

Local Baloch Perspectives on Gwadar Port Development under CPEC

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Abstract

This research, Local Baloch Responses to the Development of Gwadar Port China Pakistan Economic Corridor, examines the historical, political, and socio-economic impacts of Gwadar Port's development under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in Balochistan, Pakistan. Gwadar's strategic location has transformed it from a fishing village into a vital trade hub connecting Central Asia, China, and the Middle East, attracting significant foreign investment and infrastructure growth since its integration into Pakistan in 1958. However, local Baloch communities face deprivation, with restricted access to fishing waters, exclusion from decision-making and persistent challenges like unemployment, water scarcity, and inadequate education. These issues fuel tensions with the federal government and Baloch nationalists, as economic benefits largely bypass locals. Research findings are based on surveys and interviews from 2025 revealed that 75% of residents acknowledge economic benefits, but 60% feel excluded from decision-making, with fishermen citing environmental degradation and displacement. Limited studies focus on local Baloch perspectives, particularly deprived groups like fishermen and youth, on CPEC's socio-economic impacts. Objective of the research is to assess local perceptions of Gwadar's development and identify strategies for inclusive growth. The significance of this research appraises policymakers on balancing economic ambitions with local needs, development of stability in a geopolitically critical region. A mixed-methods approach, including 250 questionnaires, 25 semi-structured interviews, and secondary source analysis, was used, with ethical approval from the Gwadar Community Research Ethics Board. Inclusive governance and equitable resource distribution are essential to address grievances. Gwadar's sustainable prosperity hinges on empowering local communities and prioritizing their welfare.

Keywords: Provincial Autonomy, Economic Impact, Balochistan Conflict, Natives of Gwadar, Local Governance

Introduction

Makran, encompassing Gwadar, has long been a culturally and strategically significant region. Following Prophet Muhammad's death in 632 A.D., Arab forces targeted Makran, with Hakim bin Amr al-Taghlabi attempting its conquest in 644 A.D. By the time of Hazrat Ali's rule, it emerged as a Muslim stronghold (Baloch, 2015). In the 16th century, Portuguese voyagers briefly controlled Gwadar before it was integrated into the Makran Confederacy under Mir Chakar Khan Rind (Siddiqi, 2012). In 1783, the Khan of Kalat ceded Gwadar to Saied Sultan of Oman, establishing it as an Omani exclave (Khan, 2009). During the British Raj, Gwadar's importance grew, with a Political Assistant appointed in 1863 and telegraph lines connecting it to Karachi by 1894 (Ahmed, 2013; Kaplan, 2010). After Pakistan's independence in 1947, Gwadar resisted joining the Baluchistan States Union but was gradually integrated through alliances with local tribal chiefs (Baloch, 2015).

Gwadar's transition from a fishing village to a vital seaport began in 2002 with Chinese assistance under CPEC. Its deep natural harbor, capable of handling large vessels, positions it as an alternative to Pakistan's congested ports, Karachi and Port Qasim (Ahmed, 2013). Phase I of the port's construction was completed in 2005, and in 2007, PSA International secured a 25-year management contract. Declared a tax-free port for 40 years, Gwadar has attracted global trade interest (Kaplan, 2010). As a CPEC hub, it connects Pakistan to Central Asia, Afghanistan, and China, enhancing trade efficiency.

Despite its potential, Gwadar's development has sparked significant local unrest. The exclusion of Baloch fishermen and political leaders from decision-making has fueled resentment (Baloch, 2015). The influx of labor migrants from Punjab and other regions has displaced local communities, disrupting traditional livelihoods like fishing and farming (Ahmed, 2013). Protests, such as the 2021 "Gwadar Ko Haq Do" sit-in, highlighted demands for clean water, electricity, and an end to illegal trawling, reflecting broader frustrations over marginalization (Siddiqi, 2012). These grievances threaten the port's long-term stability and success. Gwadar's strategic location and deep harbor position it as a critical hub in global trade networks, particularly through CPEC. However, sustainable development hinges on addressing local concerns. Inclusive policies that involve Baloch communities in decision-making and ensure equitable benefits are essential for Gwadar to realize its potential as a global trading hub. By balancing economic ambitions with social equity, Gwadar can transform into a model of inclusive maritime development.

Literature Review

The development of Gwadar Port under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and its intersection with the Balochistan conflict reveals a complex interplay of historical grievances, governance failures, and competing local, national, and international interests. Historical analyses trace Baloch alienation to Pakistan's post-1947 accession process, compounded by centralizing policies like the One Unit Scheme and the 1973 dismissal of the National Awami Party government (Ahmed, 2013; Wirsing, 2008; Khan, 2009; Siddiqi, 2012). These policies entrenched perceptions of marginalization, fueling demands for genuine autonomy and resource control, which remain unaddressed despite reforms like the 18th Amendment and the 7th NFC Award (Ahmed, 2018; Mustafa, 2011). These measures, intended to decentralize power and enhance fiscal equity, have been critiqued for failing to meet Balochistan's unique socio-economic needs, particularly regarding resource rights.

The strategic development of Gwadar Port, framed as a catalyst for economic growth and regional connectivity (Government of Pakistan, 2001, 2003; Hussain, 2007; Rizvi, 2015), has exacerbated local tensions. Scholars highlight disruptions to traditional livelihoods, notably fishing, due to inadequate compensation for displacement, environmental degradation, and limited local employment in port projects (Baloch, 2015; Ahmed, 2013). Severe deficits in basic services like water and electricity further deepen local discontent (Planning Commission of Pakistan, 2021). Critically, the absence of empowered local governance structures undermines accountability and excludes vulnerable communities, particularly fishermen, from decision-making (Balochistan Local Government Act, 2010). This governance vacuum fuels movements like "Gwadar Ko Haq Do," with surveys and interviews reflecting mixed perceptions of CPEC's benefits and widespread feelings of exclusion (Local Perception Survey, 2024; Community Leader Interviews, 2024). The literature underscores that sustainable development in Gwadar requires reconciling strategic ambitions with equitable benefit-sharing, political inclusion, and robust local governance to address historical grievances effectively.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative methods to assess Gwadar Port's development impacts within the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) framework. Data collection occurred from January to July 2025 in Gwadar, targeting diverse socio-economic groups to capture varied perspectives.

Data Collection: Qualitative data were gathered through 25 semi-structured interviews and informal conversations with 150 residents, including fishermen, students, government employees, businessmen, and other natives. Government officials were selected due to their role in policy implementation and access to CPEC-related insights, providing critical perspectives on administrative and developmental dynamics. Quantitative data were collected via 250 questionnaires distributed to a purposively selected sample, focusing on economic and social impact perceptions. The sample reflected Gwadar's demographic diversity, prioritizing deprived groups like fishermen, whose livelihoods are directly affected by port activities, and students, representing youth perspectives on future opportunities.

Ethical Considerations: Ethical approval was obtained from the Gwadar Community Research Ethics Board. Informed consent was secured from all participants, with detailed explanations of the study's purpose and their rights. Due to security concerns, all interviewees requested anonymity, ensured through pseudonymized data and secure storage protocols to protect confidentiality.

Sample Selection: The quantitative sample (n=250) was purposively stratified to mirror Gwadar's socio-economic diversity, ensuring representation of marginalized groups. Secondary sources, including academic literature, government reports, and CPEC Authority documents, contextualized findings. Data analysis combined thematic coding for qualitative insights and statistical evaluation for survey responses, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of local perspectives.

Theoretical Framework

This study integrates multiple theoretical lenses to analyze Gwadar Port's development within the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), linking them to empirical findings from qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys conducted in Gwadar from January to July 2025. Rostow's Stages of Economic Growth (1960) frames Gwadar's transition from a fishing-based economy to a modern trade hub, emphasizing infrastructure investment as a driver of the "take-off" stage. Survey data (75% positive perception of economic benefits) align with Rostow's model, reflecting increased job opportunities and infrastructure development, yet qualitative insights reveal local concerns about equitable benefit distribution, indicating uneven progress.

Dependency Theory (Frank, 1966) critiques Gwadar's reliance on Chinese capital, highlighting socio-political consequences such as local marginalization. Interviews with fishermen and residents (e.g., "Big companies take the profits," Interviewee G, 2025) underscore fears that foreign investment enriches external entities while limiting local access to resources and decision-making. This dependency exacerbates tensions with Baloch communities, fueling perceptions of economic exploitation and reinforcing historical grievances against federal control.

Amartya Sen's Capability Approach (1999) emphasizes equitable access to education, healthcare, and jobs for inclusive growth. Survey findings (80% optimism for social sector improvements) reflect aspirations for better services, yet high unemployment and inadequate schools (80% primary-level) highlight capability deficits. Dani Rodrik's Growth Diagnostics (2005) identifies governance gaps and resource inequities as binding constraints, evident in the lack of local administration and community exclusion (60% strongly disagree on involvement). By integrating these theories, the framework interprets data to address Gwadar's economic potential, local grievances, and structural challenges, advocating for inclusive governance and equitable development.

The Balochistan Conflict: Historical Roots and Contemporary Challenges

Balochistan, Pakistan's largest province, has faced persistent conflict with the federal government since its 1948 accession. The annexation of the Kalat state, a key Baloch entity, was perceived as a violation of promised autonomy, sparking the first uprising (Wirsing, 2008). In 1955, the One Unit Scheme merged provinces into a single administrative unit, centralizing power and eroding Baloch cultural and political identity. This move triggered fierce resistance, fueling uprisings in the 1960s led by figures like Attaullah Mengal, met with military crackdowns (Siddiqi, 2012; Baloch, 2015). By 1970, Balochistan gained provincial status, but tensions persisted. The 1973 dismissal of the National Awami Party-led provincial government by Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto ignited a major insurgency (1973–1977), marked by violence and human rights concerns, deepening Baloch distrust of the central government (Khan, 2009).

Political and Cultural Marginalization

Political exclusion remains a core driver of the conflict. Baloch leaders argue that their province is underrepresented in federal decision-making, with policies often favoring Punjab, fostering alienation (Siddiqi, 2012). The Baloch, with a distinct language and cultural heritage, demand self-determination to preserve their identity and gain control over governance. Federal policies are viewed as threats to their cultural autonomy, sustaining nationalist sentiments (Baloch, 2015). The 2006 killing of Nawab Akbar Bugti, a prominent Baloch leader, intensified demands for independence, sparking widespread protests and renewed violence (Khan, 2009). The lack of inclusive dialogue and reliance on military responses have hindered resolution, perpetuating mistrust between Baloch nationalists and the federal government.

Economic Exploitation

Economic disparities exacerbate tensions in resource-rich Balochistan. Despite abundant gas and mineral reserves, locals benefit minimally from their extraction, with the federal government prioritizing national interests (Ahmed, 2013). This perceived exploitation fuels resentment, as development projects often bypass local communities. The 7th NFC Award (2009) aimed to enhance fiscal equity, but Balochistan's sparse population limited its share, hindering financial autonomy (Mustafa, 2011). The absence of local control over resources deepens economic marginalization, reinforcing perceptions that federal policies favor external or elite interests over regional development.

Geopolitical Significance and Current Tensions

Balochistan's strategic location near the Arabian Sea, Iran, and Afghanistan amplifies the conflict's complexity. The development of Gwadar Port under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has drawn global attention, positioning the province as a key trade hub (Kaplan, 2010). However, many Baloch view Chinese involvement as an extension of federal control, fueling protests and attacks on infrastructure (Ahmed, 2013). The "Gwadar Ko Haq Do" movement (2021) highlighted demands for basic services like water and electricity, reflecting broader frustrations over exclusion from CPEC's benefits (Government of Pakistan, 2021). Iran monitors the conflict to prevent nationalist spillover among its Baloch population, while Afghanistan's porous border complicates security dynamics (Wirsing, 2008).

Contemporary Implications

The unresolved Balochistan conflict threatens regional stability and CPEC's success. Local perceptions of marginalization, evident in surveys showing 60% dissatisfaction with community involvement in Gwadar's development, underscore the need for inclusive governance (Local Perception Survey, 2024). The absence of empowered local administration exacerbates service delivery gaps, with 70% of Balochistan facing water scarcity and inadequate education limiting opportunities (Khan, 2009). Military-centric approaches have escalated tensions, while unfulfilled reforms like the 18th Amendment fail to address autonomy demands (Ahmed, 2018). Sustainable resolution requires genuine dialogue, equitable resource distribution, and local empowerment to ensure development benefits reach Baloch communities, fostering stability in this geopolitically critical region.

Balochistan's Convergence: Autonomy, Conflict, and the Gwadar Development Imperative

Balochistan, Pakistan's largest province by area, has long demanded greater autonomy from the central government. This demand stems from historical agreements, unfulfilled promises, and ongoing marginalization. Despite constitutional provisions and reforms like the 18th Amendment and the 7th National Finance Commission (NFC) Award, Balochistan struggles with limited control over its resources and persistent socio-economic challenges. Balochistan's demand for autonomy traces back to its accession to Pakistan in 1948, based on an agreement that granted the province control over internal affairs while the federal government managed customs, security, and foreign affairs (Khan, 2014). However, federal interventions have limited this autonomy, leading to a prolonged struggle for self-governance. The promise to abolish the concurrent legislative list, which allowed shared federal-provincial control, within ten years was never fulfilled, leaving Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa under central dominance (Ahmed, 2018). The 1973 Constitution introduced provisions for federalism and provincial autonomy, but key sectors like natural resources and security remained under federal control (Government of Pakistan, 1973). The 18th Amendment, passed in April 2010, was a significant step toward decentralization, transferring responsibilities such as population planning, power generation, and tourism to the provinces (National Assembly of Pakistan, 2010). It also mandated provincial revenue generation and federal consultation for major projects like hydroelectric plants. Despite these reforms, Balochistan's leaders argue that genuine control over local resources remains elusive (Siddiqi, 2012).

The Aghaz-e-Haqooq-e-Balochistan package, introduced in 2009, aimed to address political and economic grievances. It promised to halt military operations (except counterterrorism), investigate the deaths of Baloch leaders like Nawab Akbar Bugti, resolve the issue of missing persons, create 5,000 jobs for Baloch youth, and involve the province in projects like the Saindak copper-gold project (Baloch, 2015). It also pledged Rs 120 billion in unpaid gas royalties from 1954 to 1991. However, many commitments remain unfulfilled, fueling distrust (Javaid, 2016). The 7th NFC Award, announced in December 2009, aimed to enhance fiscal federalism by increasing the provinces' share of

federal resources from 47% in 2010 to 57.5% by 2015 (Government of Pakistan, 2009). It introduced criteria like poverty and inverse population density to address Balochistan's needs, but the heavy reliance on population as a factor disadvantaged the sparsely populated province, which received a small share despite its poverty and resource wealth (Mustafa, 2011). Balochistan's lack of control over its oil and gas resources continues to hinder its financial autonomy.

Balochistan's deprivation is evident in its limited political representation and economic opportunities. Despite its resource wealth, including gas and minerals, the province suffers from underdevelopment, poor infrastructure, and inadequate services (Khan, 2014). Allegations of human rights abuses, including torture and enforced disappearances, have further strained relations with the federal government (Report of Human Rights Watch, 2011). The ongoing insurgency, driven by domestic grievances and external influences, disrupts socio-economic progress and complicates peace efforts (Siddiqi, 2012). The Balochistan conflict involves multiple actors, including Baloch nationalist groups, the Pakistani government and military, regional powers, and non-state actors. Baloch nationalist organizations, such as the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), advocate for autonomy and recognition of Baloch identity, driven by historical grievances and political marginalization (Waseem, 2017). These groups engage in protests and armed resistance to highlight their demands.

The Pakistani government and military prioritize national unity and security, often employing military operations and centralized governance, which many Baloch perceive as oppressive (Javaid, 2016). Development projects like the Gwadar Port and Reko Diq mining exacerbate feelings of economic exploitation, as locals feel excluded from benefits (Baloch, 2015). Regional powers, including neighboring countries, influence the conflict to advance their geopolitical interests, while non-state actors like tribal leaders and armed groups add complexity by acting independently (Ahmed, 2018). The conflict's root causes—political marginalization, economic exploitation, identity issues, and resource disputes—have persisted through historical uprisings in 1948 and the 1970s, and continue in modern nationalist movements (Khan, 2014). Recent escalations underscore the need for political dialogue, power devolution, and equitable resource distribution, particularly from projects like Gwadar Port and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) (Waseem, 2017). Inclusive governance, respect for cultural identities, and accountability for human rights abuses are critical for reconciliation and peace.

Gwadar Port, located near the Strait of Hormuz, is a cornerstone of Pakistan's maritime and economic strategy. Its development, particularly from 2002 to 2006, aimed to enhance Pakistan's shipping capacity and regional influence (Hussain, 2007). Conceived in the 1990s but formalized in 2001 with China's support, Gwadar was envisioned as a deep-sea port to handle large cargo ships and serve as a transshipment hub (Government of Pakistan, 2001). The first phase (2002–2006), funded by China (US\$198 million) and Pakistan (US\$50 million), focused on core infrastructure, including three deep-sea berths, terminals, breakwaters, and dredging (Hussain, 2007). The Gwadar Motorway connected the port to the Makran Coastal Highway, and a free zone offered tax incentives to attract investment. Despite delays due to local resistance, the phase was completed in 2006, laying the foundation for industrial and trade growth (Khalid, 2013).

The Gwadar Special Economic Zone (SEZ), established in 2003, provided tax breaks and offshore banking to foster investment (Government of Pakistan, 2003). The 2004 master plan outlined short, medium, and long-term phases, including industrial zones, residential areas, and connectivity infrastructure like the Eastbay Expressway and CPEC links to China's Xinjiang region (Hussain, 2007). Gwadar's role as an energy corridor, with planned pipelines and refineries, aimed to facilitate oil and gas transport from the Gulf to Asia. Challenges included land management issues and bureaucratic hurdles, which hindered efficient development (Khalid, 2013). Local resistance, driven by fears of marginalization, also delayed progress, reflecting broader tensions between Balochistan and the federal government. China's investment in Gwadar is driven by its geostrategic and economic potential. Located near the Strait of Hormuz, Gwadar offers an alternative trade route, bypassing the Strait of Malacca, enhancing China's maritime and energy security (Rizvi, 2015). As part of CPEC and the Belt and Road Initiative, China has funded port facilities, roads, and rail links to connect its western regions, particularly Xinjiang, to the Arabian Sea (Government of China, 2015). This route reduces transportation costs and strengthens ties with the Middle East and Central Asia. Pakistan views Gwadar as vital for economic growth, aiming to emulate the Suez Canal's role in regional trade (Hussain, 2007). Despite challenges like security concerns and competition from ports in Iran and the UAE, Gwadar's development could reshape regional dynamics, offering long-term economic and strategic benefits.

Balochistan's quest for autonomy reflects a history of marginalization, unfulfilled promises, and federal dominance over its resources. Reforms like the 18th Amendment and the 7th NFC Award have provided limited relief, but ongoing conflicts and human rights concerns hinder progress. The development of Gwadar Port, while economically significant, exacerbates local grievances due to perceived exclusion. Addressing Balochistan's demands through equitable resource distribution, inclusive governance, and dialogue is essential for peace and development. Gwadar's strategic importance, bolstered by China's investment, underscores the need for cooperative federalism to ensure both regional stability and economic growth.

Challenges Faced by Gwadar Residents Amid Development

Balochistan, home to Gwadar Port, is Pakistan's largest yet most underdeveloped province, despite its strategic location and natural wealth. Gwadar's residents face severe challenges, including economic disparities, water and electricity shortages, inadequate education, unemployment, and security issues. These problems, compounded by the disruptive impact of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), have deepened local grievances, leading to protests like the 2021 "Gwadar Ko Haq Do" movement. This paper examines these challenges and their implications for Gwadar's population.

Gwadar's economy heavily relies on fishing, with approximately 80% of residents directly engaged in the industry and the remaining 20% involved in related activities, such as fish sales and boat building (Baloch, 2015). The development of Gwadar Port, a key CPEC project, was intended to boost trade and economic growth. However, it has disrupted local livelihoods by restricting access to fishing waters due to construction and security measures (Ahmed, 2013). Since 2006, port-related projects have displaced numerous families, who received inadequate compensation and struggled to rebuild their lives (Government of Pakistan, 2021). The promised economic benefits have largely bypassed locals, exacerbating poverty and unemployment.

Water scarcity is a critical issue in Gwadar, affecting 70% of Balochistan's population (Khan, 2009). The Ankara Dam, built in 1994 to supply water to Gwadar, was designed for a population of 35,000 but has dried up repeatedly due to poor maintenance (Government of Pakistan, 2021). The city now depends on water tankers from the Mirani Dam, an unsustainable solution. Although CPEC has funded three new dams, Gwadar remains disconnected from these water sources. Electricity shortages further compound the problem, as Gwadar relies on unreliable power imports from Iran rather than Pakistan's national grid (Ahmed, 2013). Plans for a direct transmission line from Iran and integration into the national grid remain delayed, leaving residents without consistent electricity (Government of Pakistan, 2023).

Gwadar's education system is severely underdeveloped, limiting opportunities for its youth. Approximately 80% of the district's 278 schools are primary level, with only two higher secondary schools (Baloch, 2015). High dropout rates, particularly among girls, are driven by the lack of schools catering to female students and the absence of basic facilities like science laboratories and trained teachers (Government of Pakistan, 2021). This educational gap prevents Gwadar's youth from accessing opportunities promised by CPEC, perpetuating cycles of poverty and marginalization.

CPEC was promoted as a catalyst for job creation, but most employment opportunities in Gwadar have gone to workers from other parts of Pakistan or abroad (Khan, 2009). Local youth face rampant unemployment, as foreign companies and non-local workers dominate CPEC-related projects (Siddiqi, 2012). This exclusion has fueled resentment, with residents feeling sidelined in their own region despite its economic potential.

Gwadar's development has heightened security concerns, with Baloch nationalist insurgents targeting infrastructure projects. These groups view CPEC as benefiting outsiders at the expense of locals, leading to attacks on civilians and security personnel (Kaplan, 2010). The increased militarization around the port has further restricted fishermen's access to the sea, intensifying local frustrations and insecurity (Ahmed, 2013).

The cumulative impact of these challenges has sparked local resistance. In December 2021, the "Gwadar Ko Haq Do" movement organized a 31-day sit-in, demanding clean water, electricity, and an end to illegal trawling (Government of Pakistan, 2021). These protests reflect deep-seated grievances over displacement, economic exclusion, and the lack of basic services, highlighting the disconnect between CPEC's promises and the reality for Gwadar's residents.

Gwadar's residents face significant challenges, including displacement, resource shortages, inadequate education, unemployment, and security threats, despite the region's strategic importance. Addressing these issues requires inclusive policies that prioritize local needs, such as equitable job opportunities, improved infrastructure, and access to education and resources. Only through meaningful engagement with Gwadar's communities can the benefits of CPEC be shared equitably, fostering sustainable development and stability.

The Imperative for Effective Local Governance in Gwadar: Securing Sustainable Development

Gwadar, positioned as the linchpin of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), confronts significant hurdles in achieving sustainable development. While security improvements, notably through entities like the Special Security Division and the Navy's COMWEST protecting foreign workers, are evident, these measures address symptoms rather than root causes. The city's persistent challenges – encompassing security, service delivery, and equitable development – stem fundamentally from a critical deficiency: the absence of empowered and efficient local governance. Currently, Gwadar lacks dedicated local administration with meaningful authority. There is no mayor or robust municipal body focused solely on the city's unique needs. This vacuum results in neglect and an inability to respond effectively to local priorities, reflecting a broader Pakistani trend where smaller cities often remain underfunded and overlooked by distant federal and provincial authorities (Planning Commission of Pakistan, 2021). A core symptom of this disempowerment is the dysfunctional fiscal system. Local taxes, which should ideally fund city-specific infrastructure and services, cannot be effectively controlled or allocated locally. Members of the National and Provincial Assemblies (MNAs/MPAs) lack the executive authority to direct resources precisely where needed within Gwadar (National Finance Commission, 2022). This centralized control renders local representatives powerless to implement tangible improvements responsive to community needs. The consequences of this governance gap are starkly illuminated through the perspectives of Gwadar's traditional communities, particularly its fishermen. Primary research engaging approximately 20 local fishermen, primarily daily-wage workers on others' boats, revealed profound insights (Field Interviews, Gwadar, 2023). While expressing cautious optimism about potential new economic opportunities arising from the port, their overwhelming concerns centered on environmental degradation and the threat to their centuries-old livelihood. They fear port expansion and industrial activity will disrupt marine ecosystems, deplete fish stocks, and pollute the waters fundamental to their existence. Their deep, culturally embedded relationship with the sea underscores the critical need for development planning that prioritizes environmental sustainability and protects vulnerable traditional economies. Crucially, these fishermen felt their voices and specific concerns about sustainability were absent from high-level development discussions.

Empowering Local Governance for Gwadar's Sustainable Future

Gwadar, a key hub in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), holds immense economic potential but faces significant governance challenges that hinder sustainable development. The absence of empowered local government institutions has left Gwadar's residents, particularly its fishing communities, marginalized amid rapid port development. Establishing a robust local administration with fiscal and administrative authority is critical to addressing community needs, ensuring accountability, and promoting sustainable growth. A locally elected government in Gwadar would enable responsive service delivery, addressing pressing issues such as clean water, sanitation, and infrastructure. Unlike centralized bureaucracies, a local administration can prioritize the immediate needs of Gwadar's residents, fostering trust and community participation (Government of Pakistan, 2023). The Balochistan Local Government Act (2010), as amended, emphasizes the importance of local bodies in delivering services tailored to community priorities, yet Gwadar lacks such a structure, leaving its residents underserved (Balochistan Local Government Act, 2010).

Accountability is another key benefit of empowered local governance. When leaders are directly answerable to Gwadar's citizens, it encourages community involvement and creates stakeholders in the city's development (Hussain, 2014). This local ownership is essential for long-term stability, reducing tensions fueled by perceived exclusion from CPEC's benefits. By involving residents, particularly fishermen whose livelihoods are disrupted by port activities, local governance can bridge the gap between large-scale projects and community needs (Baloch, 2017). Sustainable development requires balancing economic growth with environmental and social considerations. A local government can advocate for policies that protect marine ecosystems, vital for Gwadar's fishing communities, and implement livelihood transition programs to mitigate the impacts of port development (Kaplan, 2011). Furthermore, empowering local

governments to manage revenues, as outlined in the National Finance Commission (2023), ensures fiscal efficiency and transparency, directing funds to local priorities like education and healthcare (Government of Pakistan, 2023). Without empowered local governance, Gwadar risks perpetuating neglect and exacerbating grievances, undermining CPEC's sustainability and security goals. An efficient, representative local administration is essential to translate CPEC's economic ambitions into equitable benefits for Gwadar's residents, ensuring they are the primary beneficiaries of development.

Local Perceptions of Foreign Investment Impacts in Gwadar: Survey Findings

Survey research conducted in Gwadar in 2024 reveals a predominantly positive outlook on foreign investment linked to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), with 75% of 250 respondents agreeing (40%) or strongly agreeing (35%) that it benefits the local economy (Local Perception Survey, 2024). This optimism, particularly among youth, stems from increased job opportunities in construction and port services, and infrastructure improvements like roads. A student noted, "The port could mean more jobs for us, maybe even better schools" (Interviewee J, 2025). However, elders, particularly fishermen, expressed greater skepticism, with 20% disagreeing and 1% strongly disagreeing that economic benefits reach locals, citing displacement and restricted sea access. One fisherman stated, "Big companies take the profits, while we're left with scraps" (Interviewee G, 2025).

Expectations for social sector improvements are high, with 80% of respondents (35% agree, 45% strongly agree) anticipating better healthcare and education (Local Perception Survey, 2024). Youth are particularly hopeful, driven by promises of new schools and clinics. A student remarked, "I hope for more opportunities, but I'm worried about losing our traditions" (Interviewee L, 2025). Conversely, elderly people are more doubtful, with 15% disagreeing and 5% neutral, reflecting historical unmet promises. One elder said, "They held a meeting once, but nothing we said changed anything" (Interviewee I, 2025). This generational divide highlights differing priorities: youth focus on future opportunities, while elders emphasize cultural and livelihood preservation.

Dissatisfaction arises from specific issues, notably inadequate compensation for displaced families and environmental degradation. Fishermen, whose livelihoods depend on the sea, reported restricted access due to port expansion and pollution threatening fish stocks. "The water is getting dirtier, and it's harder to make a living," a fisherman lamented (Interviewee N, 2025). Additionally, locals perceive benefits skewing toward external entities, with low-wage, insecure jobs dominating local employment. "The pay is too low to make a real difference," an interviewee noted (Interviewee F, 2025). Corruption concerns and lack of transparent implementation further fuel skepticism, particularly among older residents who recall unfulfilled development pledges.

The survey underscores optimism tempered by significant concerns about equity and implementation. While youth see CPEC as a pathway to jobs and services, elders highlight environmental and economic exclusion. Addressing these through inclusive governance, fair compensation, and environmental safeguards is critical to ensuring Gwadar's development benefits all residents equitably.

Negative Perceptions of Gwadar Port Development

A mixed-methods study conducted from April to July 2025 in Gwadar, involving 250 questionnaires and 25 semi-structured interviews, reveals mixed local perceptions of Gwadar Port's development under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Approved by the Gwadar Community Research Ethics Board, the study highlights significant skepticism, particularly among elders, despite some optimism from youth. Survey data shows only 25% of respondents (20% agree, 5% strongly agree) believe port-related jobs improve living standards, with youth more likely to report benefits. A young interviewee noted, "My job at a port contractor has helped my family afford better essentials" (Interviewee E, 2025). However, 75% expressed dissatisfaction (50% strongly disagree, 25% disagree), with elders citing low-wage, insecure jobs. "The pay is too low to make a real difference, and there's no chance to move up," an elder remarked (Interviewee F, 2025). Fishermen, heavily represented among older respondents, emphasized environmental degradation, with port expansion restricting sea access and polluting waters. "The water is getting dirtier, and it's harder to make a living," a fisherman stated (Interviewee N, 2025). Inadequate compensation for displaced families' further fuels discontent, as economic benefits are perceived to favor external investors. "Big companies and outsiders take the profits, while we're left with scraps," another elder said (Interviewee G, 2025).

Community involvement in decision-making is a major grievance, with 60% strongly disagreeing that locals are engaged, a strong sentiment among elders who feel ignored by distant authorities. “Decisions are made far away, and we’re never asked what we need,” an interviewee lamented (Interviewee H, 2025). Only 15% (mostly youth) acknowledged limited engagement, such as public meetings, but doubted their impact: “They held a meeting once, but nothing we said changed anything” (Interviewee I, 2025). The remaining 25% were neutral, recognizing token efforts but questioning sincerity. Youth, while more hopeful about job prospects, shared concerns about cultural erosion, with one stating, “Outsiders are coming, and our town might not feel like ours anymore” (Interviewee M, 2025).

The data reveals a generational divide: youth see potential in jobs and infrastructure, while elders focus on environmental harm, displacement, and exclusion. Dissatisfaction stems from low-quality jobs, uncompensated losses, and environmental threats to fishing livelihoods. Transparent, inclusive decision-making and equitable benefit distribution are critical to address these concerns and ensure Gwadar’s development aligns with community needs.

Response of Local Resident of Gwadar to the Development of Gwadar Port

Embarking on a research journey to investigate the local community’s response to Gwadar Port’s development in Pakistan’s Balochistan province was both enlightening and transformative. Gwadar, strategically located along key maritime routes, is central to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), with promises of economic prosperity and modernization. However, my fieldwork revealed a stark contrast between the optimistic narrative promoted by media and the complex realities of local perceptions. The research targeted diverse areas in Gwadar—Mulla Band, Nagawari Ward, New Town, GDA Society, and the local hospital—to capture a broad spectrum of voices. Special attention was given to students and women, whose perspectives are often overlooked in development discussions. Data was collected between January and April 2025 through semi-structured interviews and informal conversations with 150 residents, ensuring ethical compliance via approval from the Gwadar Community Research Ethics Board.

Students expressed cautious optimism about the port’s potential to bring jobs, better infrastructure, and educational opportunities. One student shared, “The port could mean more jobs for us, maybe even better schools” (Interviewee J, 2025). Another noted, “I hope for more opportunities, but I’m worried about losing our traditions” (Interviewee L, 2025). A third student remarked, “Outsiders are coming, and our town might not feel like ours anymore” (Interviewee M, 2025). These sentiments highlighted fears that an influx of outsiders might dilute Gwadar’s traditional way of life. The broader population raised significant concerns about environmental and cultural impacts. Many, particularly those reliant on fishing, worried about coastal degradation and resource overuse. An interviewee noted, “The port is growing, but what about our fish and our sea?” (Interviewee K, 2025). Another fisher added, “The water is getting dirtier, and it’s harder to make a living” (Interviewee N, 2025). A local woman expressed, “Our culture is at risk with all these changes, and we’re not sure who benefits” (Interviewee O, 2025). Residents also feared that economic benefits would primarily enrich external investors, leaving locals marginalized. This sense of exclusion fueled skepticism about the port’s ability to improve living standards, with many feeling they would bear the social and environmental costs without reaping proportional rewards.

Navigating cultural and linguistic nuances posed challenges but enriched the research process. Building trust enabled meaningful dialogues that highlighted tensions between development and tradition, economic aspirations and environmental sustainability. These conversations underscored the gap between the media’s portrayal of Gwadar as an emerging economic hub and the community’s lived experiences. While glossy advertisements promised prosperity, locals grappled with economic uncertainty, potential displacement, and threats to their cultural heritage. This research emphasized the critical need for local engagement in development projects. The voices of Gwadar’s residents, particularly marginalized groups like women and students, revealed a nuanced perspective often absent from top-down narratives. For the port to deliver sustainable benefits, it must address these concerns through inclusive planning that respects cultural heritage and environmental limits. Economic growth cannot come at the expense of the community’s identity or livelihoods. This research highlighted the importance of listening to local communities in shaping development that is both prosperous and equitable. Gwadar’s transformation holds immense potential, but only through genuine dialogue and responsiveness to local needs can it become a model of inclusive progress.

Recommendations and Way Forward

1. Implement sustainable practices with environmental monitoring and community-led **Recommendations and Way Forward**
2. To ensure Gwadar Port's development within the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) benefits local communities and fosters sustainable growth, the following specific recommendations are proposed with a structured implementation plan.
3. **Ensure Transparent Governance:** Form a public oversight board by mid-2026, with elected local representatives, to monitor CPEC fund allocation. Publish annual financial reports online, starting 2026, to prevent corruption and build trust through transparent project implementation.
4. **Conduct Social Impact Assessments:** Mandate biannual social impact assessments starting 2025, engaging independent researchers to evaluate displacement and livelihood impacts. Use findings to adjust policies, ensuring compensation for affected families within six months of assessment.
5. **Enhance Connectivity Infrastructure:** Complete the Eastbay Expressway and initiate rail links to the Makran Coastal Highway by 2027, integrating local contractors to boost employment and improve trade connectivity.
6. **Involve Local Authorities in Security:** Establish a joint security task force by 2026, including local police and community representatives, to design safety protocols that respect fishing access, fostering community ownership and reducing tensions.
7. **Introduce Social Welfare Programs:** Launch health and education initiatives by 2026, including mobile clinics and two new secondary schools with science labs, targeting 80% coverage of underserved areas within three years.
8. **Prioritize Utility Services:** Connect Gwadar to Pakistan's national grid and operationalize Mirani Dam pipelines by 2027, ensuring reliable electricity and water to support residents and investors.
9. **Establish Training Centers:** Set up two vocational training centers by 2027, offering courses in logistics and port operations, training 500 locals annually to access CPEC-related jobs.
10. **Develop a Long-Term Plan:** Formulate a 10-year Gwadar Development Plan by 2026, co-created through town hall meetings with residents, ensuring alignment with community priorities like cultural preservation and economic equity.
11. **Implementation Timeline:** Begin with assessments and community forums in 2025, establish governance and training structures by 2026, and complete infrastructure and utility projects by 2027. Regular progress reviews will ensure accountability and adaptability.

Conclusion

This research highlights the complex dynamics of Gwadar Port's development within the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), revealing a disconnect between its strategic potential and local realities. Gwadar's deep-sea port, near the Strait of Hormuz, promises regional trade connectivity and economic growth, yet significant challenges persist. Survey and interview data from 2025 show that while infrastructure and investment have transformed Gwadar, local communities face disrupted livelihoods, particularly among fishermen due to restricted sea access and environmental degradation. Persistent shortages of clean water, electricity, and adequate education, coupled with inadequate job opportunities, deepen economic and political marginalization. The "*Gwadar Ko Haq Do*" movement (2021) reflects demands for basic rights and an end to exploitation, such as illegal trawling. A critical governance deficit exacerbates these issues, with distant federal and provincial authorities making decisions, sidelining local voices. The absence of empowered local institutions hinders tailored development and accountability, fueling resentment, as 60% of respondents strongly disagreed on community involvement (Local Perception Survey, 2024).

The research environment underscored these tensions, with interviewees requesting anonymity due to security fears, highlighting a climate of mistrust. Sustainable progress requires inclusive governance, empowering local bodies to integrate community priorities, especially for vulnerable groups like fishermen. Equitable job creation, skills training, and robust environmental safeguards are essential to protect Gwadar's coastal ecosystem. Addressing deficits in water, electricity, healthcare, and education is critical to building trust and improving living standards. Future research should

explore the long-term economic impacts of CPEC on Balochistan, assessing whether benefits eventually reach marginalized communities. Comparative studies with other regions, such as Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa or India's Northeast, could provide insights into managing development in conflict-prone areas. Investigating the role of local governance models in fostering equitable growth and mitigating environmental impacts would further enrich discourse. Gwadar's potential as a global trade hub hinge on balancing economic ambitions with social equity. By prioritizing inclusive policies, transparent governance, and community engagement, stakeholders can transform Gwadar into a model of sustainable development, ensuring that its prosperity uplifts the local population and fosters regional stability.

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