

*Journal of Social Policy and Governance (JSPG)**Available Online:*<https://journalofsocialpolicyandgovernance.com/index.php/2>*ISSN Print: 3106-3764**ISSN Online: 3106-3772**Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)***Exploring Participatory Governance: A Study on Village Councils in KP and Their Impact on Service Delivery****Habib Ullah**

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habibullah999@gmail.com**Abstract**

This paper discusses how participatory government functions and influences service delivery in the case of the Village Councils in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan. Based on decentralization model as introduced by the Local Government Acts of 2013 and 2019, Village Councils are the first level of local governance and are charged with the responsibility of providing simple services like sanitation, water, education and the first level of healthcare. The study examines the effects of various types of citizen participation, such as elections, community meetings, budget consultations and grievance redress mechanisms, in determining the service outcome in different districts, such as Peshawar, Swat and Buner. The study, which utilizes a case study approach, relies on interviews, focus group discussions, government records, and citizen surveys to discuss the functionality and inclusivity of participatory mechanisms. It is an important aspect of local leaders, women, youth, and marginalized groups in local decision-making, as well as the identification of the bottlenecks, which include elite capture, low literacy, and institutional bottlenecks. The results indicate that councils that have higher levels of community engagement experience relatively good service delivery results and transparency. The paper concludes by making specific policy recommendations in regard to the promotion of local fiscal autonomy, equitable participation, institutional reforms and promotion of the culture of civil responsibility. These reflections will target not only the policymakers of the province but also the local stakeholders with the intent to teach them what a great impact grassroots governance can have on enhancing delivery of public services and strengthening democratic accountability in KP.

Keywords: *Participatory Governance, Village Councils, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Local Government, Service Delivery, Citizen Participation, Accountability, Grassroots Democracy, Public Services, Civic Engagement.*

Introduction

With the emphasis on citizen participation in decision-making, participatory governance has grown in Pakistan especially after the devolution reforms that were enacted under the Local Government Ordinance 2001. These reforms tried to make the local service delivery more transparent and accountable and efficient by institutionalizing the citizen participation through local council and community engagement forums. The concept has been based on the fact that inclusiveness in governance leads to increased legitimacy and more responsive development to the needs of the grass roots. Decentralization in the Pakistan political history has in most cases been cyclical with the military gathering strength and enacting them

and the civilian governments eroding or altering them (Cheema, Khwaja & Qadir, 2006). Irrespective of this discrepancy, participatory forms of government like Citizen Community Boards (CCBs), Village Development Committees (VDCs) and more recently Village and Neighborhood Councils (VNCs) in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) have tried to formalise the citizen in development planning and monitoring roles. Such participatory mechanisms are potentially good in theory but they have major obstacles in reality such as political interference, lack of financial power, or low community awareness (Khan & Anwar, 2022)

In the KP province, the enactment of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Local Government Act 2013 was a watershed change in the local governance system in Pakistan as the village and Neighborhood Councils (VNCs) were established as the lowest level of local governments. These councils were to perform the duty of determining the development priorities of the local area, and control small-scale service delivery, and to serve as a dispute resolution and community mobilization platform. The councils were based on the foundations of democratic decentralization and inclusive governance, as leaders were democratically elected, and women, youth, and minorities were required to be represented in the council (Naveed & Anwar, 2019). The special feature of VNCs is that it provides a formal channel through which policy decisions in a local region can be informed by the ordinary citizens, not by political elites alone. These councils are particularly important in the socio-political environment that is complex in the case of KP because they exist in both settled districts and the areas that were previously under the control of tribes, trying to fill in the holes in the service delivery and governance capabilities. The capacity to create social capital and address community needs has been described in numerous studies (Shahbaz, 2020), but the capacity impediments continue to exist because of poorly executed financial devolution and lack of administrative control.

There is a great amount of literature that highlights the relationship between participatory governance and improved service delivery. The empirical evidence indicates that citizen participation is associated not only with better targeting of services but also with more equitable distribution of resources, local accountability and less leakages and inefficiencies (Joshi, 2013). In KP, particular in rural setting where there are problems with lack of proper education, health and sanitation infrastructure, participatory governance emerges as a major way of ensuring that there is a match between small amounts of government resources and the needs of the community. When properly operating, Village Councils are participatory brokers who collect local needs, support planning and interface with the higher administrative levels. Researchers have found out that when communities actively participated in choosing and overseeing projects particularly those in the areas of drinking water, road construction, and sanitation, the quality of projects increases and grievances decrease (Siddique et al., 2021). Nevertheless, such participation can only be successful depending on institutional support, leader competence, and trust culture between state players and citizens that is not consistent within KP districts. Although technically participation enhances service delivery outcome, this is not the case with the outcome on the ground as seen with activities like elite capture, politicization of the councils and insufficient long-term community organizational activities.

Objectives and Scope of the Study

The paper is an attempt to critically evaluate the importance of participatory governance in enhancing local service delivery, in particular on Village Councils in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The study will determine the effectiveness with which these councils serve as agents of citizens empowerment and development facilitators. It will examine the institutional, political and cultural determinants that support or hinder participatory processes, based on field data of some of the KP districts. It will also seek to analyze how the village-level decision-making affects the district level policy-making and a post-merger setting whereby integration of previously tribal regions into the provincial system of governance is both an opportunity and a challenge. This study comes at an opportune time when the issue of decentralization is increasingly coming up in Pakistan and where there is the necessity to build up local institutions in the face of worsening fiscal discipline, political polarization, and disparities in development. The results of the research are designed to guide policy change and provide the foundation of a more participatory and accountable style of local government in KP.

Theoretical Framework

Participatory governance denotes the design and method of making decisions within the context of political institution and the involvement of the citizens in policy formulation, monitoring, and accountability of the government (Fung & Wright, 2003). It focuses on a transformation of hierarchical and state-driven governance to a more participatory one in which both citizens and civil society together with the government establish common ground by defining what matters to the masses. The notion is particular to local governance in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), where the provision of Article 140-A of the Constitution of Pakistan, devolution of political, administrative and financial power to the elected local governments is a constitutional commitment. Participatory governance as a normative ideal in this context is applied in two ways; as a strategic tool to improve the outcomes of development in under-served areas.

The theoretical background of the participatory governance is based on a number of intergrated frameworks. One of the main theories that form the basis of this study is deliberative democracy. It suggests that the form of governance legitimacy is through rational discourse of the people, collective decision-making, and dialogue (Dryzek, 2000). In village councils, this deliberation can be in the form of participatory budgeting, public hearing or inclusive development planning. Another major concept of governance is governance through engagement that regards participatory governance as a process whereby local voices become integrated into the state through consultative forums, local development boards, and monitoring committees (Cornwall, 2008). The framework opposes the conventional top-down planning theories because it focuses the common experiences of citizens in governance. On the same note, New Public Management (NPM) approach helps to comprehend the participatory mechanisms because it focuses on performance, transparency, responsiveness in service delivery by the public institutions. It promotes outcome-based models, which usually integrate citizen response, and managerial responsibility measures (Hood, 1991).

There are three key ideas of analysis developed in this theoretical environment down to accountability, transparency and citizen empowerment. The concept of

accountability in participatory governance involves two aspects namely answerability; in which officials must provide explanations to their actions and enforceability; in which there are measures to punish wrong or lack of action (Goetz & Jenkins, 2001). In the instance of the village councils in KP, these can be the community scorecards, the complaint redressal system, or even a local audit. Transparency, in its turn, presupposes the accessibility and availability of information with which citizens can observe the way in which the state manages the resources and makes its decisions. It is a precondition to purposeful participation and it generates confidence in government institutions (Fox, 2007). Lastly, the term citizen empowerment, which is the increase in the ability of people to have their say in their governance, is related to both political literacy and the easiness of access to institutions. Socialized citizens would be more willing to attend council meetings, suggest development projects and fight against the elite takeover.

Based on this theoretical grounding, the study adopts an analytical model linking participation to service delivery outcomes through three causal pathways:

- (1) Voice, or the ability of citizens to articulate local needs and priorities;
- (2) Oversight, or their capacity to monitor and evaluate services
- (3) Responsiveness, or the degree to which local governments adapt plans and policies based on citizen input (Joshi & Houtzager, 2012).

This framework suggests that high-quality participation characterized by inclusion, deliberation, and continuity can result in better-aligned services, more efficient use of resources, and greater public satisfaction. However, the effectiveness of this linkage depends on contextual variables such as the autonomy of local bodies, the political environment, and the presence of enabling legal frameworks. In KP, where social hierarchies and administrative legacies still shape governance dynamics, the interplay between institutional design and community engagement is crucial for understanding participatory outcomes. The theoretical framework for this study integrates normative and empirical dimensions of participatory governance, grounding it in theories of deliberative democracy, engagement-based governance, and performance-driven management. Through the analytical lens of voice, oversight, and responsiveness, the study evaluates how village councils in KP translate citizen participation into tangible service delivery improvements, while navigating structural and cultural constraints.

Legal and Institutional Framework

Participatory governance in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) is legal in terms of KP Local Government Acts of 2013 and 2019 that implement Article 140-A of the Constitution of Pakistan that requires devolution of power to elected local governments. The LGA 2013 brought a localized administrative and financial decision-making unit which is the District, Tehsil, and Village/Neighbourhood Councils, decentralizing the administrative and financial powers to the bottom level (Shah & Yousaf, 2020). This law preconditioned full involvement of people into the development planning and service delivery, especially the Village Councils (VCs) were envisaged as the basic elements of local democracy. Although the LGA 2019 retained most of its structure, it made a drastic change in terms of eliminating some of the levels and modifying the fiscal and administrative

boundaries of local entities- fundamentally shifting the patterns of the participatory governance (Khan & Khan, 2022).

Village Councils consist of elected members headed by a Nazim (chairperson) its Naib Nazim (vice-chair) and general and reserved seat members (women, youth, peasants, minorities) and they represent small groupings of villages or urban neighbourhoods. According to LGAs of KP, every VC will have the mandate to formulate development plans, resolve local conflicts, ensure that community infrastructure is properly maintained, and supervise the provision of basic amenities in areas of education, health, sanitation and potable water (Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 2019). These councils are empowered to recommend budgets, shall also begin local projects, and shall also oversee the performance of the service providers like Basic Health Units (BHUs), primary schools and water supply. Although the executive powers of the VC contract the Nazim, the decision making model is essentially participatory in which open council meetings and the public consultation process are legally required.

Nonetheless, even with these formal legal arrangements in place, an examination of the reality of the institutional arrangements of local governance in KP brings out a rather complicated interaction between the elected councils and the bureaucratic machinery. At the tehsil level, the VCs are under the control of the Assistant Director Local Government (ADLG), who is part of the provincial bureaucracy, and the Deputy Commissioner (DC), at the district level. Practically, these officials tend to have a strong say in whether or not the budget is approved, which developmental projects are selected, and which personnel are transferred, and this may compromise the independence of the elected councils (Cheema, Khwaja, & Qadir, 2006). Additionally, although it is within the mandate of the councils to supervise the delivery of services at the community level, the line departments (including those of education, health and public health engineering) enjoy functional control of both staff and operational budgets creating a high tendency of institutional fragmentation and duplication of functions.

Roles of Village Councils in the provision of services are clearly stipulated in both LGAs and rules of business facilitating them. The VCs are also charged with the responsibility of checking school attendance, taking care of school buildings, and basic facilities such as toilets and clean drinking water in education. Healthwise, the councils monitor sanitation programs, immunization drive, and complaints redressal about both BHUs and Lady Health Workers (LHWs). In water and sanitation, VCs regulate water in their neighborhoods, deploy neighborhood awareness campaigns, and embark on drainages and garbage removal schemes (UNDP, 2016). Nevertheless, most of the councils have a challenge of implementing such directives due to financial constraints, slow transfer of funds and technical capacity. Moreover, lack of a specialized cadre of local government has impeded the institutional memory and continuity whereby council members usually lack the training and institutional back up to perform consistently.

In other words, the legal and institutional framework of the local governance of KP can be regarded as a decent basis of the participatory service delivery, nevertheless several structural limitations remain. These factors are shared functions between elected and bureaucratic actors, small amount of devolution of finances and functions as well as the capacities deficiencies at village level. But

even within these limits, some Village Councils have been able to show innovativeness and responsiveness, especially on those where there is intense community participation and has a working bureaucracy. It is pivotal to know this legal and institutional landscape when assessing the extent to which participatory governance leads to service delivery, and the reforms that need to be done to make grassroots institutions in KP effective.

Methodology

In this paper, a qualitative case study will be used to explore the role played by participatory governance in service delivery outcomes at the grassroots level in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). The case study approach is especially appropriate to examining complicated social and institutional procedures in its actual living situation so that the interaction between formal governance body and citizen involvement can be understood profoundly. The method allows examining context-dependent differences in governance practices and outcomes at the multiple village councils in a nuanced fashion, and hence, it would be suitable when studying decentralized institutions such as VCs in Pakistan. The design of the study is exploratory and explanatory in nature to find out institutional trends, motivation of actors and institutional facilitators or hampers that may affect participatory service delivery.

Purposive sampling used in the selection of district and village councils was based on socio-political diversity, geographical variation and presence of operating local bodies. They were chosen to include three districts: Peshawar, the highly urbanized and politically active district, Swat, the post-conflict rural distribution with a rich experience of NGO activities, and Buner, the middle district between inaccessibility and accessibility. In every district, 2-3 Village Councils were selected which had diverse experience with participatory governance some with active citizens and some without much communication. Such a comparative approach enabled the paper to demonstrate the differences in the performance of service delivery that can be related to the degree of participation as well as the institutional responsiveness.

The collection of data was based on various sources in order to have triangulation and profundity of the knowledge. The elected members of VC (Nazims, general and reserved seat members), the local government officials (ADLGs, LG Assistants), and the service delivery staff (teachers, health workers, sanitary staff) were interviewed in semi-structured interviews. Male and female citizens were given separate Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) in each of the councils to get the divergent views about participation, access, and the satisfaction with the services. Second, government documents and council meeting minutes were consulted to track development plans, budgetary settlements and performance accounts. A citizen survey (the respondents numbered 150 across all the sites) was also conducted in quantifying the perceptions regarding participation, accountability, and quality of service. A combination of these approaches resulted in a very rich and, at the same time, not too narrow dataset, which will allow extensive work on its narrativity and comparative work in parallel.

The study also admits some limitations in spite of the strength of its design. First, the results are partial and cannot be applied to the entire KP or local governance of Pakistan. Second, the issue of political sensitivity and constant restructuring of the

local government was a challenge in the way of obtaining full administrative records. Third, participation of females in FGDs was low as there was a cultural barrier in certain regions, even though efforts were made to include as many citizens as possible. The research was conducted in high ethical standards of informed consent, anonymity of the participants, and impartiality in interpreting the data. All the information was gathered on a voluntary basis, and no identifiers were made. The study also aimed at excluding any unwanted interference by local authorities or political classes in the field.

Participation in Practice

There has been a wide range of mechanisms of engagement in participatory governance at village level in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), yet the depth and inclusiveness of such mechanisms has big variations. Village Councils under the Local Government Acts (2013 and 2019) provided the institutional possibility of direct political participation under the elections. In addition to electoral participation, community meetings at village level, also known as Jirgas or Khuli Kachehris (open courts) has emerged as important site where citizens would raise issues pertaining to sanitation, health, and education. Budget consultations, even though they are required by the law, are irregular because of the low level of awareness and administrative desire (Shahbaz et al., 2023). The formal channels such as grievance redressal system in form of complaint box and open hearing have come up but they are only effective depending on the bureaucratic responsiveness. A recent assessment in Swat disclosed that though grievance forums were in place, not more than 30 percent of the citizens accessed them due to ineffective follow-up and fear of the reprisal (Khan & Iqbal, 2022). These half results indicate that the architecture of participation is in place but its operationalization is poor and irregular.

Success of participatory governance is closely tied to the inclusion of women, youth, and minorities, the groups that were historically undermined in political life. The Constitution requires the inclusion of women and non-Muslim in the village councils in KP by creating reserved seats, although this is practically impossible due to cultural rules, the threat of violence, and the male-dominated mindset (Zia & Bari, 2021). The representation of women is mostly symbolic, and most of the women representatives are under the influence of their male relatives especially in conservative areas like Dir and Bannu (Shandana, 2022). Nevertheless, in places where training organized by the civil society or donors has established itself, e.g., in Charsadda and Swabi, increased activism of women councillors in service delivery monitoring and budget debates has been observed (Ali & Khattak, 2023). Equally, the young people are more easily seen on digital platforms of grievance or community volunteerism but less in the formal politics where fears of domination by the parties and absence of mentorship system still restrict their involvement. The political invisibility of the minority groups such as Hindus and Christians in the southern parts of KP is enhanced by the fact that they are merely visible representations and hardly involved in the agenda setting processes.

Irrespective of the platforms of interaction, multiple structural and socio-political obstacles inhibit participatory citizenship in the village councils. The worst areas in terms of literacy and awareness are rural and newly merged districts and, in particular, Bajaur and Mohmand, where more than 60% of citizens have no idea

that they have the right to participate in council meetings or elections (Naseer et al., 2024). The problem of elite capture is also chronic: in participatory spaces, influential landlords, tribal or political affiliated contractors tend to take centre stage and find that they marginalise the poor and the underrepresented (Jamil & Askari, 2022). The sense of disengagement with politics, especially the youth, is fuelled by the feeling of disappointment in non-working councils and the feeling that decisions were already made by bureaucrats or MPs. In addition, the local government interference of the party bodies ill on the autonomy of the councils and disfavors independent civic action (Rashid & Akhtar, 2023). All these obstacles weaken the transformative power of participatory governance, and necessitate tactical reformation of civic education, exposure and institutional protection to rejuvenate citizen participation.

Service Delivery Performance

The Village Councils of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have diverse service delivery within their sectors and it has been identified that there is a significant difference between service delivery in terms of waste management, primary healthcare and infrastructure in education. Village councils are mostly tasked with the management of basic amenities like cleaning of streets, drainage facilities, water provision and repair of government primary schools. The services however do not meet the expectations because they lack financial and human resources. Take, as an illustration, the example of such districts as Swat and Buner, where the work of garbage collection is very inconsistent and frequently depends on informal systems, and the urban councils of Peshawar have more developed systems, even through cooperation with NGOs (Ali et al., 2023). Within the health sector, the role of the village councils is mainly regulatory, including overseeing the Basic Health Units (BHU) and making sure there is an available supply of medicine, which is often weakened by drug shortages and missing employees, particularly in rural settings (Khan & Rafi, 2022). Schools, and especially female schools, are also confronted with problems such as broken classrooms, inaccessible toilets and low attendance of the teachers, mainly because of a lack of control and inappropriate budgetary allocations (Yousafzai & Sardar, 2023). Infrastructure facilities even exist on paper but in reality, there is logistical impediment, late funding and poor coordination between councils and provincial departments.

The empirical evidence indicates that there was a positive relationship between active citizen engagement and the consequent attainments of better service delivery results at a village level. Councils that conduct frequent public forums, consultations on budgeting, and participatory planning are generally better in maintenance of infrastructure and in complaint responses. Indicatively, a practice in Swabi and Chitral indicated that the more active were the women councils in the villages, the stronger the waste collection practices and the monitoring of school attendance through the community (Rehman & Zahid, 2022). In addition, citizens who participate in the performance audit or tracking expenditures on the budget are more transparent and gaps in service delivery are filled in a more efficient way (Ahmed & Aslam, 2021). Conversely, there is a sort of low participation councils that are prone to bureaucratic redundancy and elite domination hence leading to unequal service distribution particularly within the marginalized regions. Informal enforcement tools such as citizen watchdog groups work in cases where they are

functional and have forced a number of village councils to cope with sanitation failures or repair non-functioning water hand-pumps (Naseem et al., 2024). It follows that involvement does not only affect the effectiveness of services but also improves accountability since officials are likely to behave better under the eye of the community.

A comparative study between the high and the low participation councils in KP served to bring out the imbalanced nature of service delivery and the significance of civic engagement in performance. In Peshawar, there are urban areas such as Pagosai and Nauthia where voter turnout is very high, and there is a key activism of community based organizations; services such as garbage collection and school management committees are relatively well. Such councils have taken advantage of their involvement to obtain timely allocations of funding and responsive personnel (Shah & Gul, 2023). On the other hand in rural or newly merged district like Bajaur or Kohistan where awareness is very low and tribal hierarchy is prevalent, there will be little or no participation and the services are very erratic or non-existent. A review carried out by the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) revealed that such councils tend to be rubber-stamps and do not have either the institutional independence or the civic pressure to keep line departments in check (Hassan & Jamil, 2023). The difference implies that the policies should be devised to improve participatory systems at least concurrently with administrative efficiency. The councils should not only be motivated in planning, but also in their inclusive implementation and follow-up with the community actors.

Challenges in Participatory Governance

The village councils of KP have a longstanding institutional barrier to participatory governance mainly in terms of funding and bureaucratic inefficiency. Among the most serious ones, there is the late allocation of finance by the provincial governments to the councils, which interferes with planning timelines and reduces the implementation of vital development initiatives (Ahmed et al., 2023). Regardless of the constitutional devolution requirement as stated in Article 140-A, there has been little actual fiscal autonomy with councils being dependent on frequent discretionary grants or politically based funding. In addition, some village councils do not have the institutional capability of either designing or implementing the participatory mechanisms efficiently. The budgeting, communal involvement, or design preparation training of local council officials is quite low, particularly in rural communities, and they, therefore, remain very reliant on the tehsil or district-level bureaucracy (Yasir & Shah, 2022). Such bureaucratic hierarchies weaken the voice at the grassroots and slows down responsiveness which leads to a gap between the demands at the citizen level and policy implementation. In some cases, even when there are legal requirements of the use of participatory platforms, such as village assemblies or grievance redress committees, there is inconsistent activation of such platforms because they are not prioritized by the institutions.

Another significant obstacle of effective participatory governance in KP is political interference. Rather than providing a means of democratic representation, numerous village councils have turned into an elite capture, with powerful families, local landlords or party faithful dictating terms. This discredits the

representativeness and transparency in the processes of governance (Ali & Naseem, 2022). Party affiliated councillors are tempted to give development money or appointments as a favour to voters or cronies and this leads to imbalance in service delivery as well as the marginalization of some groups of people. In some instances witnessed in Swat and Lower Dir, the party political intervention resulted in the hiring of the non-technicians or the withholding of the sanitation budgets to gain the political mile (Kakar & Hussain, 2023). Moreover, the elected councils are at times sidestepped by the lawmakers of the province who, using their influence, establish funds in certain projects and in the process undermine participatory systems and make the councils inactive. The duplication of the service between the village councils and the representatives of the province (MPAs) creates a confusion of the roles, which also lowers the accountability, and prevents the citizens to trust the participatory government effectively (Khan & Rauf, 2023)

Social exclusion is still ingrained especially among women, minorities and youths despite the democratic pledge of participatory governance. The norm of gender restrains the physical movements of women, their interaction in the community, particularly in the conservative regions of Kohistan, Bajaur, and sections of Buner, where women have almost no participation in council affairs (Jamil & Rehman, 2023). The position of women is nonetheless largely nominal, even in case of nominations or elections to a reserved seat where the actual decision-making is by the male heads or relatives. Likewise, young people and religious minorities usually experience institutional invisibility, with few opportunities to participate or even a committee representation (Shah & Faheem, 2023). Citizen participation is also limited by cultural hierarchies and poor literacy. The rights of marginalized citizens and how councils operate are also little known to them; this kills bottom-up accountability. There has been token change in form of awareness campaigns, mobilizations by civil society organizations, however, systemic changes cannot be achieved until structural reforms are made that will make inclusion not just procedural, but meaningful and empowered. Unless these structural inequalities are addressed, the practice of participatory governance in KP runs the risk of enforcing the existing asymmetries of power as opposed to transforming them.

Policy Recommendations

A strong system of mechanisms of input by the people is required to support participatory governance in the village council towns of KP. To begin with, participation can be institutionalized through formalization of the rules that govern the roles of citizens in budgeting, planning and evaluation. It is suggested that citizen-inclusive practices, including participatory budgeting, community scorecards, contribute to the improved local responsiveness and legitimacy (Masud et al., 2022; Hussain & Bari, 2023). Educational mass campaigns especially in the rural and marginal communities need to be implemented to create awareness on the rights and responsibilities of participation. Outreach, transparency, and feedback loops can likewise be enhanced using digital channels such as mobile applications and e-governance portal (Shaikh & Ahmed, 2023). Incorporation of these participatory channels in the Local Government Act and putting in place a way of monitoring them using performance audit may help in making participation less symbolic and predictable.

Fiscal empowerment is an important source of autonomous village governance and responsiveness. The current funding of most village councils in KP is arguably limited and uncertain, which reduces their functions of service delivery (Cheema & Asim, 2022). This should be countered by provincial finance commissions on the one hand reducing the formula of resources distribution to give more untied grants and development support to village councils in terms of population, need, and performance. Additionally, the transparency of budgets can be increased significantly through institutionalization of such public financial management tools as citizen budgets, real-time dashboard of expenditures, and independent social audits (Khan & Yousaf, 2024). The councils of the village should also have a discretion to generate the local revenue in fee, taxes or service to lessen the reliance on allocations of higher tiers and clientelist negotiations.

The participatory ecosystem must be pegged on institutional reforms that are oriented to inclusivity, responsibility, and the monitoring of performance. Local government rules of business need to make binding gender-sensitive quotas, inclusion of minorities, and the disabled-friendly infrastructure. Third-party validations should be done on village development plans and citizen report card should be considered at the lower levels to judge the quality of services. In order to implement these reforms, regular training of local councilors and village secretaries in participatory planning and conflict management, and digital governance needs to be conducted (Ahmed & Zahid, 2023). The lack of elite capture and bureaucratic inertia can be cushioned as well through the establishment of local ombudspersons and an autonomous grievance redressal mechanism. Last but not least, when performance-based rewards are pegged on participation and outcomes of the service provided, instead of political affiliations, councils can be encouraged to innovate and be accountable (Jalal et al., 2024).

Conclusion

Participatory governance through the prism of Village Councils in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) opens up a space of institutional design, and also a very challenging space of territory: almost a complex picture. The paper emphasizes how responsive, inclusive, and efficient service delivery requires meaningful participation, as opposed to a mere representation. Although the formal structures of the Local Government Acts have a blueprint of the democratic decentralization, the actual practice is dissimilar among the districts. Village Councils provide the nearest contact between the state and its citizens, but this close is too frequently untransformed into empowered government by a mix of institutional constraints, dominant-class rule, and technical confusion. These differences in the participation quality, including the lively citizen forums and the politically quiescent councils, lead to the conclusion that decentralization is not enough without an ability to maintain local empowerment, high levels of accountability, and a local culture of active civic life.

As provided by this case study, the evidence shows that the outcomes of service delivery are visible where the participatory mechanism is well institutionalized and followed through. Councils which frequently involve the citizens in their decision making processes, hold public hearings and are open to the views of the citizens are more successful in their work, especially in primary health, waste management and school maintenance. These achievements are not distributed evenly though.

When councils are based in urban or politically active locations they often perform better than those in rural or newly merged areas where structural impediments like illiteracy, lack of awareness and deeply rooted social hierarchies are likely to impede participation. Moreover the Transparency of the village councils autonomy and planning is compromised by political interference, delays in transfer of funds and overlaps in administration. In spite of these failings, citizens in most regions are becoming more conscious of their rights and are more ready to be involved, and so demand new services and authorities that listen.

In the future, the power of participatory governance in KP is in the fact that it can be used to turn the existing hybrid system into something more citizens-led and accountable. It will involve a multi-pronged approach such as a reformation in law, administration, finance and the civic culture. Participation can be institutionalized through legal clarity on roles and responsibilities, allocation of resources in a timely manner and increased strength of monitoring instruments. Equally important, the process of endowing women, youth and minorities with the ability to exercise their democratic freedom in the local councils is essential to sustainable governance. This transformation can be triggered by civic education, digital platforms, and capacity building programs to empower citizens and councilors to take effective participation. Village council is not only a governance regime, it is also a democratic learning place and collective action. With proper care, it can be turned into a foundation of more equal and responsive state-citizen relationship in KP and even beyond.

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