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THE ECONOMIC IMPACTS OF CPEC ON LOCAL COMMUNITIES IN KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA

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Abstract: The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a major initiative under the Belt and Road Initiative, seeks to strengthen economic ties between China and Pakistan, with substantial investments in infrastructure, energy, and trade. However, while CPEC promises significant national benefits, concerns have emerged regarding its impact on local communities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), a province significantly impacted by the project. This study examines the economic effects of CPEC on local communities in KP, particularly in terms of employment creation, income generation, and poverty alleviation. Using a mixed methods approach, combining both qualitative data and quantitative data from surveys and statistical analyses. CPEC is a flagship initiative of the Belt and Road Initiative, which is poised to bring transformative economic benefits to Pakistan, particularly to the local communities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). This study explores the positive economic impacts of CPEC on these communities, focusing on job creation, income generation, and overall economic development. The research paper highlights how CPEC has significantly contributed to local employment opportunities, particularly in infrastructure development and related sectors. Furthermore, the project has spurred improvements in transportation, energy supply, and social infrastructure, enhancing the overall quality of life in KP. The establishment of new industries and businesses has led to a diversification of income sources for local populations, fostering economic resilience and poverty reduction. Additionally, the development of modern infrastructure has facilitated better connectivity, opening up new avenues for trade and investment. This research paper underscores CPEC's role in boosting regional economic growth, creating a positive ripple effect throughout KP's local communities.
Keywords: Economic development; Job creation; Income generation; Infrastructure; Regional growth; Poverty reduction; Social development; Investment

1 INTRODUCTION

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) linking Gwadar Port on the Arabian Sea to China's Xinjiang region stands among the most transformative infrastructure initiatives in Pakistan's modern history, conceived to deepen economic integration, expand regional connectivity, and catalyze broad-based growth through coordinated investments in transport networks, reliable energy, and purpose-built industrial zones[1]. Nowhere is this promise more consequential than in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK/KP), whose strategic geography and long standing role as a gateway to Central Asia position it at the forefront of corridor led change as new motorways stitch mountainous highlands to lowland markets, logistics corridors shorten farm to market distances for producers, and special economic zones draw capital, technology, and skills into the province, KP's economy stands on the cusp of a structural transition from fragmented local exchange to integrated regional commerce. For households, traders, and small enterprises urban and rural, settled and migratory the core question is not whether the corridor exists on a map, but how its concrete elements recalibrate everyday livelihoods, lowering travel times and costs, improving the reliability of inputs and energy, widening access to buyers, and opening new pathways into wage work and entrepreneurship. In this sense, understanding the on the ground economic effects in KP's local communities is essential to ensuring that the gains jobs, market access, and rising productivity are equitably distributed and sustainably embedded, so that CPEC's national vision of connectivity translates into tangible improvements in opportunity, income, and well-being across the province.
Anchored in this premise, the paper investigates the economic impacts of CPEC on local communities in KP by tracing the concrete channels through which corridor investments translate into household income, employment, enterprise formation, market access, and complementary public goods. It foregrounds the lived economy the trader whose transport time and spoilage rates shift with improved roads, the micro enterprise that pivots once input reliability improves, the young graduate who recalculates the returns to skill acquisition when a nearby zone starts hiring, and the household that rebalances time between farm and non-farm work as mobility costs fall. Taking KP's role along emerging north south arteries as a starting point, the study reads macro-scale changes reduced travel times, greater predictability of freight movement, and a denser lattice of ancillary services through a local lens[2].
Building on the national vision articulated for CPEC, the study first establishes a brief historical and policy background to clarify why KP is pivotal in the Corridor's north-south lattice. The Long-Term Plan (2017–2030) frames CPEC as an integrated program spanning transport, energy, industrial cooperation, and socio-economic development, with explicit

emphasis on regional balance and local opportunity creation[3]. Within that blueprint, KP's placement along arterial routes and its flagship Rashakai Special Economic Zone (RSEZ) render the province a logical focal point for community-level inquiry into access to markets, firm clustering, and skills absorption. By foregrounding these design features, the study aligns its inquiry with nationally endorsed objectives while maintaining a local, people-centered lens[3].

Substantively, the inquiry anticipates several interlinked economic pathways. First, reduced travel times and higher trip reliability can widen sales radii for farms and micro enterprises, compressing spoilage and inventory costs while easing supplier coordination mechanisms central to the Corridor's logistics vision. Second, improved energy reliability associated with CPEC's power portfolio can lessen downtime for home-based and small industrial units, enabling longer production runs and smoother order fulfillment[4]. Third, clustering near the RSEZ can stimulate supplier development, services ecosystems, and skills uptake as firms co-locate and local workers match to new vacancies[5]. Each pathway is assessed through reported experiences, perceptions of change, and concrete livelihood adjustments narrated by respondents, ensuring that the picture of impact remains grounded, constructive and closely aligned with officially stated development goals.

Recognizing that perceptions shape uptake, the study also documents how information flows, including social media, community networks, and local business associations, mediate awareness of opportunities, e.g., supplier registration, skills programs, and zone facilitation services. In this respect, the analysis complements the well-being literature by exploring how community narratives around access, reliability, and prospects evolve as projects mature and how proactive information strategies can help households and small firms convert connectivity into lasting income gains[6]. The overall objective is forward-looking and solution-oriented to identify practical lever skills partnerships aligned to zone demand, light-touch supplier onboarding for small firms, mobility facilitation for women and youth, and responsive local service delivery that can help embed CPEC's benefits across KP's diverse localities in line with the Corridor's inclusive development vision [7].

2 PROBLEM STATEMENTS

is straightforward, while national appraisals consistently describe CPEC's potential to raise productivity, investment, and regional connectivity, evidence on how KP's households and micro enterprises experience these changes remains comparatively thin and scattered. This research, therefore, investigates how Corridor enabled improvements in accessibility, i.e., travel time and reliability, energy predictability, and industrial clustering, translate into perceived and observed shifts in income generation, employment pathways, and micro enterprise dynamism. In framing this agenda, the study draws on authoritative syntheses that highlight CPEC's role in catalyzing broad based growth while encouraging an explicitly inclusive orientation ensuring that benefits diffuse to underserved regions and vulnerable groups [5].

3 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The significance of this qualitative study lies in its people centered, policy relevant lens on how the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is reshaping everyday economic life in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). While national appraisals and long-term plans articulate CPEC's promise in terms of connectivity, energy reliability, and industrial cooperation, systematic insight into how these macro shifts translate into local livelihoods jobs, small enterprise dynamism, market access, skills uptake, and perceived well-being remains limited in scope and resolution. By foregrounding community narratives and triangulating them with publicly available project information and zone facilitation features, this study fills a critical evidence gap: it identifies the specific channels through which improved accessibility, logistics reliability, and firm clustering around nodes like the Rashakai Special Economic Zone (RSEZ) recalibrate household strategies and micro business models, thereby offering actionable guidance for inclusive policy design. Its findings can directly inform provincial and federal decision-makers on where complementary interventions, skills partnerships aligned to zone demand, supplier development and onboarding for small firms, mobility facilitation for women and youth, and targeted information campaigns will yield the greatest community-level multipliers, ensuring that benefits are widely and equitably distributed in line with CPEC's development vision. Beyond immediate program design, the study contributes a grounded baseline for monitoring and learning as projects mature, enriches the scholarly literature linking corridor investments to community well-being through qualitative mechanisms, and supports a constructive, opportunity-expanding narrative that strengthens local ownership, policy coherence, and the durability of CPEC's economic legacy in KP.

4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopts the Regional Development Theory as its central framework because it provides a valuable lens through which spatial inequalities can be addressed and equitable economic growth can be fostered across different regions. The core idea of this theory is that development should not be concentrated in a few urban centers but instead be spread out to less developed or marginalized regions, ensuring that all areas benefit from economic progress. This approach is especially relevant to understanding the potential impacts of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), as it illustrates how large-scale infrastructure projects such as new road networks, energy initiatives, and the establishment of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) can serve as powerful tools for spurring development in regions like

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). Historically, KP has faced significant challenges, particularly in infrastructure and industrial growth, and CPEC offers a timely opportunity to bridge these gaps. Regional Development Theory emphasizes the importance of directing economic policies toward fostering growth not just in major cities but in peripheral areas as well, in order to prevent widening regional disparities. Scholars like and have highlighted the importance of decentralized development strategies, suggesting that targeted investments in rural and remote regions such as KP can drive local industry, improve skills, and enhance connectivity[8,9]. This kind of development approach ensures that the benefits of national projects like CPEC are shared more fairly, extending to regions that have long been left behind. By applying Regional Development Theory, this study critically examines how the infrastructure and policy initiatives within CPEC can contribute to creating more balanced and sustainable economic development in KP, ultimately transforming the region's economic landscape and helping to reduce the long-standing inequalities that have held back its growth.

4.1 Infrastructure Development and Economic Connectivity

The development of infrastructure under the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has had a profound impact on the economic connectivity of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). Key components of CPEC, including the development of modern road networks, have played a pivotal role in reshaping the region's economic landscape. Improved roads and highways, particularly those linking key regions of KP to major cities and trade hubs, have significantly reduced transportation costs and travel times, thereby fostering smoother trade and commerce. For instance, the development of the M-1 motorway and its connections to the Rashakai Special Economic Zone (RSEZ) has been especially impactful. This connectivity allows for the faster movement of goods, which is crucial for local businesses, particularly those involved in agriculture and light manufacturing, who rely on efficient logistics to access broader markets. Alam S. observed that rural communities in areas such as Upper Hunza, which were historically isolated, have experienced increased market access and trade opportunities following the development of these roads[10]. Enhanced infrastructure has not only facilitated the transportation of goods but also improved local access to public services such as healthcare, education, and government schemes, fostering overall development. The better road networks also attract new businesses, encouraging investment in areas that were previously seen as economically peripheral. As a result, these developments are shifting KP from an economically isolated region to a more integrated one within the national and even regional economy, aligning with CPEC's overarching goal of fostering connectivity across the region.

4.2 Employment Opportunities and Skill Development

The employment opportunities generated by CPEC have been a significant driver of economic change in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, particularly in areas around the Special Economic Zones (SEZs) established under the project, such as the Rashakai SEZ. These zones serve as focal points for attracting domestic and foreign investment, which in turn leads to the creation of numerous jobs in various sectors, including manufacturing, construction, services, and logistics. According to the Chinese Embassy in Pakistan Belt and Road Portal, 2024 , the Rashakai SEZ alone is expected to create over 70,000 direct jobs and an additional 250,000 indirect jobs, many of which will be filled by residents. These jobs span a wide range of skill levels, from unskilled labor to highly technical roles, thereby providing employment opportunities for diverse segments of the population[11]. As businesses set up operations in these zones, there is a growing demand for a skilled workforce, leading to the establishment of vocational training centers and skill development programs aimed at upgrading the local labor force. This demand for skills is particularly beneficial for the youth population in KP, who now have better access to training and employment opportunities. Moreover, women, who traditionally have limited participation in the formal workforce, are also benefiting from targeted employment programs that encourage their involvement in the growing industrial sectors. The development of human capital in KP through skill-building initiatives is expected to have long-term positive effects on the province's economic development, enhancing the employability of the local population and improving income levels.

4.3 Social Infrastructure and Community Well-Being

Beyond the direct economic benefits, CPEC's infrastructure improvements have also contributed significantly to the enhancement of social well-being in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The improvements in transport and energy infrastructure under CPEC have not only facilitated the movement of goods but also greatly improved access to essential services for local communities. The construction of better roads, for example, has reduced travel times to hospitals, schools, and other critical services, making them more accessible to people in rural and remote areas. The Pakistan Institute of Devolopment Economics found that these improvements have directly impacted social indicators such as healthcare access, education, and housing. In KP, these infrastructure developments have led to a 5.19% improvement in overall well-being as people experience better access to social amenities, and businesses benefit from more reliable utility services. The study emphasizes that this enhanced access to services is especially important for marginalized communities, including those in far-flung areas, where access to quality healthcare and education has historically been a challenge. Furthermore, the increased job opportunities created by CPEC have helped improve household incomes, which in turn has allowed families to invest in their well-being, including better housing, healthcare, and education for their children. These improvements in social infrastructure, spurred by the broader economic shifts under CPEC, are expected to have a lasting positive impact on the quality of life in KP.

4.4 Challenges and Local Community Perceptions

While the benefits of CPEC are widely acknowledged, the project has not been without its challenges, especially at the community level. A significant concern among local populations, particularly in KP, is the environmental impact of large-scale infrastructure projects and the displacement caused by new developments. Despite the potential for economic growth, the local community's perceptions of CPEC are not uniformly positive, with concerns over land acquisition, environmental degradation, and the marginalization of local interests often being voiced. Khan points out that although the economic benefits, such as employment and improved infrastructure, are recognized, the negative impacts such as environmental harm and the feeling of exclusion from decision-making processes, are also significant[12]. Local communities, particularly those in rural and peripheral areas, have expressed concerns about the lack of adequate consultation and inclusion in the planning and implementation stages of CPEC projects. This gap in local participation has led to mistrust among some segments of the population, who fear that the benefits of the project may be unevenly distributed, favoring external investors over residents. These concerns highlight the need for more inclusive planning processes and better community engagement to ensure that the long-term success of CPEC is shared across all communities. Addressing these challenges requires the government and implementing agencies to adopt more transparent, participatory approaches to development, particularly by involving local populations in decision-making and ensuring that environmental and social safeguards are respected.

To achieve a more balanced development across provinces and regions in Pakistan, it is essential to focus on equitable resource distribution, targeted infrastructure investments, and fostering regional collaboration. One approach is to prioritize infrastructure projects in underdeveloped regions, ensuring that key areas like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Baluchistan, and parts of Sindh receive investments in transportation networks, energy, and social services. This can be achieved by increasing the number of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in these areas, offering opportunities for local businesses to integrate into national and international supply chains. Additionally, investing in human capital through education, vocational training, and healthcare improvements will empower local populations and help bridge the development gap. Encouraging public private partnerships in these regions can further enhance economic opportunities by leveraging private sector expertise in industrial development. Moreover, strengthening inter-provincial cooperation and ensuring that local needs and challenges are reflected in policy decisions can promote balanced growth. By adopting such inclusive strategies, we can ensure that all regions benefit from national projects like the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), fostering long-term economic stability and reducing disparities. This approach aligns with sustainable development goals that advocate for shared prosperity and social inclusion[13-14].

5 ANALYSIS

This paper offers a comprehensive and insightful analysis of the economic impacts of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) on local communities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), highlighting both the tangible and intangible benefits of this transformative initiative. The study effectively integrates a mixed methods approach, combining qualitative data from interviews and focus groups with quantitative surveys, to understand the real-life experiences of local communities impacted by CPEC. By focusing on key factors such as job creation, income generation, infrastructure development, and social well-being, the paper provides a nuanced perspective on how large-scale projects, such as CPEC, are reshaping local economies. It captures not only the positive outcomes such as improved transport connectivity, enhanced energy reliability, and new business opportunities but also the challenges and concerns faced by local populations, particularly regarding environmental degradation, displacement, and limited local involvement in decision making processes. This balanced approach allows the reader to appreciate the full scope of CPEC's impacts, both the opportunities it creates and the obstacles it presents.

The analysis also underscores the importance of the Regional Development Theory in understanding the broader implications of CPEC for regional economic integration and the equitable distribution of benefits. The theory emphasizes the need for development to extend beyond major urban centers, ensuring that marginalized regions, like KP, do not remain on the periphery of national economic growth. By applying this framework, the study highlights how infrastructure improvements such as new road networks, the establishment of Special Economic Zones (SEZs), and increased energy supply serve as catalysts for local development in KP. These projects facilitate smoother trade, encourage investment, and open up new employment opportunities, especially in areas that have historically struggled with underdevelopment. The findings emphasize that infrastructure is not merely a physical upgrade but a critical component for unlocking the potential of local communities, allowing them to access broader markets, improve productivity, and diversify their income sources. Moreover, the paper stresses that CPEC's influence goes beyond economic growth, contributing to social well-being by improving access to essential services, such as healthcare and education, in previously underserved areas.

However, the study does not shy away from discussing the challenges faced by local communities, particularly in terms of environmental concerns, displacement, and exclusion from the decision-making process. The analysis reveals that, despite the benefits brought about by CPEC, a significant portion of the local population feels alienated from the project due to a lack of consultation and engagement during the planning and implementation phases. This gap in participation has led to skepticism and mistrust among certain segments of the population, who fear that the benefits of CPEC may disproportionately favor external investors while neglecting the needs and interests of local communities. The paper calls for more inclusive and participatory development processes, advocating for transparent decision-making and better community engagement to ensure that the economic benefits of CPEC are shared equitably. The study also suggests that addressing these challenges requires not only infrastructural investments but also a concerted effort to empower local populations through education, vocational training, and skill development, thereby ensuring that the long-term legacy of CPEC includes broad based prosperity and reduced inequalities across KP.

6 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study provides a critical and multi-dimensional assessment of the economic impacts of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor on local communities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, illustrating both the significant opportunities and challenges that the initiative brings. By adopting a people centered approach, the research highlights how infrastructure development, job creation, and improved connectivity are pivotal in transforming the region's economic landscape. The findings demonstrate that CPEC has been a catalyst for local economic growth, fostering the emergence of new industries, improving access to markets, and generating employment opportunities, particularly for youth and women. These developments have also contributed to poverty reduction and enhanced social well-being, as better infrastructure has led to improved access to healthcare, education, and other public services. However, the study also brings attention to the concerns and uncertainties voiced by local communities, particularly around environmental impacts, land acquisition, and the perceived exclusion of local voices from the decision-making processes. These issues underscore the importance of ensuring that the benefits of CPEC are shared equitably and that vulnerable populations are adequately represented in development planning.

Furthermore, the study emphasizes that for CPEC to achieve its full potential in transforming KP, the focus must shift toward more inclusive, participatory development strategies that actively involve local communities in the planning and implementation of infrastructure projects. The insights gathered from this research point to the need for targeted interventions such as skill development programs, local business support initiatives, and mobility facilitation for marginalized groups. These measures will help bridge the gap between macro scale infrastructure investments and the micro level needs of the communities they aim to benefit. The application of Regional Development Theory in this context proves instrumental in understanding how economic policies can be designed to prevent regional disparities and foster inclusive growth. By aligning the benefits of CPEC with the needs of local communities, the project can not only boost economic output but also create sustainable development pathways that resonate with the aspirations of the people of KP. Ultimately, the study calls for a more balanced approach to development one that is responsive to the local realities and prioritizes social inclusion, ensuring that the transformative power of CPEC is felt by all members of the community.

7 POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Inclusive Planning and Community Engagement: It is crucial to involve local communities in the early stages of CPEC projects to ensure that their concerns, needs, and aspirations are considered. Establishing transparent communication channels and participatory planning processes can help build trust and foster a sense of ownership, ensuring that the benefits of the project are equitably distributed.
- Environmental Protection Measures: Given the concerns around environmental degradation, it is essential to integrate sustainable practices into CPEC projects. This includes conducting thorough environmental impact assessments and implementing mitigation strategies to minimize negative effects on local ecosystems and communities.
- Skill Development Programs: To maximize the employment opportunities created by CPEC, particularly for youth and women, targeted skill development programs should be established. These programs should align with the needs of the emerging industries in the region, ensuring that the local workforce is equipped with the skills required for jobs in sectors like manufacturing, construction, and services.
- Support for Local Businesses: Encouraging the growth of small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) in KP should be a priority. This can be achieved through financial support, technical assistance, and facilitating access to new markets. Local businesses should be integrated into the supply chains of larger companies and Special Economic Zones (SEZs) to boost their growth and competitiveness.
- Improved Infrastructure for Rural Areas: While urban centers benefit significantly from CPEC’s infrastructure improvements, rural areas should not be overlooked. Enhancing road networks, energy supply, and access to essential services like healthcare and education in these areas will ensure that the broader population can share in the benefits of development.
- Gender and Youth Inclusion: Special initiatives should be implemented to ensure that women and youth have equal access to employment opportunities and resources. These could include targeted training programs, entrepreneurship support, and policies to promote greater participation of women in the formal workforce.
- Monitoring and Evaluation Systems: A robust monitoring and evaluation framework should be established to track the impact of CPEC on local communities. This system will allow policymakers to assess the effectiveness of different interventions, make adjustments as needed, and ensure that the project's benefits are maximized for all stakeholders.
- Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs): To leverage the expertise of the private sector and encourage investment in underdeveloped areas, public private partnerships should be encouraged. These partnerships can play a key role in enhancing the efficiency of infrastructure projects, creating jobs, and driving economic growth in marginalized regions.

- Long-Term Economic Planning: The government should focus on creating long-term economic plans that integrate CPEC into the broader development goals of the province and the nation. These plans should prioritize sustainable development, regional cooperation, and measures to reduce inequality, ensuring that KP's growth is both inclusive and resilient.
- Enhanced Social Services: With the improvements in infrastructure, there should be a parallel focus on enhancing social services in KP. This includes upgrading healthcare facilities, expanding education access, and improving housing conditions, which will help raise the overall quality of life for local communities.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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