting marginalized populations. But success remains constrained by limited awareness, restrictive cultural norms, inadequate capacity, bureaucratic obstacles, and weak state support. These barriers fall disproportionately on poorer, less educated groups. Pakistan's lesson proves straightforward concluding that participatory methods constitute necessary but insufficient conditions. Broader institutional and capacity strategies provide the essential context for development.

4.4 Area-based rural development and civic participation

Golmohammadi's (2025) cross-country synthesis identifies strong social networks and civic engagement as correlates of economic development and democratic deepening; but emphasizes that contextualization and inclusive

stakeholder involvement prove decisive. Where participation genuinely engages relevant actors and mobilizes cohesive networks, economic development and multidimensional poverty reduction advance simultaneously. Where participation remains tokenistic or elite-captured, initiatives fail.

5. The Role of International Donors in Pakistan's Participatory Development

5.1 Donor influence and fragmentation

International donors like UN agencies (UNDP, UNICEF, UN Women, FAO), Bretton Woods institutions (World Bank, ADB), bilateral actors (USAID, FCDO, EU, GIZ, JICA) etc., have substantially shaped Pakistan's participatory development landscape through rural support programmes, community-driven development projects, local governance reforms, and social protection initiatives. Yet donor interventions confront recurring challenges, such as:

Fragmentation and coordination deficits:

Multiple donors pursue overlapping yet uncoordinated initiatives, imposing transaction costs on government and communities, duplicating monitoring systems, forgoing economies of scale (Pilkington et al., 2018; Gulrajani, 2011).

Abbreviated cycles and sustainability gaps:

Donor projects typically operate on 3 to 5 years span. The stipulated stie periods are insufficient for transforming entrenched power relations, constructing robust institutions, or achieving sustained multidimensional poverty reduction. Steiner & Farmer (2018) and Easterly (2006) argue that external funding cessation frequently triggers community organization collapse absent domestic fiscal continuity.

Parallel implementation architectures:

Donors routinely establish PIUs and PMUs bypassing line departments and local governments, ostensibly ensuring efficiency and accountability while inadvertently eroding institutional capacity and creating unsustainable parallel systems (George et al., 2015; Andrews et al., 2017).

Political economy blindness: According to Booth (2012), donor-designed participation typically assumes benign power relations and

neutral institutional contexts, failing to engage elite capture, gender exclusion, or political interests shaping participatory spaces. Technical interventions receive priority over politically informed institutional transformation (Mansuri & Rao, 2012).

Weak domestic governance linkages: Donor projects rarely connect explicitly to strengthening Pakistan's local government system, advancing fiscal decentralization, or supporting legislative reforms that would institutionalize participatory governance beyond project duration.

5.2 Opportunities for donor reform

Despite these limitations, donors possess considerable leverage for catalyzing institutional transformation. This can be done through harmonization around local governance strengthening rather than parallel structure creation. They need to i) extend funding horizons (10-15 years) permitting genuine institutional transformation; ii) conduct political economy analysis centrally informing project design and explicitly addressing power, gender, and elite capture; iii) conditionality link funding to government commitment regarding fiscal decentralization, iv) emphasize local government empowerment and legislator-led discretionary fund elimination; and v) provide support for bridging institutions and roles connecting community action to policy reform rather than isolated mobilization.

6. Pakistan's Legislative and Institutional Architecture for Participatory Governance

Grounding policy recommendations in institutional reality requires understanding Pakistan's formal governance framework.

6.1 The 18th Constitutional Amendment and Devolution

Pakistan's 18th Constitutional Amendment (2010) devolved substantial powers and responsibilities to provinces including education, health, agriculture, local government. This created participatory governance opportunities alongside challenges such as provincial capacity, resources, and political commitment vary dramatically. Additionally, the center-province fiscal transfers remain contested.

6.2 Provincial Local Government Acts

Provincial local government legislation incorporates community participation provisions, though implementation varies across provinces.

- **Punjab Local Government Act 2019** establishes three-tier local government (district, tehsil, union council) with Citizen Community Board provisions permitting development proposal submission and community resource mobilization. CCBs face criticism for elite capture and constrained functional autonomy.
- **Sindh Local Government Act 2013 (amended 2021)** provides for local councils with elected representatives and mandates participatory budgeting at union council level. In practice, implementation remains weak, with low awareness and limited civil society engagement.
- **Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Local Government Act 2013 (amended 2022)** includes village and neighbourhood councils as the lowest tier, intended to bring government closer to communities. The Act mandates participation in development planning, but fiscal constraints and capacity gaps limit effectiveness.
- **Balochistan Local Government Act 2010** establishes union committees and town committees with provisions for public consultations. Balochistan's governance challenges, such as insecurity, low literacy, dispersed population, politicization of funds, compound difficulties in operationalising participatory provisions.

6.3 Rural Support Programmes and civil society networks

Pakistan's Rural Support Programmes (RSPs), including the National Rural Support Programme (NRSP), Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP), Balochistan Rural Support Programme (BRSP), Sarhad Rural Support Programme (SRSP) and various other NGOs have decades of experience mobilising community organisations, particularly around savings, credit, and infrastructure. AKRSP's work in Northern Pakistan, initiated in 1982, pioneered the community organisation model that has since been replicated across the country, mobilising over 6 million households into community organisations (Naqvi & Shahnaz, 2002). While RSPs and few other Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) have achieved significant outreach, Khan

and Eversole's (2024) research highlights persistent problems of elite capture and limited empowerment for the most marginalised.

6.4 Gaps and opportunities

Pakistan's legislative framework provides formal spaces for participation, but these remain underutilised or captured due to weak fiscal decentralisation (local governments lack discretionary budgets); limited capacity (elected representatives and officials often lack skills in participatory planning, gender-responsive budgeting, and multidimensional poverty analysis); elite capture (existing power structures dominate formal participatory spaces); and gender exclusion (although 33% quotas for women's representation exist in local councils,

but substantive participation and decision-making power remain limited).

The challenge is not absence of legal provisions but their operationalisation in ways that genuinely redistribute power and resources toward the multidimensionally poor, coupled with elimination of legislator-led development schemes that undermine local governance.

7. Proposed Implementation Models for Pakistan

Drawing on global evidence and Pakistan's institutional context, this paper proposes two workable models that integrate lessons from successful cases while addressing Pakistan's specific challenges.

Model 1: Hybrid State-Civil Society Partnership Model

Component	Description
Conceptual Basis	Synthesises Kerala housing experience (state enabling framework), Pakistan's RSP networks (community presence), and Costa Rica's bottom-linked governance (bridging mechanisms)
Key Institutions	- Provincial Participatory Development Authorities (coordination, oversight, quality assurance) - District Participatory Development Support Units (technical support, capacity building) - Community Development Councils (federated village/neighbourhood structures with legal status) - Civil Society Bridging Organizations (RSPs, NGOs for mobilisation and brokerage)
Financing	- Eliminate MPA/MNA discretionary funds; redirect to formula-based local government transfers - District Multidimensional Poverty Reduction Funds (30% of district budget) - Long-term (10-15 year) donor support through government systems
Accountability	- Annual community scorecards and third-party evaluations - Public disclosure of expenditures and beneficiary lists - Independent Participatory Development Ombudsperson

Model 2: Multi-Tiered Accountability Model

Component	Description
Conceptual Basis	Addresses Pakistan's accountability deficits through overlapping systems, i.e. upward (to government), downward (to communities), horizontal (peer/civil society oversight)
Key Institutions	- Community Accountability Forums (quarterly public reviews with approval authority) - Gender and Inclusion Watch Committees (50% women, marginalised group representation) - Technical Quality Assurance Boards (government, experts, community representatives)

	• Participatory Poverty Observatories (annual assessments, public reporting)
Financing	• Performance-based transfers linked to poverty reduction, gender inclusion, transparency, quality • Community co-financing scaled to capacity • Multi-Donor Poverty Reduction Trust Funds with civil society governance
Accountability	• Real-time digital disclosure via mobile platforms • Community-led social audits with legal protections • Mixed-methods external evaluations every three years

8. Policy Recommendations: SMART Interventions for Government and Donors

Drawing on comparative evidence and Pakistan's institutional context, this paper proposes seven SMART interventions targeting government and donors.

Recommendation 1: Integrate multidimensional poverty diagnostics into programme design

By fiscal year 2027–28, all federal and provincial community-based development programmes exceeding PKR 50 million must conduct ex-ante diagnostics that: (a) classify participation using Choguill's ladder; (b) identify multidimensional poverty indicators (education, health, housing, assets, voice) and change pathways; (c) map power structures and elite capture risks. Building on Planning Commission tools and aligning with SDGs 1 and 10, guidelines should be issued by end 2026 for mandatory application to all new projects from 2027–28. Provincial Local Government Act rules should be amended to require these diagnostics in Annual Development Plans.

Recommendation 2: Mandate gender-responsive and inclusive governance structures

Community-level project committees (CCBs, village organisations, project management committees) must include at least 30% women and 20% marginalised groups (religious minorities, persons with disabilities, landless households), with annual public reporting on membership, leadership, attendance, and decision-making roles. This addresses documented exclusion (Awoonor, 2025; Bari, 2005; Zulu et al., 2025) and builds on existing 33% local council quotas. Implementation to be phased 2026–2030: 33% Year 1, 35% Year 2, 40% Year 3, with compliance linked to

disbursements. Provincial governments should amend Local Government Act rules and incorporate requirements into RSP operational guidelines through memoranda of understanding.

Recommendation 3: Establish district-level facilitation and technical support units

Multi-disciplinary District Participatory Development Support Units (DPDSUs) combining social mobilisers, engineers, health/education specialists, and gender experts to support communities in planning, monitoring, and technical decision-making, reducing risks identified by Khwaja (2004). Rollout targets 20 districts (10% coverage) by 2027 as pilots, expanding to 100 districts (50% coverage) by 2030, with mid-term evaluation in 2028. Federal and provincial governments should allocate 2–3% of Annual Development Plan budgets to DPDSUs and create posts under Local Government and Rural Development departments.

Recommendation 4: Pilot bottom-linked governance models in poverty hotspots

Five pilots (South Punjab, Sindh interior, Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Gilgit-Baltistan) in high-poverty districts to test co-designed multi-sector poverty reduction plans with explicit bridging roles (network enablers, resource brokers, conflict mediators) and joint accountability mechanisms, targeting reductions in at least three poverty dimensions. Drawing on Costa Rican bottom-linked governance (Castro-Arce & Vanclay, 2020), pilots to initiate by July 2027 with independent mixed-methods evaluations by December 2032. Federal government should establish a Poverty Innovation Fund under the Poverty Alleviation and Social Safety Division or utilize Pakistan

Poverty Alleviation Fund; provinces should designate pilot districts through executive orders.

Recommendation 5: Institutionalise participatory adaptive monitoring

Programmes exceeding PKR 100 million must allocate at least 3% of costs to participatory monitoring and evaluation, including community scorecards, annual multidimensional poverty indicator reviews, and feedback mechanisms triggering adaptive management. Aligning with Mansuri and Rao (2012) best practices, this requirement applies to all new projects from fiscal year 2026–27, with standardised participatory M&E toolkit developed by 2026. The Planning Commission should issue mandatory guidelines; provincial planning and development departments should incorporate requirements into project approval criteria.

Recommendation 6: Phase out legislator-led development schemes

Federal and provincial governments should legislate elimination of MPA/MNA/Senator discretionary development funds by fiscal year 2029–30 through phased transition: 50% reduction by 2027–28, 75% by 2028–29, complete elimination by 2029–30. Resources should be redirected to formula-based local government transfers with mandatory community participation in priority-setting, implementation, and monitoring. This addresses the fundamental contradiction between participatory governance and patron-client politics, strengthening local government fiscal autonomy and accountability as demonstrated by India's 73rd/74th Constitutional Amendments and the Philippines' Local Government Code. All local government elections should be completed by 2026–27, with constitutional/ legislative amendments initiated by 2027. Federal government should amend rules governing development funds; provincial governments should amend Local Government Acts to mandate community participation in devolved resource utilisation.

Recommendation 7: Establish donor harmonization framework (for donors)

UN agencies, World Bank, ADB, EU, and bilateral donors should jointly adopt a Pakistan

Local Governance and Community Empowerment Compact by December 2026, committing to: (a) channel at least 70% of community development funding through government systems rather than parallel PIUs/PMUs by 2029; (b) harmonize participatory methodologies, M&E frameworks, and poverty indicators; (c) extend programme cycles to minimum 10 years for institutional transformation; (d) condition new funding on government progress toward local government fiscal empowerment and legislator-led scheme elimination. Building on existing coordination mechanisms (Pakistan Development Forum, sectoral working groups) and precedents (Nepal's Local Development Programme, Philippines' KALAHI-CIDSS), the Compact should be negotiated and signed by end 2026 with annual joint review monitoring from 2027. The Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives should lead compact development with provincial planning and development departments and establish a Joint Government-Donor Steering Committee with civil society representation.

9. Conclusion

Pakistan's over three-decade experience with community participation, examined alongside comparative evidence from South Asia, Africa, and Latin America, demonstrates that participation constitutes neither panacea nor mere procedural formality. Outcomes depend fundamentally on institutional design, power configurations, and governance linkages.

Participation reproduces poverty through several identifiable mechanisms. Operating at Choguill's ladder lower rungs (informing, diplomacy) provides legitimacy absent power transfer, ignoring or reinforcing elite capture and gendered exclusion. Proceeding without technical support and capacity development produces service delivery failures and resulting in isolation from higher-level policy and fiscal frameworks. Legislator-led development schemes that bypass local governments perpetuate patron-client relations.

Participation reduces multidimensional poverty only where it i) empowers communities with genuine resource and decision control; ii) embeds within responsive state institutions and organized civil society (the sandwich configuration); iii)

rules deliberately address gender and class inequalities through quotas, capacity development, and social mobilization; iv) systems operate through bottom-linked governance connecting grassroots action to policy reform, budget processes, and legal protection; and v) people receives support from harmonized, long-term donor engagement strengthening rather than bypassing domestic institutions.

Pakistan's central challenge involves redesigning participatory development as explicitly pro-poor, gender-responsive, and institutionally embedded strategy. The country possesses formal legislative provisions for participatory local governance, an active civil society sector, and successful community mobilization examples. What remains absent is political will to operationalize these provisions through SMART interventions addressing power, building capacity, ensuring inclusion, and establishing institutional linkages. While simultaneously dismantling parallel systems such as legislator-led development, donor PIUs that undermine participatory governance.

Two proposed implementation models, i.e. the Hybrid State-Civil Society Partnership Model and the Multi-Tiered Accountability Model provide concrete institutional architectures integrating global best practices with Pakistan's specific context. Seven recommendations, 1) multidimensional poverty diagnostics, 2) gender-responsive governance quotas, 3) district facilitation units, 4) bottom-linked governance pilots, 5) participatory adaptive monitoring, 6) legislator-led scheme elimination, 7) donor harmonization, offer actionable, time-bound pathways grounded in Pakistan's constitutional and legislative architecture.

These measures cannot eliminate multidimensional poverty rapidly. They establish credible institutional routes ensuring participation serves its intended purpose. These will ensure expanding capabilities, redistributing power, enabling the poor to live lives they value. For international donors, the imperative proves clear. They need transition from fragmented and short-term project support toward harmonized, long-term institutional strengthening building sustainable participatory governance capacity. For Pakistan's government, the challenge involves embracing genuine devolution, not merely administrative decentralization but political transformation transferring power and resources

to elected local governments and empowered communities.

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