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CLIMATE FEDERALISM WITHOUT SHARED RULE: CENTRE–PROVINCE COORDINATION IN CLIMATE CHANGE GOVERNANCE AND DISASTER RISK MANAGEMENT IN PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

The issue of climate-governance in Pakistan is often blamed on decentralized/institutional setup, limited capacities of provinces and devolution of environmental authority through the Eighteenth Constitutional Amendment. But these diagnoses highlight relevant symptoms without necessarily reflecting why the path of a more networked governance of climate change – in terms of more climate policies, climate councils, climate authorities, catastrophe and climate finance strategies and platforms – has not resulted in coherent action. This article contends that Pakistan has come up with a way forward by establishing a route to climate federalism without any institutionalised shared rule. Authorities exist at several environmental and many climate sensitive levels, especially provincial, where some governments have powers, the federal government has international representation and have a significant fiscal leverage, and the local governments are held back, at the same time, to the front line risks, but do not have a stable on its own authority or financing. This makes for an authority/capacity/accountability disconnect that leads to duplication of policies, unfunded mandates, strategic blame passing, and pushes towards institutional bias towards addressing relief, rather than resilience, in the aftermath of a disaster. The article analyzes the constitutional provisions, legislation on climate and disaster risks, national and provincial policies that have primarily been implemented between 2021 and 2025 and postscholarship analysis. This is regarded as a stress test of the multilevel governance system in 2022, with flooding events. The article builds on the notion of negotiated climate federalism, which would be based on a federal-provincial climate compact, differentiated implementation agreements, climate-responsive fiscal equalisation, integrated climate-disaster information, empowered local governments, and include substantive duties under article 9A that are enforceable. It sums up that the issue in Pakistan is not over devolution, it is under federalisation – self-rule has been given but the systems required for own fiscal arrangements, shared decision-making and monitoring and accountability remain underdeveloped in Pakistan.

Keywords: *Climate federalism, cooperative federalism, climate finance, provincial autonomy, article 9A, Pakistan, and disaster risk governance are some of the key words that were used in the conversations.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Federal government is based on territorial concepts, but these are being upended by climate change. The emissions, watersheds, river systems, heat, migration and food markets and infrastructure networks transcend boundaries, and many of the climate risk responses are place-based. Subnational knowledge and implementation is crucial for effectively designing floodplain regulation, agricultural extension, drainage, building control and public-health preparedness and ecosystem restoration. Federal systems thus bring some institutional advantages and a collective-action problem as they allow experimentation and adaptation at a local level, but they can also lead to sharing of responsibilities and to a shifting of costs among levels (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2022a; Fenna et al., 2023).

This is a dilemma in a state of emergency in Pakistan. It is climate vulnerable via the Indus basin river systems, glacier dependent water sources/basins, arid and semi-arid areas, fast pace urbanisation, agro-based livelihood, coastal vulnerability and differential administrative ability. They are not risks which are within the scope of a single ministry. They are created and managed by making decisions on water, agriculture, energy, transport, health, housing, forests, public finance and disaster management and local government. The cross-sectoral nature of this is recognised through the National Climate Change Policy 2021 and National Adaptation Plan 2023, but this recognition has not resulted in a corresponding architecture for the implementation, as yet (GoP, 2021a, 2023; World Bank, 2022).

The concurrent legislative list changes to abolish the list are often referred to as the institutional roots to Pakistan's climate-governance challenges as this change enhanced provinces' power over environmental regulation and several sectors sensitive to climate change. Nevertheless, the federal government kept foreign affairs, national representation under the climate regime and the important energy functions, a sovereign financing as well as considerable influence on the development planning. This resulted in a 'constitutionally-scattered policy space' where policies can be national, but policy delivery is usually in the province or communities. Recent studies find that uncertainty, or a disconnect, between central policy direction and devolved implementation, is a major barrier, yet it is also seen that incoherence goes beyond the vertical between the center and the devolved territories—to the horizontal level of policies and development plans (Masud & Khan 2024; Waheed et al., 2021, 2025).

The usual answer is ‘fragmentation’ and to examine the need for greater co-ordination from the federal government. That diagnosis is partial, since there are no apolitical coordinations. This can involve information sharing, consultation, decision making as a joint group; conditional funding, or command by the Federal government. Equating these different views and institutions with one another can mask another new centralising idea – that a more powerful federal organization in a province can lead to coherence of policy. This does an injustice to the role of provincial autonomy as part of the constitution, as well as the locally-differentiated nature of adaptation (Fenna et al., 2023; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2023).

This article presents an alternative argument. The real challenge of Pakistan is not to shortcut a federally structured system where the provinces are provided greater autonomy, but climate federalism without any institutionalised form of shared rule. The scope of provincial autonomy has grown without a consistent and binding mechanism for the provinces and others to come together to negotiate national goals, assign implementation duties, fund and evaluate results. However, the federal government is able to develop national strategies, and international submissions, but the government is not in a position to directly enact many elements of these strategies in its sectors. Local governments are faced with immediate demands and pressures from the public, with being institutionally and financially reliant on the provinces. What emerges is an authority–capacity–accountability mismatch as opposed to the lack of institutions (Faiz 2024; Masud & Khan 2024).

This mismatch was made apparent last year during the 2022 floods. They resulted in total cases of direct damage of about US$14.9 billion and economic losses of US$15.2 billion; and resilient recovery and reconstruction costs of at least US$16.3 billion. The magnitude of the loss was reflective of more than just the 'Once in a 100 years' storm. It showed the overlapping of climatic hazard and land use decisions, lack of infrastructure, social inequality, absence of proper drainage and lack of local capacity and fragmented risk governance. The disaster can thus be a very significant test of how interconnected the long-term adaptation, DRR and emergency response and reconstruction (Government of Pakistan et al., 2022; United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction [UNDRR], 2022) elements are in Pakistan's institutions.

These questions the article raises are: How is the responsibility of climate and disaster distributed among federal, provincial and local institutions?; Why is there – despite successive policies and coordinating bodies and institutions – a lack of implementation?; What institutional model can reconcile the autonomy of provinces with national co-ordinating bodies and institutions and equitable financing? It has three-fold contribution. It is able to identify the difference between fragmentation and the complete lack of shared rule – one of the most significant differences in conceptualizing climate and disaster governance, includes consideration of climate and disaster governance in a single political framework and formulate an analytical model of negotiated climate federalism that would work in the context of Pakistan's constitutional framework. The argument seems to be to not have everything at one level, but to be purposeful with the alignment of the authority, resources, info and answerability across levels (Fenna et al., 2023; Vij et al., 2024).

2. Climate Federalism, Shared Rule and Policy Coherence

Climate federalism is about delegating and meshing climates and about how climatic powers can be constitutionally safeguarded. Provincial and territorial governments are not just in charge of the centres' offices and do have an analytic difference with administrative decentralisation, as all have political mandates, legislative powers and are territorial. This comparative scholarship offers one another evidence to show how federal systems can open up more spaces to act on climate change, how they can facilitate experimentation and how the performance of subnational governments can go beyond what the national government is able to do. The same multiplicity can also create 'veto points' (Fenna et al., 2023; IPCC, 2022b) as well as regulatory inconsistencies and competing credits and blames.

The classic notions of centralisation-decentralisation are thus misleading. The role of most climate functions cannot be attributed to one and only one level of government. National institutions have greater means to act on behalf of the state internationally, establish minimum standards, pull out leverage from the State in the financial markets and manage cross boundary externalities. Provinces and municipalities are more likely to be able to customize the types of land use, infrastructure, health and livelihoods interventions within a specific area. Organised overlap – rules of who leads, gives money, argues for support, reports and takes responsibility when collective results are not achieved – is key for effective climate governance (OECD, 2023; Martinez-Vazquez, 2021).

The difference between the concept of self-rule and shared rule would make the problem in contexts of institutions more established. Self-rule is the ability of provinces to rule in their cast-off areas which are recognised in the constitution. Being involved in decisions that impact the federation as a whole, is known as shared rule. Removing the upward accountability of subnational governments to the national level also removes the federal governments' ability to be instrumental in setting targets, setting up finance and monitoring mechanisms, creating an unbalanced situation in the climate federation. It is wrong too if the centre makes announcements and implementation is to be based on parts for which it has no control. Ensuring representation on a council is not enough – Provinces must be involved in agenda setting, harmonization and implementation through binding agreements (Faiz, 2024; Fenna et al., 2023).

The problem is vertical – policy coherence introduces another dimension to it which is horizontal. Climate action are treated as institutional, in an environment or climate department, and the most impactful decisions are taken by planning, finance, irrigation and agriculture, energy, transport, housing and local-government institutions. Based on studies done in Pakistan, there is clearly some disconnect between water policies and agricultural, energy, development, disaster management, and environmental policies. This suggests the ability to combine an ambitious climate approach with ongoing public investments and policies that result in emissions, exposure or maladaptation (Waheed et al., 2021, 2023, 2025).

Power also affects how institutions relate to each other, and to the context: not only is the context technically influenced, but also by power. It is not uncommon to see how expert-led, infrastructural solutions are prioritized in the development of climate policies in the South Asian region, while marginalizing less powerful actors, reducing the planning time scale for local communities/areas and reproducing inequalities between national, subnational and community level institutions. Limited ownership of climate policy exists in Pakistan, as the field is mostly a specialised federal area, done with closed consultation. Coordination mechanisms might therefore generate exclusion in isolation of political incentives, even though sounding to be rather comprehensive.

Climate governance and disaster-risk management should be analysed further and as one risk-governance system at the same time. There are several shared elements of adaptation/disaster risk-reduction that include building standards, floodplain regulation, watershed management, heat-health planning and early warning/resilient infrastructure. The mechanism of separating institutional actors is detrimental when institutional actors of a disaster are blamed for losses caused by decisions in development and land use as well as infrastructure which are beyond their responsibility. This distinction can in turn create a length of responsibility for risks (dispersed) and response (concentrated) in a climate policy system, as opposed to an emergency-management system. (UNDRR, 2022, Waheed et al., 2023)

This article thus examines the climate federalism in Pakistan with respect to five dimensions, namely, authority, finance, integration, information and accountability. Authority wonders: Is there any law over the job performed by the institutions? Finance is looking at - is there a sense of responsibility with resources? Integration explores linkages between Climate, Disaster and Development Plan. Information evaluates if the risk, expenditure and performance information can be made available to be shared and combined. Accountability determines whether or not a cause of non-performance might be pinned-down on the doorstep of a particular institution. These dimensions provide a more tangible and measurable set of institutional needs as a way of making the notion of coordination more tangible and measurable (OECD, 2022, 2023; Waheed et al., 2024).

3. Methodology

This study is based on qualitative critical-institutional design which is based on doctrinal – legal approaches, structured policy approach and critical-case approach. Doctrinal analysis is a process to identify the constitutional and statutory responsibilities and institutional analysis looks at the formality of the allocation of these powers given a set of decision rules, resources and accountability frameworks. This design is suitable as the object of the research is the architecture for climate commitments' transfer into governmental actions and not a causal impact of one programme. Document-based methods have been applied to assess climate-policy coherence, integration of environment governance and disaster policies in Pakistan through a series of studies (Waheed et al., 2021, 2023, 2024).

The main set comprises of Constitution, and the following pieces of legislation: Pakistan Climate Change Act 2017, National Disaster Management Act 2010, National Climate Change Policy 2021, Updated NDC 2021, National Adaptation Plan 2023, National Climate Finance Strategy 2024 and selected Provincial instruments, from Sindh, Punjab and Balochistan. Older constitutional and statutory documents have been included since they provide the legal framework, as have many of the policy sources which are predominantly post-2020, in line with the focus on the contemporary governance system (GoP, 2021a, 2021b, 2023, 2024, 2025; National Disaster Management Authority [NDMA], 2025).

They examined documents under an institution-leading and other seven questions: does the leading institution have constitutional and/or statutory authority to do so; are there other institutions that must engage in cooperation; is cooperation either mandatory or negotiated or-for the sake of argument-discretionary; is financing identified that will be allocated to achieve cooperation; are outputs specified that must be delivered under cooperation; are reported deadlines set for cooperation; and what are the legal, or fiscal, or political, or administrative consequences of failure to cooperate. Mentions of 'coordination', 'mainstreaming' or 'capacity building' were only counted as implementation mechanism, where the report also included both decision rights and resources, as well as reporting requirements. This distinction is important as there can be a thin implementation and a thick policy – these two can occur simultaneously (Masud & Khan, 2024; Waheed et al., 2025).

The situation of the 2022 floods is being used as a critical stress and has no attempt at providing a comprehensive empirical case study. A key case tells about institutional relationships which might otherwise not be on the administration's 'radar screen' or be visible during regular administration. It is important to note that not everything that has been lost is blamed as a failure of the government; it is analysed in regard to territorial system of governance in relation to risk reduction, preparedness, response and recovery at the sectoral and territorial levels. However, there are some limitations to the method due to missing interviews and data available for provinces was not uniform and uniform, so the findings should be understood only as formal design and publicized implementation, as there may many other informal bureaucratic practices (Government of Pakistan et al., 2022; Zhu et al., 2026).

4. Examining the country's constitution and institutional structure functioning

In Pakistan there is no individual legislative area to deal with 'climate change' as per the Constitution. Multiple areas of competence, such as environment, agriculture, terrestrial uses, local administration, water, energy, transport, public health, planning and external affairs are contributing to climate action. Since the Eighteenth Amendment, the federation has held responsibility for foreign affairs and foreign representation, sovereign finance and a few nationally important infrastructure/regulatory powers, with a majority of the environmental/ climate sensitive assignments being foremost within the provinces. So, rather than the constitutional ownership of climate change, the focus is on which level has the control on implementing each tool to battle climate change (Faiz, 2024; Waseem, 2024).

In recent years it is the Eighteenth Amendment that is frequently seen as the source of fragmentation, and that does the service of oversimplifying history and analysis. The amendment is not avoiding the issue of environmental enforcement, instability of local governments and sectoral silos in Pakistan were present prior to the amendment. These weakness redistributed with devolution are not new but rather "recycled". It also created potential benefits as the provinces also have different ecological and socioeconomic situations which enabled them to tailor policies. Different adaptation is needed in different areas, particularly areas of water scarcity (node 3) and urban/industrial Punjab, mountainous regions (node 1), and coastal Sindh (node 2) (Masud & Khan, 2024; World Bank, 2022).

The main issue is that, following devolution, there was inadequate evolution of intergovernmental bargaining. The intergovernmental relations in Pakistan are highly executive and politically-motivated. The evidence in the context of federation – Sindh relations reveals that even constitutional fora can be undermined if there is a high level of partisan polarization, resulting in less information sharing, trust and joint problem solving. Climate policy is actually extremely susceptible, with the advantages occurring over the longer term, distributive expenses and various policies involving changes in land use, infrastructure, or resource allocation, impacting patterns of land that is important to politicians.

The Council of Common Interests is a constitutional forum to handle specific federal–provincial concerns such as those related to shared resources and Part II of the Federal Legislative List. Climate governance, however, has evolved mostly along statutory Councils, Ministries and policy committees outside a systematic and framework of accounting for CoCI. While not all challenges related to climate change should be handed over to the Council, there is a need for a constitutional forum (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, 2024; Waseem, 2024) for political consensus and dispute resolution for interprovincial water and national energy issues including major fiscal disputes and risk issues crossing provinces or states boundaries.

The Pakistan Climate Change Act 2017 has established “Pakistan Climate Change Council”, “Pakistan Climate Change Authority” and a climate fund. It is designed according to the requirements of national coordination, development of policies, international reports, collection of data and mobilisation of resources. However the Act represents co-ordination as a service performed by a federal statutory organisation and not one that can be negotiated between governments. It does not outline a detailed timelines to allocate the national commitments to federal, provincial and local institutions or stringently provide a solution for disagreements on national levels in terms of priorities and financial allocations (Pakistan Climate Change Act, 2017; GoP, 2025).

Climate Change Authority was established late, again showing the delay between enactment of statutes and institutionalisation. While the Authority was established by law when it was passed in 2017, it was only-firstly running after the judicial pressures in 2024. It is a good start to formalise the architecture but will be effective if it can be an intergovernmental technical platform or another body to develop plans for provincial departments. Without proper access to data, leveraging budget, provincial support and clear procedures, the coordinating authority could result in an additional layer of administering without affecting the incentive to implement the changes, (GoP, 2025; United Nations Pakistan, 2025).

The disaster-management system is vertically replicated through national, provincial and district institutions. This seems to be compatible with multilevel governance, nonetheless a lot of factors are not in the control of disaster authorities to determine the risk level. They have no control over urban sprawl, compliance with the building codes, drainage, change of layouts in irrigation schemes and placement of infrastructure in critical zones. As a result, these institutions can be publicly held accountable over such losses generated by their routine planning, development, housing and local-government decisions (NDMA, 2025; UNDRR, 2022).

The Constitutional Amendment in Article 9A which came in 2024, entitles every person the right to environment of a healthy sustainable and clean of nature. The new element in the provision is to provide the formerly 'normative' environmental governance a fundamental right status. However, intergovernmental coordination can no longer be simply an administrative convenience since, to achieve that right, the powers are passed between various levels of governments. While adjudication of public duties in a case may be complex because of nature of jurisdiction, absence of action cannot be used as an excuse when a public authority has the power to adjudicate the case (Constitution (Twenty-sixth Amendment) Act, 2024; Human Rights Commission of Pakistan [HRCP], 2025).

5. Diagnosing the Implementation Deficit

In short, Pakistan faces the problem of climate policy density and thinness of its implementation. The state has implemented (adopted) national policies, as well as NDCs, adaptation plans and finance strategies, provincial policies, and implementation committees and statutory authorities. These instruments expand the scope of understanding of climate risk but many lack the verbs of commitment—that turn the instruments into funded, time-bound and enforceable commitments: to promote, facilitate, strengthen and coordinate. Arrowsmith, 2012). This can lead to the following elements: Policy-making can thus serve as a token of goodwill and a window dresser for a progress that is far from achieved in the processes of decision making (Masud & Khan, 2024; Waheed et al., 2024).

The National Climate Change Policy 2021 is an instance of them. It has a measure around broad adaptation and mitigation priorities and proposed the need for more interaction, activation etc. of federal and province bodies for implementation, as well as functionalisation of Climate Change Authority. It's so wide ranging because of the nature of climate change and to some extent, diffused, with no real clear lead steward identified. When each ministry and each level of government encompasses a description of responsible, where there is no cooperation in implementation, that fact is a non-performance, and not particular ministry or government or specific institution's nonperformance (GoP, 2021a; Masud & Khan, 2024).

The National Adaptation Plan 2023 builds upon the previous policy and links up the efforts with activities of the federal ministries, the provincial planning departments, line agencies as well as the local governments. It also takes into account the capacity gaps at subnational level and learnings from the governance challenges during the floods in 2022. However, by putting several 'responsible entities' next to an action, it has not been decided which institution is responsible or what budget can be used to deliver the action or what happens if it is not completed on schedule. The Plan is well strategically placed but largely hinges in being translated into provincial scale development programmes and departmental business rules (GoP, 2023; Zhu et al., 2026).

This is the implementation gap which is a combination of vertical and horizontal fragmentation of gummadi. Vertical fragmentation is where commitment is made at a federal level but delivery is based at a provincial and/or local level. Horizontal fragmentation exists between the climate, planning, finance, agriculture, irrigation, disaster, transport and urban institutions at each of the above levels. A federal–provincial committee can be established to deal with the vertical relationship without affecting any of the sectoral incentives; an interdepartmental provincial committee to enhance horizontal exchange without any connection to national finance or reporting. Therefore, reforms need to be effective at both ends of the two axes (Waheed et al., 2021; 2023; 2025).

layering within institutions adds to the lack of clarity. New climate units and committees are set up and added on top of existing development decision-making bureaucracies, with little or no changes in budgetary, human or legal resources. Climate departments need to advocate to other more powerful planning, finance, energy and infrastructure institutions to include climatic factors. Waheed et al., 2024, 2025, highlighted the role of coordination through influencing and leadership, if risk screening and climate objectives are not part of the project appraisal, procurement, budget approval and project performance evaluation.

Political economy of expertise also is relevant. Climate policy can be represented as a specialized area of science, only a handful of scientists is needed to have an influence on, restricting participation and exasperating the centralized agenda-setting. From interviews with all informants and a review of the literature, Masud and Khan concluded that civil-society and community people were only considered relevant during implementation, not in the policy development process. SSI can isolate and ignore local knowledge and promote the instrumentation of engineering over institutional, ecological and distributive approaches to innovation, all over South Asia. Therefore, a coordination system as such can be formally inclusive and influence substantive at the same time, which is considered as concentrated influence (Masud & Khan, 2024; Vij et al., 2024).

The provincial differentiation can be used as a tool of highlighting pros and cons of devolution. Sindh has also approved a climate policy in 2022 and appointed focal persons within all the climate-sensitive departments and Balochistan has a climate policy with governance set-up, reporting, finance and sectoral action plans specific to the province's unique vulnerability in 2024. One of the action steps for the CACFP is the development of a Climate Resilient Punjab Vision and Action Plan and enhancement of the climate-policy capacity. Such initiatives demonstrate that there is potential for provincial autonomy to spur innovation, but also point to differing levels of institutional maturity and technical resources at the disposal of each province (Government of Balochistan, 2024; Government of Punjab, 2024; Government of Sindh, 2022).

Asymmetry in itself is not an aspect of federalism that is a primary concern. Differentiation can be acceptable to different provinces as a different path to a specific outcome while the national institutions can stop it from being institutionalized ways of accepting inequality. Bankable projects can be developed more easily in provinces that have a stronger bureaucracy, and are more rapid to access external technical and skill sets and to meet complex donor standards than in highly vulnerable, but bureaucracially weaker jurisdictions. Competitive climate finance could potentially target funding to institutional capability, rather than need, if missing the necessary project-preparation and equalisation support.If project-preparation and/or equalisation support are not available, competitive climate finance may focus on institutional capacity, and not on need (Martinez-Vazquez, 2021; OECD, 2022).

The fiscal imbalance is particularly high. The National Climate Finance Strategy projects that there is still a large gap between the required financing and domestic/external flows. Compared to the federation, provinces and local governments have access to fewer resources for sovereign borrowing, multilateral finance and international negotiation and control many areas in which adaptation investments will have to take place. This is due to a vertical imbalance – where inputs are at one level and outcomes are at other levels. Under the lack of clear guidelines of allocation climate finance has the potential to further empower the discretion of the federal government and competition amongst provinces (GoP, 2024; United Nations Pakistan, 2025).

Expenditure classification in the form of green budget tagging, green bonds and other mechanisms is a welcome development, but do not always lead to effectiveness, and these come with their own set of greenwashing risks. A project can be considered climate without adding, it doesn't have to be additionality or show resilience distributional benefit. Reconstruction can be considered as adaptation, even if the damaged infrastructure is rebuilt as it was before the damage. It is therefore crucial to bring credible climate budgeting in line with territorial risk, outcome indicators and independent evaluation, and not just report on the amount of expenditure labelled as climate, as is often done (GoP, 2025; OECD, 2022).

The National Finance Commission is yet to be optimally utilized as a climate-governance tool. However, the major federal–provincial transfer system is not yet incorporating climate vulnerability and adaptation costs and ecosystem services. A formula sensitive to climate impacts needs to be able to account for exposure and fiscal capacity differentials and grants for performance can be used to incentivize agreed outcomes. However, conditional finance can only be negotiated, else it might lead to a possible loss of provincial autonomy by the risk of imposing federal conditions and incentive structures and/or to formal compliance, rather than to substantive innovation (Martinez-Vazquez, 2021; OECD, 2021).

All data fragmentation adds to fiscal and institutional fragmentation. Different sectors such as the meteorology, disaster, irrigation, environment, planning and statistical services as well as local-government agencies produce information with various classifications and reporting frequency. Hazard information might not influence granting permissions for land use; climate expenditure might not correlate to location or vulnerability of projects; activities in provinces might be complicated when compiling climate expenditure on national level. Even if a national database is resolved without any legal responsibilities of institutions, consensus on indicators and incentives to share (GoP, 2023, 2025; Waheed et al., 2024) the problem can't be solved.

A federated information architecture where provinces continue to maintain the ownership and validation of their information and interoperability and aggregation facilitated by the development of national standards, is appropriate. Every climate action needs to be accompanied by an accountable institution, location, money and time and a source of an indicator and verification. Then public dashboards could be used to differentiate the announced commitments, from the funded and completed actions. This kind of transparency would facilitate legislative oversight and audit, judicial oversight and policy learning on a province-wide basis (OECD, 2023; GoP, 2025).

The largest, most significant vertical gap is at the level below that of the province. Global impacts are local, but, autonomia provincial is not ubiquitous and necessarily leads to autonomia local. District and municipal bodies have jurisdiction over drainage, waste removal, local roads, building controls, water and even shelters and community communications, but are built and elected and organized, and socio-economically funded, to be compliant with the provincial options. Hence devolution can end at the provincial capital as there would still be a centralisation of power at that level, rather than at the federally level (OECD, 2023; GoP, 2023).

This puts in place downward accountability displacement. Federation can hold provinces accountable for things related to climate; capacity at the province to give districts and municipality tasks; at times, local governments can be short on people, money and control. Citizens experience failures on the local level, but it is not obvious from a citizen's point of view who was in control of the funds/budget or who was involved in a decision. The legal establishment of local functions, where and how they are financed and how they are integrated into planning processes at the local and provincial level are essential to a successful implementation of climate federalism – and not merely as project-based delivery arrangements (OECD, 2023, Martinez-Vazquez, 2021).

6. The 2022 Floods as a Critical Stress Test

The various climate, disaster and development policy areas day before yesterday were illustrated by the way for being tried to handle and manage the impact of the floods in 2022. Damage was experienced with respect to housing, agriculture, transport, education, health, irrigation, water and sanitation – all relating to various governmental mandates. None of these losses could be prevented by any disaster authority alone, nor could there be any single disaster authority to repair them. This event, therefore, highlighted that disaster effects are the result of cumulative decisions made by various sectoral agencies and departments, and local governments long before disaster agencies get into action (Government of Pakistan et al., 2022; UNDRR, 2022).

Issues that were identified in the Post-Disaster Needs Assessment are that there were systemic weaknesses such as inadequate urban planning, weaknesses in water governance, weak infrastructure and institutional limitations. These findings refute framings of the floods as a kind of 'external shock' that is inevitable or as an issue of global climate injustice. Given Pakistan's small contribution to global emission levels, there is a strong case for providing international support for this country; however its internal governance also has a great impact, as it is through this that hazards are translated to unequal losses. Climate justice internationally and internal accountability of the administration is thus not mutually exclusive explanations but complementary (Government of Pakistan et al., 2022; World Bank, 2022).

Emergency response resulted in easily visible federal–provincial collaboration of various types such as national mobilisation, provincial operations, district delivery and international assistance. However, crisis coordination is also many times politically-centralised, lacks structure and is based on project temporary structures. Should not be confused with institutionalised shared rule. A resilient federation coordinates before disaster, when the prevention benefits are not yet guaranteed and any action taken in the disaster prevention process will cost the federation politically in the immediate future, such as floodplain regulation, floodplain relocation, building control and protection of ecosystem.

The difference can be formulated as being relief or resilience federalism. Relief federalism is the result of a catastrophe when there is a need for relief, a focus on the issue and a third-party intervenor. To implement resilience federalism these collaborative efforts need to be regularly undertaken within the moving parts of budgets, development permissions, maintenance, risk assessment and local control. Perhaps for this reason, the institutions of Pakistan have been more effective in mobilising relief rather than in averting accumulation of exposure since giving out relief will earn political rewards which will not be the case with prevention.

The reconstruction also highlights the need for national standards which are differentiated. While 'build back better' solutions reject the notion of a homogeneous federal model, it cannot allow for provinces to build back to what was vulnerable or even more vulnerable before the disaster. The federations has a legitimate role in defining minimum resilience conditions of nationally or externally financed assets, provinces should specify of design and procurement to territorial conditions whilst local governments to verify usability and maintenance in the case of assets financed under construction and operation through local authorities. It is this mix of usual consequences and variable means that is the essence of negotiated federalism on climate change (Government of Pakistan et al., 2022; OECD, 2023).

7. Towards Negotiated Climate Federalism

However, what Pakistan does not need is the centralisation of its environmental powers and also no blanket belief that the autonomous action of provinces will naturally coalesce into national resilience. To achieve this, negotiated climate federalism is necessary, which involves defining national objectives in a negotiated manner; specifying responsibilities according to target, function and territory; matching funding with responsibility; and making performance public. The model acknowledges that overlap is not avoidable anymore, but rather needs to be organised through explicit agreements instead of, as formerly, being dealt through consultation, with an element of discretion (Fenna et al., 2023; Martinez-Vazquez, 2021).

The initial reform should be the Federal–Provincial Climate and Disaster Compact that is endorsed through the Council of Common Interests and legislationally coupled to the Climate Change Act. The minimum results in resilience objectives across the country, the responsibilities of the provinces for implementation, principles of financing, data responsibilities and dispute-resolution mechanisms should be set in the Compact. It should be updated regularly in each NDC/ Adaptation cycle. This will mitigate reliance on evolutions in political dynamics and help in taking the Council out of the routine climate programme administration cycle (Faiz, 2024; GoP, 2025).

The implementation of the Compact should be done under different implementation agreements with differences. The agreement of each major commitment shall include the following elements: the institution(s) responsible for leading the fulfilment of the commitment, the institution(s) to support the commitment, where the funds shall come from, along with the deadline, indicator and verification of the achievement of it. The federation should be in the lead for international reporting and national inventories, sovereign climate finance and cross-boundary coordination and minimum standards. Allow Sectoral Adaptation, regulation of the environment, agriculture, and provincial infrastructure and control of local delivery to be led by Provinces. Over local risk reduction, drainage, local land-use enforcement and community preparedness, it is important to have strong leadership by local governments (OECD, 2023; IPCC, 2022b).

Technical secretariat of this negotiated system should, instead, be based on the Pakistan Climate Change Authority (CCA) which should not exist as a command authority. The common method would lend it credibility, along with credible analysis and transparent monitoring – not in its role as a substitute for provincial departments. GRPs should be involved in the agenda-setting process and in identifying/validating data and

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prioritising projects. Comparative implementation reports should be published by the Authority while political decisions on duties, finance allocation at the intergovernmental-level should be made in the correct forums (Pakistan Climate Change Act, 2017; GoP, 2025).

A common risk architecture to be used in climate and disaster planning. Vulnerability indicators, hazard scenarios and monitoring cycles for the National Adaptation Plan (NAP) should be common with the National Disaster Management Plan and the provincial climate strategies and development programmes. Prior to the approval of major public investment, climate and disaster risk screening as an integral part of the approval process must be done; and compliance screening must be independently auditable. Disaster-loss reviews should not be limited to disaster response by pointing fingers but should focus on planning, construction, and maintenance and warning failures.

It is important to have an integration of equalisation and performance in fiscal reform. Water stress, infrastructure limitations, and ecosystem services and fiscal capacity should be included in a climate sensitive transfer window, in addition to exposure and poverty. This would take account of varying adaptation costs amongst provinces and potential benefits of ecosystem protection that may be beyond provincial boundaries. Indicators should be independently verifiable and not set up to incentivize risk taking or the claims of high vulnerability levels (Martinez-Vazquez, 2021; OECD, 2021).

A consideration of performance grants should include measurable outcomes at the most basic level including operational dissemination of early-warning, risk sensitive local plans, resilient schools and health facilities, heat-action plans, and building or floodplain standards enforcement. There should be provincial discretion as to how this implementation is done so as to keep federalism's ability to experiment. Project-preparation support shall be provided to less capable Administration Provinces and Districts to ensure that there are no impediments to climate finance, stemming from a lack of administrative competitive capacity of the Administration Province or District.

Climate finance needs must also be socially fair and transparent in territorial terms. Allocation by province, district, sector, funding instrument, the categorisation of the beneficiaries and distinctions between grants/loans/guarantees and private mobilisation needs to be made transparent via public reporting. There is a need to link expenditure tagging with an evaluation of outcomes and distributional analysis. This is critical, because the rationale of debt financing adaptation can be to burden the already stretched out public budgets with climate adaptation costs, and project-based financing can favour visible infrastructure projects, over the adaptation of local institutions and ecosystem-based approaches (GoP, 2024; United Nations Pakistan, 2025).

The creation of a federated climate–disaster information protocol should include harmonization of the definitions, metadata, quality criteria and reporting requirements. Each Province to gather and also validate its very own information with the Climate Change Authority guaranteeing interoperability and national merging. Early-warning information needs to be communicated in a locally useable way and there needs to be a connection between maps of hazards and approval of land-use and infrastructure. Data integration should consequently be considered an institutional and legal reform and not as a technology project (GoP, 2023; NDMA, 2025).

The words district in plans at the national level is not sufficient to realize localisation. A set of functions of local resilience should be set in provincial law with predictable transfers of resources in areas of drainage, waste and provision of water and risk communication, emergency readiness and local roads. District disaster / climate plan should be used as inputs to provincial development priority. There is a need to ensure continuity between institutions: moving staff, assets and institutions across different structures and fiscal arrangements, over and over again will not allow for the ongoing continuity of staff, assets or community trust (OECD, 2023; Martinez-Vazquez, 2021).

Community should be involved in the planning, selection of projects and the verification of the beneficiaries and social audit. Women, people living with disability, people living in informal settlements, farmers community and pastoral, climate and displaced people know the risks which are missing in formal system databases. Part and parcel of a participation process is the question of power: participation processes that are carried out after priorities have been set do not redistribute power. This means that locally led adaptation must be supported by access to information, reasoned responses to the community proposals and places where the impacted groups can make objections against taking measures they consider to be maladaptive (Vij et al., 2024, Zhu et al., 2026).

Climate accountability is a procedure that has a constitutional basis: Article 9A. Courts should not take on the role of a permanent climate policy administrator, but they can ensure that the public agencies create the plans mandated by the law, share evidence and costs, carry out risk assessments and involve affected communities and provide clarity over the reasons for failure. This demand for procedural responsibilities is more manageable than judicial orders to achieve specific technical results. Moreover, they would also shift the responsibility of climate change from the Federal/Provincial/Local level to the constitutional litigation mechanism (Constitution (Twenty-sixth Amendment) Act, 2024; HRCP, 2025).

A balance between judicial review, legislative and audit institutions is required. There needs to be a comparison of commitments, budgets, geographical distribution and outcomes in the form of annual reports to Parliament and provincial assemblies – climate federalism. Auditor-general institutions need to go beyond checking the regularity of financial transactions in conducting performance audits and include the quality of resilience and policy coherence. Public accounts and standing committees will then be able to pose questions to the ministries which control the decision on development, instead of putting only questions on climate change on the agenda of an environment department (Waheed et al., 2024, 2025; GoP, 2025).

8. Discussion

The analysis reveals the need that 'fragmentation' is a poor ultimate diagnosis. Fragmentation is not a mechanism that is seen to cause non-performance, but event rather how the institutions manifest themselves. This is the more profound disease of Pakistan, wherein there is a disconnect among power, capabilities and accountability. The federation has international responsibility, has significant finance, and provinces manage many of the sectors for implementing change–including local governments which have immediate expectations for services. Since these positions are not bound by obligations and commitments, it can easily justify that the other level controls the missing instrument (Masud & Khan, 2024; Faiz, 2024).

This is where the institutional proliferation (as an attempt to implementing) did not help clarifying the issue. There are opportunities for communication through councils/committees, but no pressure to change a budget, legal powers or political incentives. Only if the coordination is part of powerful processes like fiscal transfer, development appraisal, procurement, reporting, audit and legislative review will it become effective. Experience in Pakistan thus point to a fundamental distinction between ‘many' and ‘polycentric' when it comes to grounds of improving governance: many institutions could improve governance, but it would require reciprocal duty and learning mechanisms of interaction, between institutions, to do so (Fenna et al., 2023; IPCC, 2022b).

The results refute the argument of the recentralisation. Federal horizontal fragmentation would not be resolved, and local capacities set up by the Federal government would not be effective, even if implemented by a national or central command, for national standards, international commitments, cross-boundary risks, and equalisation. It might alternatively be a dilution of provincial jurisdictions and create lip service. On the other hand, full provincialisation would sidestep the problem of national emissions accounting and the sovereign financing as well rivers and interprovincial externalities. Therefore, negotiated climate federalism can, more so than a compromise between two perfect models be thought of as a response to a productive interdependence (OECD, 2023; Martinez-Vazquez, 2021).

The analysis also provides a new way of thinking about climate finance. Pakistan is highly exposed and contributes less to global emissions which makes its international demand for finance – both on the themes of 'grant' and 'accessibility' – compelling. However more funding can't replace a locally coherent institutional structure. Money flowing through opaque or 'projectised' programming system can exacerbate territorial inequalities, duplicate institutions and projects and favour those that are ready for the donors rather than those that reflect what is wanted or needed on the ground. Climate justice internationally needs to be linked to open fiscal federalism and effective delivery system at the local level in Pakistan, therefore.

Therefore, Article 9A fortifies the constitutional basis for common rule by putting environmental quality as a constitutional right. How important it proves in the practical world remains to be seen and will largely depend on the extent that it creates "procedural obligations" which result in holding "dispersed government to account. The realization of a right, for instance a right to information, brought about by several institutions, needs coordination, information and reasoned responsibility. Thus, Article 9A can contribute to shift the climate federalism as a policy arrangement to a constitutional and accountability architecture (HRCP, 2025; Constitution (Twenty-sixth amendment) Act, 2024).

9. Conclusion

The problem of climate-governance deficit in Pakistan is not just due to too much autonomy being given to the provinces. Self-governance was increased in the Eighteenth Amendment, though it was far from being put in place in an equally effective fashion in the federation. Its relation to national commitments and provincial action, federal financial leverage and local vulnerabilities has been discretionary and not through a necessarily binding intergovernmental agreement. This has led to an increase in policy density without clarifying on who should do what, who should pay for what, and who will be held accountable if municipalities do not do what they should.This has resulted in policies becoming increasingly dense, lacking clarity on who does what, who pays for what and who will be held accountable when a municipality fails to do what it should.

In 2022, the federal government has seen the devastating effects of this underdeveloped federalism through the floods. Accumulated risk due to land use, infrastructure, poverty and a lack of local government political will and/or sectoral coherence could only be addressed by emergency cooperation. The recent reforms, such as the National Adaptation Plan, National Climate Finance Strategy, National Climate Change Authority (NCCH) operationalisation, NDC 3.0 and Article 9A present an important opportunity. Their success relies upon whether or not they will replace or revise existing fiscal, planning, regulatory and accountability arrangements or burden their implementation with additional layers of policies.

The way forward is along the lines of negotiated climate federalism – a constitutionally suitable pathway. This is a combination of the national minimum outcomes and province specific implementation, climate responsive equalisation, integrated information and empowered local institutions and procedural accountability. The goal is to ensure overlap does not occur but for power and responsibility to match or to set it up that way. Moving the ownership of the climate policy from one level of the government to another will not fundamentally change the resilience of Pakistan but who can decide, fund, implement and take responsibility for the risks they can control.

Table 1. Institutional diagnosis and reform logic

Dimension	Observed pathology	Governance consequence	Reform principle
Authority	National commitments and devolved delivery are not allocated through binding agreements.	Mandate ambiguity and strategic blame shifting.	Differentiated federal–provincial implementation agreements.
Finance	Federal access to sovereign finance coexists with subnational delivery obligations.	Unfunded mandates and unequal provincial access to projects.	Climate equalisation plus negotiated performance grants.
Integration	Climate, disaster and development systems operate through parallel plans and committees.	Relief is prioritised over prevention; maladaptive investment persists.	Common risk screening and integrated planning cycles.
Information	Data are fragmented across sectors and levels and use inconsistent classifications.	Weak monitoring, national aggregation and territorial accountability.	Federated data ownership with mandatory interoperability.
Accountability	Whole-of-government language does not identify a final answerable institution.	Collective responsibility becomes diluted responsibility.	Lead-agency duties, public reporting, audit and Article 9A procedures.

Note. The table synthesises the article's analytical framework and reform proposals (Fenna et al., 2023; OECD, 2023; Waheed et al., 2025).

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