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Sustainable Development: A Mediating Proposition between Two Paradigms Pro-Development and Pro-Environment (A case study of Balochistan, Pakistan)

Dr. Abdul Rahim Changezi

Assistant professor, Department of Social Work, University of Balochistan, Quetta

rahimji@yahoo.com

Dr. Muhammad Yousuf

Lecturer, Department of Social Work, University of Balochistan, Quetta

usuf.barech@gmail.com

Abstract

The province Balochistan is the largest one among its four provinces including the areas such as Gilgit Baltistan and FANA/PATA areas, rich in terms or having access to Arabian Sea through its coastal best i.e. Makran regions. At the same time, it's rich in terms of having highly demanded mineral and natural resources such as Oil, Gas, Copper, Gold, Coal and many others. Despite of such richness, the masses here in the province is ranked amongst the poorest of poor. The situation in today's globalized world due to technological advancement such as Google and AI software tools remained no more undisclosed, but open to all including economically sound countries of the Western countries and multinational national corporations MNCs for business i.e. "maximization of profit" at any costs like IMF, World Bank and Asian Development Bank through their proxies including federal and provincial government of the country. Consequently, a large number of programs and projects have since long been initiated in order to primarily justify the ruling parties governance partially and providing huge space to all such internationally recognized investors to invest to gain benefits out of the lethargic, inefficient, ineffective and somewhat indifferent governance in countries such as Pakistan including the states and provinces, which is relatively rich in term of natural resources, weak governance and somewhat already persuaded to share burden and seek financial help from abroad specially western countries and their business counterparts .China, for being, closest, friendly and economically sound country took the advantage to explore by investing billion dollars in Balochistan, only for one reason i.e. one belt and one route also called BRI to maximize its profit and find new market for its already over produced production in almost all aspects of daily life including both necessity and luxurious items of household and economic activities of a country such as efforts are primarily aims to look into the matter and while logically and according set standards internationally and get benefitted from these mega CPEC, Gwadar Deep Sea Port, Reko Diq and Saindak Copper and Gold Mining projects were launched, however without meeting the set standards set by UN in the form of four major indicators of "sustainable development" such as economic viability, social/cultural acceptability, political feasibility and, indeed, environmentally friendly suitable interventions. All such mega projects do face various issues including scientific investigations. This research paper is a preliminary effort in this regard aiming to raise political and social awareness among masses in general, and concerned communities and researchers in particular.

Keywords: Sustainable Development, Economic Viability, Political Feasibility, Social/Cultural Acceptability and Environmentally Friendly, Mega Project and, Environmental Justice.

INTRODUCTION

Almost half of geographical landscape of Pakistan comprise of Balochistan i.e. 44.7%, yes with, relatively, more richness in terms of natural resources such as five ecological zones - arid, semi-arid, plain, hilly/ mountainous and deserts areas (Baloch & Tanik, 2008). The semi-arid and mountainous zones is promised to be good for settled life, whereas the arid and plain zones are suitable for fishing and specialized herding including farming/agriculture due to surface water availability. The desert zone areas are almost uninhabitable due to harsh weather conditions and scarcity of water mainly (Khan et al. 2021). The province is adequately, well-off, in terms, of already explored and yet to be explored minerals resources such as copper, gold /coal deposits, natural gas and other precious natural resources along with its geo-political importance as a result of sharing common borders with Iran, Afghanistan and through them to middle eastern and central Asian countries both through silk road and via longest coastal belt that it lucky have, however, with highest ratio of mass poverty across provinces (United Nations Development Program (Nnaemedo & Ugwu, 2022). Balochistan currently expected to be hosting China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) through Gwadar Deep Sea port. So far, an investment of \$25 billion dollars Since 2015, have already been flowed, mostly by China, to up-grade Gwadar Airport for international flights, improve Deep Sea Port in accordance to international standards, developing infrastructure to meet the challenges of energy crises and ensuring provision of basic social services of clean drinking water and basic health facilities, however, its areas of operations is limited and confined to only foreigners i.e. Chinese, for the most part, and other technical human resources from different countries on be basis of needs and incidences of emergencies, and not for actual residence of the areas (Hussain, 2019). One vividly evidence of such facilitation is construction of road namely Surab-Hushab Highway also called N-85 or connecting to M-8 Motorway that has minimized travel time from 32-36 hours to 10-13 hours instead (World Bank, 2020).

The province despite all such richness ranked poorest of the poor as more than 71% of its populace is faced with Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) compared to 38% at national level according to IPRI report in 2015, the figure become more alarming when it comes to Urban 37% and 84% in rural areas 39% in Balochistan (Islamabad Policy Research Institute IPRI, 2015). As of 2025, 70% of Baluchistan's population lives in multidimensional poverty, and 43.9% of households lack grid electricity (Hameedi, 2025; World Bank, 2023).

The ever increasing gulfs between other province and Balochistan in term of socio-economic status including mass poverty do prevail in the heart of concept of sustainable development crisis, as the current infrastructure and well-being of people belonging to Balochistan do not match each others at any ground. The current situation does pose certain questions with regard to meet the goals of UNs Sustainable Development Goals by the year 2030 as it requires balanced progress in terms of socio-economic, political and environmental pillars as all four parameters are basically the main indicators of sustainable development (United Nations, 2015). In Balochistan, all mega projects being undertaken such as CPEC, Reko Diq, Gwadar Deep Sea Port and Saindak Gold, Copper and Silver Mining project seems to have compromised physical capital over local capacities, equity, political feasibility and ecological safeguards (Shah, 2021). This research paper investigates how effective and efficient are those mega projects in terms of facilitating human centered activities with regard to well-being of masses of Balochistan and particularly of the areas where these projects are being executed. The main focus of this research paper is to analyze and highlight the gaps between physical infrastructures, which, no doubt is viable economically, but at the same time, how culturally and socially these are in the context of sustainability. Effort is also being made to analyze these mega projects in terms of political

feasibility and friendliness with ecology and environment of the areas, which are a soft image and an immediate impact of all such projects.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are various theoretical framework that be implied to this study. To begin with two contrasting ones, first, the “resource curse theory” does emphasis on pace of development as slow process mainly due to governance loop-wholes, lavishness as a result of sound economic status, weaker institutions and dearth of social and political acceptance (Auty, 1993; Ross, 2015). In Balochistan, this manifests as a “paradox of plenty”– extraction without broad-based prosperity (Ahmed, 2024). Historical grievances run deep among masses particularly Baloch nation: since 1947, multiple insurgencies have been erupted over central government control of local resources (Harrison, 1981; Siddique, 2018). Contrary to the “resource curse theory” the “environmental justice theory” (Schlosberg, 2007) helps explain how marginalized communities – especially fishing and agrarian groups – bear disproportionate environmental burdens from large infrastructure such as big trolley commercial fishing and deep sea port operations

There are few indicators that are commonly used to explain sustainable development, however within the contextual framework of pro-development – pro environment and opting for a third somewhat mediating – logical and better option, where both concepts are sagaciously taken care of is the one and only choice is sustainable development. The four indicators before being discussed in detail is also deliberated upon as responding to a basic question that how much do we pay for a mega project being undertaken by a ruling government in terms of compromising environmental degradation and getting economic benefits out of the project and programs. This refers to a challenging concept of “development at what cost concept”? This question commonly asked can be replied through indicators of sustainable development for mega projects officially accepted, but it is complex and refers to an ideal situation

The four major indicators of sustainable development are economic viability, environmental friendliness, cultural and social acceptability, and political feasibility. Economic viability ensures that development projects remain financially beneficial and create long-term economic growth. Environmental friendliness focuses on protecting natural resources and reducing ecological damage and adoption of sagacious resource use pattern. Cultural and social acceptability ensures that development project respects local traditions, promotes social justice, and gains community support. Political feasibility emphasizes government commitment, policy support, and effective implementation. Together, these indicators help ensure balanced and long-lasting development project that benefits both present and future generations. According to experts representing Government who do elaborate on these four indicators such as below

The term environmental sustainability refers to how well a project protects natural resources and minimizes ecological harms. Actions associated with the concept is energy efficiency, waste management, least carbon emissions, water conservation and three Rs of reuse, refuse and recycle along with Protection of biodiversity. Whereas economic viability, according to Govt officials is explained in terms of economic benefits, job creation, long term financial gains from already made investment. Improvement in quality of life including public health facilities provisions and other basic services are part and parcel aspect of the term social equity and community impact the official reports explain.

Institutional / governance effectiveness refers to the fact that how transparently the project is being executed from initial foundation to completion. Compliance with existing national and international laws and set standards are another aspect that a project should follow accompanied with effective internal and external mechanisms of monitoring and evaluation (Hanif, 2024).

On the other hand, these indicators are widely explained a bit different from the narrative of government. These considered to be such indicators that not only assures successful completion, but the basis for sustainability of the large scale infrastructure like construction of Highways, Dams, Energy plant execution and natural resource conservation and making of smart cities. Indeed with least harm to ecology and prevailing environment.

Development projects – Indicators of sustainability

Sustainable development concept by its very nature refers to any sort of human interventions that fulfills the needs of present generation and without compromising the needs, significance and human abilities of future generations with no or least harm to environmental degradation in an already sustained geographical areas and ecological zones that is livable and fit for both human being and other living organisms. Usually, the action or intervention being carried out is assessed and measured by experts before, during and after completion while considering the following four major indicators to gauge and analyze whether a project or program executed is human centered, politically feasible, friendly with environment and is it socially and culturally acceptable, apart from its economic viability, to be regarded as “sustainable development”. Details of all four parameters/ indicators are as follow.

1. Economic Viability

Economic viability means that a project or development activity should be financially practical and capable of generating long-term economic benefits. A sustainable project must create employment opportunities, improve income levels, reduce poverty, and use resources efficiently without causing economic instability. If a development initiative continuously depends on outside aid or creates financial losses, it cannot be considered sustainable. Economic viability ensures that development remains productive and beneficial for society over time (Agbon, 2001).

2. Environmental Friendliness

Environmental friendliness refers to the protection and responsible use of natural resources. Sustainable development should minimize pollution, reduce waste, conserve water and energy, and protect ecosystems, forests, and biodiversity (Shen et al. 2022). Development activities should avoid environmental degradation and ensure that natural resources remain available for future generations. Projects that heavily damage the environment may provide short-term benefits but ultimately threatens human survival and long-term progress.

3. Cultural and Social Acceptability

Cultural and social acceptability means that development should respect the traditions, values, beliefs system along with social structures of local communities. Sustainable development should improve quality of life, promote equality, protect human rights, and encourage social harmony. A project that ignores local culture or creates social conflict may face resistance and fail in the long run (Bramley et al. 2009). Therefore, public participation, community consent, and social inclusion are essential elements of sustainability.

4. Political Feasibility

Political feasibility refers to the extent to which a development policy or project can gain support from government institutions, political leaders, and the public. Sustainable development requires stable governance, effective laws, transparency, and long-term policy commitment. Without political support and proper implementation mechanisms, even economically and environmentally sound projects may fail (Lawford-Smith (2012). Political feasibility ensures that development initiatives can be practically implemented and maintained within the political system.

The above discussed concepts are inalienable and interrelated, therefore any missing aspect with regard to economic, social/ cultural and political acceptability and, environmental friendliness, do pose certain question about project intervention to be not sustained, thus may face financial political and social hindrance at local and national level, but also at international forum such as the commitment of nation states by United Nations “Sustainable Development Goals SDGs by the year 2030. Any project if does meet these parameters during and after completion might be considered to be contributing in to affairs as called by many experts of sustainable development, simply a human intervention into already emerging issues associated with climate change.

METHODOLOGY

This research paper is based on the outcomes of reviews of already published papers, reports of Govt department and international organizations such as Asian Development Bank (ADB, 2025), Planning Commission of Pakistan (2024), Balochistan Bureau of Statistics (2023), UNDP (2022), World Bank (2023) reports of Investigative journalism and policy briefs: The Diplomat (2025), Profit Pakistan Today (2026), Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung (2023), CESCUBE (2026), Senate of Pakistan (2025). Therefore, it is purely qualitative in nature and is the outcome of reviewing the already published papers, reports and research papers.

RESULTS/ FINDINGS

The paper is comprised of a preliminary analysis of various mega project undertaken in Balochistan either by Government of Balochistan or Pakistan by its own financial resources or jointly by financial support and technical expertise of foreign countries or multinational funding agencies. The mega projects include CPEC, Gwadar Deep Sea Port, Reko Diq and Saindak Gold, Silver and Copper mining projects.

Results and findings are project focused; therefore, a scientific investigation is hereby made to analyze and evaluate only four mega projects, which is being discussed differently by various stakeholders in varied manners. Stakeholders representing government do seem to be justifying and projecting these as their success stories and puts them under the umbrella of their vision and mission to proof the commitments and projection of somewhat controversial political slogan of “Balochistan – the future of Pakistan”. A the same time this “slogan” does not get fit due to many reasons including opposition both by state actors such as political parties and none state actors i.e. the organizations, parties and militant groups who openly resist and condemn all such progressions. Another bitter fact that prevails in province is that individuals and parties who have ruled or currently ruling while sitting in avenues of policy and decision making mechanisms are, by and large, the outcome of engineered elections, irrespective of their positions either as ruling government or in friendly opposition benches. The state of mega projects undertaken or underway in the province is as under (from side to side) microscope of sustainable development, indeed, all the way through four indicators

1. CPEC PROJECTS

It is officially propagated and generally talk about that the CPEC is game changer investment, which will transform Pakistan into a regional economic hub including an industrialization and energy rich country.

CPEC is divided into phases comprised of construction of roads, highways and other means of communication such as Gwadar Airport and CPEC Road from Chine Border “khunjurab” starting from Northern areas of through Islamabad and various districts of Punjab, KPK and Balochistan till Gwadar Deep Sea Port. The second phase has already been started with the launch of five year action plan 2025-2029. So far an investment of \$ 25.93 billion have been made mostly on constructions of motorways and production of energy i.e. electricity. This heavy invest and other in pipeline, indeed, are justified as far as economic viability of sustainable development is

concerned as the investment of \$ 43 billion will definitely create economic benefits and income generation activities within the country. CPEC as a mega project is covered under PEFA act of 1997 and Provincial Environmental protection Act PEPA and various international agreements such as (UNCLOS, Paris Agreement and CBD), but at the same time it is being criticized with limited regulatory capacity due to certain reasons ranging from Environmental Impact Assessment report to various certification by both federal and provincial government for its execution as full-fledged human friendly and sustainable development project¹

The political feasibility aspect of CPEC is somewhat fragile due to happening of certain incidences of security issues and China has already warned to making further investments of CPEC project with improved that security situation by Government of Pakistan and provincial Governments must be improved. The ground realities are bitter to a high level of concerns as many provincially operating nationalist political parties such BNP, NP and others making hue and cry at all avenues of political discussions while highlighting concerns and reservations over the CPEC and other mega projects. The blames of such political parties, no doubt, getting momentum as ordinary public do not get any financial benefits out of these projects, rather feel forced to compromise the land, sea and natural resources at the cost of getting very less or not at all.

The aspect pertaining to social and cultural acceptability is not promising too as local residents of Gwadar in particular and common masses in Balochistan in general is vividly evident in public gatherings, media outlets and other avenues of deliberations claiming that “their lives were far better than post CPEC projects because their means of livelihood i.e. fishing, businesses and of small scale level trades got further shrink as a result of tightened security measures

2. GWADAR DEEP SEA PORT

Expectedly, Gwadar Deep Sea Port imagined to be replacing Dubai and Colombo due to two basic reasons. First, it was expected that with becoming functional the Gwadar Deep Sea Port will improve access of transit trades to many neighboring countries such as China, Afghanistan and through them to many states of Central Asia especially in matters pertaining to safe transportation of energy sources like oil and gas from Iranian and Gulf states to their countries. Consequently, Gwadar Deep Sea Port became under the umbrella of CPEC due to heavy investments including upgrading of Gwadar Deep Sea Port and construction of Gwadar International Airport is another heavy investment by China into Gwadar City followed by construction of expressways and industrial zones. The investment is officially reported to be 230 Million dollars. This year, an investment of 1.34 billion dollars for shipbuilding and \$ 300,000 f Furnace oil Plant, was also made by China, respectively. Dollars amounting to \$ 15 billion into Petrochemical industry is another heavy investment. All such investments were made for two major reason such as establishing a city through which China may export its products as per philosophies of political economics and exploring new avenues of businesses through its broader concept of “ Belt and Road Initiative” BRI. Definitely the projects being initiated, indeed, with consent of Pakistan are justified to be viable as an economic activity to combat mass poverty in Balochistan. The situation is beautifully explained in an Idiom, proverb or saying that “the money is round and it roles away”

As far its environmentally friendliness is concerned, it is usually complained that the project (Gwadar

Deep Sea Port) has been creating certain threats to fragile ecosystems, which has forced federal Govt to opt for “ Gwadar Blue Energy Center” in 2024 to mitigate the harms that the project has been making to ecosystems and tantalizing the already high at risk natural resources extensions such as scarcity of clean drinking water, fauna and posing threats to Gwadar beach and local species of fish and other living organisms

In terms of its political feasibility and cultural/social acceptability, its functionality is at high risk due to both nationalist political parties detest and resistances of militant groups as security concerns. This fragile situation has resulted assassination of various Chinese individuals in various parts of Balochistan, which in turns has raised various concerns for the investors such as China and other countries

3. REKO DIQ GOLD AND COPPER MINING ROJECT

The Reko Dig project is another mega project that was initially planned to bring about both economic and social change in the province. It was primarily aimed to unlock province's vast mineral resources such as Gold and Copper and to attract foreign investments in order to generate billions and trillions of revenue to reserve mass poverty and push the country amongst the riches states of the world community. A heavy invest of billions dollars have been made during various phases of the project. According to official reports at least 7 to 9 billion was invested for the purpose of exploration of natural resources, transporting it, adding value additions and its marketing. The bitter fact, however, is that, such heavy investments by US had already sunk into project due to many reasons including compliance to international legal framework issue. Much more is going to be invested by certain other multinational companies / groups to retain functionality of the project. The project is still going on while having faced with similar issues pertaining to political feasibility, cultural and social acceptance and none compliance of legal pathways of both national and internationals standards. Therefore, this project too, does not qualify cent percent with the already set standards of sustainable development. For instance, though the project got a comprehensive" environmental and social impact assessment ESIA t in 2024 about its least harm to environment and social fabric of concerns communities, however, the issue with regard to massive water consumptions between the project executions and local agriculture based communities persists. Projections such as " Reko Dig is generating 2.7 billion per annum, which will reach to \$ 5 billion after its expansion, but it could not help to minimize the risks of its feasibility and acceptability of politics and culture/ social responsibility respectively.

4. SAINDAK MININGPROJECT

This project is another exploration and large scale mining activity/ operation in Chagai district, where Pakistan had tested its nuclear weapon i.e. "Atomic power". Primarily, it was launched to explore through mining the natural resources such as Copper, Gold and Silver deposits for combating mass poverty, uplifting local communities and eventually adding into national revenues. However, it is characterized with the same fortune, good avenue of economic viability, least consideration over environmental degradation that it had already done or might brought to the areas such as unexpected weather conditions (Climate Change phenomenon) despite its 800 million dollars revenue it does not receive social and political sanctioning as the concerns and reservations of local communities and provincial political parties had never been addressed in terms of distributions of revenues being generated by it at national level. The masses in general and residents of district in particular were treated inhumanly as aliens and indifferent people. The consignment being signed between Federal /provincial Governments with foreign investors were never been made public, nor any investors had ever been taken responsible under the umbrella of Corporate Social Responsibility CSR for sparing a good sum of money for uplifting of communities in terms of providing them with basic social services like health, education, shelter and social safety nets followed by building basic physical infrastructure.

DISCUSSION

Based upon the results/ findings, the following discussion seems logical and justified. This is logical as mega projects being undertaken in the province lack participation of local people at

one side the prevailing scenario, and political detests by provincially based nationalist parties on the other. The results confirm a central paradox: physical infrastructure has advanced, yet human development has lagged. We interpret these findings through the resource curse and environmental justice frameworks and discuss their implications for theory/ policy and practice as below.

Economic development vis-à-vis social change

Most of the findings of **assessing** and evaluating the four mega projects reveal that there is huge gap between the technological economic development projects and the state of mindsets found among local communities in general and ruling parties Government in particular. This ever widening gulf is not Balochistan focused, it happens everywhere in the world where all such initiatives are undertaken. However, it is a matter of great concern that such issues are not addressed in terms of political feasibility, cultural acceptability while compromising environmental considerations and by only one aspect of sustainable development, i.e. Economic Viability. Auty (1993) and Ross (2015) argued that rent-seeking and weak institutions trap resource rich regions in underdevelopment parts of the world. Balochistan exemplifies this: resource wealth is extracted, but revenue does not recycle into local schools, clinics, or water supply systems. Instead, as CESCUBE (2026) noted, “resource revenues extracted by federal authorities rarely reinvest in local development.” This is not merely an economic fact; it is a political grievance that fuels insurgency (Siddiq, 2018)

Environmental Justice and Climate Vulnerability

No doubt, that any country weather developed or developing had since long been contributing towards manmade efforts also called “human interventions” into nature in the name and slogan of development is not only an effort being implied by countries, who do qualify to be states promoting and projecting the ideas and biased mindsets of capitalism and lavish users of the already scared natural resources. Socialism as an ideology and types of governance is believed to be replacing the already deteriorating social, political, economic and environmental status of nation states, however, until now only with political slogans and not pragmatically proven successful case studies and replicable projects. Balochistan’s water governance fragmentation (Paradigm Shift, 2025) reflects a broader pattern in which mega projects are planned on case to case basis instead of integrated approaches (Mustafa et al., 2019).

Prospects: From Extraction to Empowerment

The results also identify hopeful pathways. Renewable energy is an obvious win-win: it would bring electricity to off-grid households (SDG 7), reduce carbon emissions (SDG 13), and create decentralized, local jobs (SDG 8). The fact that the federal IGCEP excludes Balochistan renewable suggests a policy failure, not a technical one (NEPRA, 2024). Small-scale solar and wind, combined with karez restoration, could address the water-energy nexus more effectively than large dams (IRENA, 2021).

Revenue sharing reform is politically difficult but empirically necessary. The SME Support Program is a modest start; but without a guaranteed percentage of port and mining revenues flowing to local governments (e.g., 20-30%), sustainable development will remain elusive. International examples – Alaska’s Permanent Fund Dividend, Norway’s sovereign wealth fund – show that transparent, direct revenue distribution can mitigate the resource curse (Ross, 2015). Balochistan could consider a provincial natural resource fund with clear community benefit rules

CONCLUSION

The 44% of Balochistan as province of country - Pakistan rich in terms of natural resources such as sea with its never explored and virgin beaches for tourism as a none Smokey industry, rich in terms of either explored or yet to be explored natural / mineral resources is believed to be

promising future of the country along with its geo-political importance for reaching and having access to Central Asian countries and entire world community for mutual economic activities is a fact that cannot be ignored altogether and once for all. This, natural and God gifted importance of province has been studied by many countries, including USA, UK, Russia and as its closed neighboring country like China had already assessed the significance of Balochistan is an areas where investment do not get squandered, but invested to get multiplied. In this regard, she has already taken interests to invest in billions dollars for initiating CPEC including constructing Gwadar International Airport,, Gwadar Deep Sea Port and Reko Dig and many other energy and conservation of natural resource related projects, mega in size and investments, but examples of not following the already set standards by its commitments to SDGs and other treaties/ conventions being signed by her. These heavy investments, no doubt, are viable for economic reasons, but questionable to be suitable and human friendly while analyzing them through the parameters and indicators of sustainable development. There are wide gulf between physical infrastructure – roads, ports, power plants and the consents and mindsets of local communities. But the sustainable development record is troubling: extractive revenue arrangements, water crises, environmental injustice, skills gaps, and militarized governance undermine the very concept of sustainability. The central challenge is structural – a model that centralizes decision-making and resource capture while marginalizing local voices. The long-term viability of Balochistan’s mega projects will be measured not by cargo volumes, but by whether they succeeded in transforming the lives of ordinary Balochistan’s residences/ populace, particularly the concerned communities. Without inclusive, equitable, and environmentally sustainable governance, the province’s extraordinary potential will remain unrealized – a tragedy not only for Balochistan, but for the idea of sustainable development itself.

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