



The Political Economy of Sustainable Mobility: A Comparative Analysis of State Capacity and SDG 11 in Lahore and Karachi, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This paper addressed the politics of sustainable urban mobility by taking two cities, Lahore and Karachi, and discussed how differences in state capacity influence the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal (11) in Pakistan. The results show a clear difference in development patterns. In Lahore centralized and integrated governance system allows quick implementation of large-scale transport projects, eventually increasing urban accessibility and supporting SDG 11.2 indicators. In contrast, the fragmented institutional structure of Karachi, including overlapping jurisdictions, and political conflicts, limits proper policy implementation, resulting in delays and unequal service provision despite the introduction of technologically advanced and environmentally friendly transport solutions aligned with SDG 11.6. The paper is based on two broad theoretical foundations: state capacity and the political economy of development. These frameworks allow for the consideration of urban transport as a direct product of governance forms and political decision making, rather than just a technical or engineering problem. The study is based on a qualitative comparative design and relies on secondary data, which analyzed the importance of interaction between institutions, governance structure, and political motivation in shaping urban transport outcomes at the provincial level. The paper also highlights the mixed impact of decentralization after the 18th Constitutional Amendment and explains the importance of development trajectories, especially CPEC-related investments in Lahore and multilateral donor-led projects in Karachi. By placing SDG 11 within a broader political economy framework, the study argues that sustainable urban transformation depends not only on policy commitment or technical planning, but also fundamentally on the strength of state capacity, institutional coordination, and political alignment. The research contributes to ongoing discussions regarding urban governance in the Global South and provides useful lessons for policymakers aiming to develop inclusive and sustainable mobility systems in complex metropolitan settings.



1. Introduction

The twenty-first century has seen a shift in urbanization as of 2026, approximately 60% of the world population is living in cities (United Nations, 2026) such as Pakistan, about 40% of its population has been urbanized. (World Bank, 2025) this rapid urbanization process has dual dimensions. Urban areas provide prospects of economic growth and development on one hand and on the other hand, there is a risk of infrastructural overload and the environmental worsening, un effective management. To address this issue, the United Nations has made Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, particularly SDG 11, to end miseries of population of word till 2030. (United Nations, 2015) UN's SDG 11 specially deals with making cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. This study will deal with 11.2 that focuses on the creation of accessible, affordable, and sustainable transport systems, and 11.6 which regarding environmental issues in cities. (United Nations, 2015) The realization- at the local level- of such global undertakings is not merely a technical or financial problem, but essentially is a matter of the character of state capacity and the dynamics of political governance.

The Eighteenth constitutional Amendment in Pakistan had a significant reorganization of the institutional structure of the urban governance system through the introduction of Article 140A by devolving power on the transport and municipal planning to the provincial governments. Therefore, this decentralization gives a good background to study the urban governance in larger cities in Pakistan in different provinces using comparative political analysis. The study analyzes the capitals of 2 big provinces Punjab (Lahore) and Sindh (Karachi). The results have shown that Punjab's capital Lahore has a fairly good administrative capacity to carry out urban transport in mass projects. The Metro Bus, the Orange Line Metro Train, and the recent advances of electric bus fleets are the projects that demonstrate a centralized and coordinated form of governance that can be capable of providing observable infrastructural results. These have set Lahore as a prominent case of successful urban policy implementation in Pakistan. However, in Sindh, its capital Karachi, the largest metropolitan city and economic center of the nation, offers a different scenario. The urban transport system in Karachi has been undermined by institutional fragmentation and overlapping jurisdictions, as well as by political conflicts among the various federal, provincial and local actors involved. Some initiatives such as bussing and the Green Line Bus Rapid Transit system achieve a more moderate degree of success in their implementation, while some other larger-scale projects such as the Red Line corridor suffer from delays and governance problems.

The paper clearly finds that the dynamics of state capacity and political economy are central to these findings in the two largest cities of Pakistan. The government's relative success in Lahore indicates the relative success of the harmonization of the political interest, administrative power and distribution of resources, which will lead to a more centralized and unified government. Whereas, in contrast, in Karachi, the governmental constrained, the competing political interests and institutional overlaps destroy policy coherence and efficiency of implementation, resulting in fragmented governance. The paper uses a qualitative comparative research design that is founded on secondary data to investigate the variations in governance structures, administrative capacity, and political agendas that inform the formation of the urban transport systems in both Lahore and Karachi. This comparative analysis makes the study relevant to the wider discussions of urban governance and sustainable development in the Global South in the context of SDG 11.

Research Objectives:

- The effects of subnational state capacity on the realization of SDG 11 in the cities of Lahore and Karachi.

- To test the efficiency of the governance structures with respect to the political and institutional strengths and weaknesses of the mass transit development.

Research Questions:

- What is the role of subnational state capacity on the implementation of SDG 11 in Lahore and Karachi cities?
- Why do governments formations yield varying results in the development of mass transport in the two largest cities in Pakistan?

The coming sections review the relevant literature, the theoretical framework, and a comparative analysis of the two cases to evaluate the contribution of state capacity towards attaining sustainable mobility results.

2- Literature Review

State capacity in the field of political science is mainly concerned with how effectively a government can perform its activities in the given circumstances. This is explained by Fukuyama (2013) primarily in terms of administrative capacity as the ability of the state for effective implementation of its own policies. However, according to Migdal (1988), in the developing countries, the state has challenges in effective administration due to strong social groups and weak institutional control. Such concepts are useful in explaining the variation in governmental working but are general in nature and not describe specific sector problems, such as urban transport in countries like Pakistan.

To understand these differences, it is important to study institutions and political dynamics. As North (1990) defines institutions as rules of the game that influence economic and political results. Malik (2021) describes these rules as the political settlement which is the politics of infrastructural development in Pakistan, and involvement of the economic interests of elites, political priorities, and electoral factors, which shape the development of infrastructure projects. This is one of the reasons why certain projects have rapid progress and others are delayed. Nevertheless, there remain few studies that compare the varying functioning of these political factors in cities such as Lahore and Karachi in the same national system.

This problem is more complicated under the premise of decentralization. With the implementation of the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution of Pakistan, power was transferred to the provinces, whereas local governments were not equally empowered. Studies such as Naseer and Bano (2020) highlight coordination issues in major urban centers after decentralization, while other literature, including Cheema (2018), also points to the continued weakness of local governments despite provincial empowerment. Consequently, there is still uneven governance at the city level. The provincial government is highly controlling in cities such as Lahore, and in Karachi, the provincial and local institutions are at loggerheads, which poses coordination challenges. Nonetheless, this does not mean that the literature has a clear relationship between decentralization and variations in urban transport outcomes.

These issues of local governance are also correlated with global development plans, especially SDG 11 of the United Nations, which advocates sustainable cities and highlights transport as Target 11.2. The majority of research in this field is concerned with the significance of public transport and environmental sustainability. However, they primarily talk about what is to be done but not how it is actually being implemented in countries of varying state capacity. UN-Habitat (2016) has shown the importance of sustainable urban mobility frameworks, and OECD (2019) have pointed to the need for governance and capacity constraints in implementation. This sets up a disconnect between global policy objectives and local realities. Research on sustainable mobility

has shown that BRT can improve accessibility, reduce congestion and contribute to environmental sustainability. Although there are well established technical benefits of these systems, their political and institutional context and conditions that pre-define their success are less emphasized. BRT systems are efficient and sustainable, as demonstrated by Hidalgo and Gutiérrez (2013), and governance and institutional context is vital to transport outcomes, as Pojani and Stead (2015) argue. This has resulted in a lack of understanding of the impact of governance structure on system performance of urban transport systems.

This is the most apparent problem in big cities in Pakistan. Poverty of coordination, institutional duplication and administrative difficulties have been highlighted in most studies. The other studies suggest that the Pak Pakistani urban transport planning process suffers from institutional fragmentation and poor coordination between agencies and it affects the good implementation of planning process (Imran, 2010). Nevertheless, they tend to consider Pakistan as an isolated situation and fail to compare the dissimilarities among big cities. When we look at it more closely, we realize that Lahore and Karachi are poles apart. This centralized control is what helps Lahore's model to execute projects quickly, like Metro Bus and Orange Line, and it has been successful due to a strong provincial control too, as explained by Siddiqui (2017); meanwhile, Qadeer (2019) notes that the key benefit of the Lahore model is that it prioritizes speed and visibility when it comes to infrastructure development. According to Pojani and Stead (2015) the governance structure has a significant impact on transport outcomes, with more centralized governance systems tending towards more speedy decision making and implementation. The same applies to Klopp and Petretta (2017), who demonstrate that cities with disunited and divided governance structures experience slower progress, lack of coordination and are less effective in their transport systems. Like in Karachi, the Asian Development Bank (2026) reported that the delays occurred in the Red Line BRT project were caused by coordination problems, land problems, and administrative problems. Likewise, the report of World Bank (2025) highlights that the multi-agency approach with dual mandates has held up project implementation. These reports are an important source of empirical data, but they tend to be descriptive without being explained in larger theoretical frameworks.

Overall, the current literature is useful to comprehend the concepts of state capacity, political economy and urban governance. However, there is still a significant gap in integrating these perspectives in a comparative study in Pakistan. In particular, there is limited research available that outlines the potential effects of changes in governance structures, political processes, and development patterns on the achievement of SDG 11 in urban settings like Lahore and Karachi. Therefore, this study will contribute to this void by linking theory to the empirical evidence, and provide a comparison of how urban transportation has developed in these two large cities.

3- Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The paper is based on two broad theoretical foundations: state capacity and the political economy of development. These frameworks enable urban transport to be viewed not as a mere technical or engineering problem, but as a direct consequence of governance forms and political decision-making. The initial fundamental notion, state capacity, is the capacity of a government to design and adopt policies in an effective way. Fukuyama (2013) elaborates this concept by stating that powerful states possess effective administrative structures and are capable of implementing resolutions. Nevertheless, as Migdal (1988) notes, this is not always the case in many developing countries since most states act within weak institutions and competing social forces.

As a matter of fact, state capacity can be interpreted by a couple of clear signs. A government that is well endowed has the capacity to accomplish big infrastructure projects like mass transit systems within a defined period. It also has the ability to liaise with various departments and prevent

wastage of time. Moreover, it is also able to implement policies without the daily opposition of rival groups. Conversely, weak state capacity is mostly manifested in delays, lack of coordination, and unfinished projects. These indicators are used in this research to understand why a particular city can build its transport system more successfully than another.

The second approach employed in this research is the political economy perspective, which examines how power and political interests influence development results. This method can be traced back to the works of such scholars as North (1990), who has defined institutions as the rules of the game which govern political and economic actions. Within the framework of Pakistan, Malik (2021) goes further to elaborate that infrastructure projects are driven by the politics of settlement whereby they are made based on the interests of elites and political priorities, and not entirely on the needs of the people. This is observable in cases where governments are more interested in visible projects so as to receive political goodwill, or even in the delays of projects as a result of disagreement among various political players. Such instances demonstrate that development is not purely technical but highly political. These two frameworks give a clear analytical basis in the study. State capacity is the governmental administrative ability, political economy is the political forces in the making of a decision. Together, they add to the knowledge of why cities are not equal in terms of the extent of their impacts on urban transport.

These theoretical ideas are implemented in the study by a qualitative comparative research design. Such a method is suitable since both Lahore and Karachi are under the same political and constitutional framework but deliver quite different results in terms of city transport infrastructure development. Due to the time and scope constraints, the study is based on secondary data. This encompasses scholarly writings, policy reports, and official reports of different organizations like the Asian Development Bank (2026) and the World Bank (2025). These sources provide a lot of information regarding the implementation of projects, governance structures, and institutional issues in both cities. This paper uses Lahore and Karachi as case studies as they are two opposite governance models. Lahore is a reflection of a more centralized and coordinated system, whereas Karachi is fragmented in the sense that two or more institutions are active at the same time. Analysis is done by comparing major variables like coordination, political influence, and institutional performance within both cities. Even though the research lacks actual fieldwork, it is an excellent analysis, with the theoretical concepts being connected with actual-life examples of the development of transport in an urban environment. By so doing, the research assesses the impact of various governance set-ups on the realization of sustainable mobility objectives as part of SDG 11.

4- Case Study: Lahore

Lahore is the second largest city of Pakistan having population nearly 15.2 million in 2026 (World Population Review, 2026). However, it is regarded as having one of the most sophisticated urban transport systems in Pakistan. After 2010, the city shifted towards a more formal transport network including Metro Bus, Orange Line Metro Train, feeder buses (Speedo), and recently electric buses. This transformation is an example of infrastructural development as well as governmental functioning in Punjab (PIDE, 2021; World Bank, 2020). At the same time, these developments directly relate with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 11, especially Target 11.2 which focuses on safe, affordable, and sustainable transport systems, and Target 11.6 which deals with environmental problems in cities. The Metro Bus Service (MBS) was the first major development launched in February 2013. The project was completed within 11 months, from March 2012 to February 2013. This comparatively fast completion is often considered an example of strong administrative coordination and implementation capacity (Punjab Mass Transit Authority, 2013; UET Technical Journal, 2024). This 27 km system from Gajjumatta to Shahdara (Punjab

Mass Transit Authority, 2026) introduced an exclusive transport corridor which improved travelling time and convenience, especially for daily commuters. The system usually facilitates between 140,000 and 160,000 passenger trips daily under normal operating conditions (Dunya News, 2026). In this way, it directly contributed towards improving urban accessibility which is a major objective of SDG 11.2.

The second important step was the Orange Line Metro Train, (OLMT) a project developed under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). It is the first urban rail transit system in Pakistan. Construction started in 2015 and operations began in 2020. This project reflects not only infrastructural development but also growth in technical and administrative capacity through international cooperation (Asian Development Bank, 2020). It also increased the ability of the city to provide mass transit services, which aligns with SDG 11.2 objectives regarding efficient and inclusive transport. The train covers 27 km from Ali Town to Dera Gujran and serves more than 250,000 passengers daily (Pakistan Today, 2026). To connect different parts of city to these 2 main transport systems, third initiative was taken which is known as the feeder bus system, commonly known as Speedo, which connects different parts of the city with the major transport routes. This step benefited 150 thousand passengers daily on 27 routes in 2026 (Punjab Mass Transit Authority, 2026). These services are supported through an integrated e-ticketing system where one card can be used across different transport modes. In recent years, the system has further improved with the introduction of the T-Cash card and the E-Transit Punjab app, allowing real-time tracking and mobile top-ups, gradually replacing the traditional token system (Punjab Mass Transit Authority, 2026; The Daily CPEC, 2025). This governmental initiative improves efficiency and accessibility and therefore supports SDG 11.2.

More recently, environmental concerns have become part of transport policy. The introduction of electric buses in Lahore is part of a broader plan to modernize transport and reduce air pollution, especially smog. Transport policy is now more closely linked with environmental response strategies because during periods of high pollution, people are encouraged to use public transport. Such developments are directly connected with SDG 11.6 which aims to reduce the environmental impact of cities, especially regarding air quality. In this way, transport systems are also becoming tools of adaptive governance for dealing with environmental challenges (Government of Punjab, 2025; The Express Tribune, 2025; The Nation, 2025). Different long-term strategies are also under planning for future transport development in Lahore, particularly under the Lahore Master Plan 2050. This shows that the government is not only focusing on short-term projects but is also considering future-oriented urban mobility systems (Lahore Development Authority, 2024). One important proposal is the underground metro system, including the Blue Line project. The Blue Line proposes a 27 km route from Valencia Town to Babu Sabu and is expected to serve around 250,000 daily commuters (ProPakistani, 2026). This indicates a shift towards more technically advanced infrastructure, although these projects are still at the planning stage (Punjab Mass Transit Authority, 2026; The Nation, 2026).

The Punjab Mass Transit Authority (PMTA) plays a central role in controlling the transport system in Lahore, while the Punjab Transport Company (PTC) has broader responsibilities regarding engagement with private operators. As a result, the overall governance of the system is not in the hands of one institution alone but is spread across a governmental network. However, Lahore has a comparatively decentralized administrative system as compared to other cities, making the coordination process smoother and quickening the implementation process. This backs up Fukuyama's (2013) view that administrative centralization enhances implementation capacity (Fukuyama, 2013; PIDE, 2021). Meanwhile, politics also plays a role in infrastructural development in Lahore. In Pakistan, Malik (2021) argues that political settlements frequently influence projects in which tangible infrastructure is employed as a tool for government

performance. Such political signaling has been seen in Lahore in the Metro Bus and Orange Line projects (Malik, 2021; PIDE, 2021).

These transport systems, from the public viewpoint, have enhanced the mobility of a great deal of individuals. They offer comparatively cheaper services, save travel time, and are safer than informal transport. This has a positive impact on SDG11, which aims to make cities more accessible and inclusive (World Bank, 2020; ADB, 2020). But there are some constraints to be seen, too. The system is highly subsidized, making it questionable whether it will be financially sustainable in the long run. The need for subsidy and revenue is still a question, as transport is regarded as a social service but also places a strain on the provincial budget, as noted by PIDE (2021) and World Bank (2020). In addition, the centralized governance model restricts local governments' contribution to last-mile connectivity and local planning (Urban Unit, 2021). Taking the case of Lahore overall, it shows that strong state capacity and central governance could contribute to the speed of implementing urban transport projects. At the same time, it also shows how such a governance model contributes directly towards achieving SDG 11, particularly Targets 11.2 and 11.6.

5- Case Study: Karachi

Karachi is the largest city and economic center of Pakistan. Its population is nearly 21.24 million in 2026 (World Population Review, 2026), and it is the strategic economic arena of Pakistan. But its transport system is a complete contrast to the picture of urban transport development in Lahore, and has traditionally remained underdeveloped and disjointed (World Bank, 2020). After 2010, different efforts were made at different times, but the overall structure still reflects weak coordination, institutional conflicts at different governmental levels, and uneven implementation. This comparison shows how differences in governance directly affect the achievement of United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 11, especially Targets 11.2 and 11.6.

The first plan to modernize the transport system was made in 2010, known as the Karachi Breeze network with 6 corridors differentiated by different colors. The most visible progress among these corridors was made in the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) network, especially the Green Line and Red Line. The first corridor operationalized under federal government assistance was the Green Line. This project was initiated in 2016 and started operations in 2021. It spans approximately 21 km from Surjani Town to Numaish Chowrangi and facilitated around 135 thousand people in 2026 (SIDCL, 2026; World Bank, 2020). It introduced dedicated lanes and comparatively better travelling conditions than informal transport. In this regard, it contributed towards improving accessibility and mobility, which are major objectives of SDG 11.2. However, unlike Lahore projects, its implementation involved different institutional actors including federal and provincial governments, which created coordination problems and delayed implementation. The Red Line BRT is technically more advanced. Supported by the Asian Development Bank and other international investors (ADB, 2026), this project was started in March 2022 (TransKarachi, 2022). This corridor is 26.6 km long and designed to connect Model Colony to Numaish Chowrangi. One of its major features is the use of biogas-powered buses supported by a biomethane plant to control carbon emissions (TransKarachi, 2026). This project directly aligns with SDG 11.6 because it focuses on reducing emissions and improving urban air quality. However, despite these technical advantages, the project has faced delays and implementation difficulties over several years, and its completion date has changed many times, with the revised date now being October 2027 (Pakistan Today, 2026).

These delays are not only technical issues but also reflect deeper governance problems. Unlike Lahore, Karachi's transport governance is highly fragmented because several institutions have overlapping powers. Planning and implementation involve the Sindh government, local

government bodies, and federal institutions. This creates multiple problems such as disagreements over land acquisition, relocation of utilities, and administrative authority. These hurdles play a major role in slowing down project progress (World Bank, 2020; ADB, 2026). Different corridors are still in the planning and development phase except the Orange Line, which is the smallest route of this network.

The Karachi Circular Railway (KCR) is another project which was started in 1964. Originally, it was a 43-kilometer loop. It started from Drigh Road Station (connecting to the Main Line) and circled through the city's industrial areas, including the S.I.T.E. area and Wazir Mansion, before returning to the city center. Due to governmental inefficiency, financial losses, and political interests of elites, it was officially closed in December 1999 (World Bank, 2020; Railway Technology, 2026). In 2020, the Supreme Court ordered its restoration, and the government tried to restart the KCR again. Due to land encroachments, it was officially restarted partially on November 19, 2020. Initially, it started as a 14-kilometer route from Karachi City Station to Orangi Town (The Nation, 2020). Later, a 60-kilometer shuttle service from Marshalling Yard Pipri to Orangi was started to facilitate factory workers and connect with the main route (Gulf News, 2020). In 2026, to modernize this project, the Sindh government and the Asian Development Bank finalized a \$1.58 billion plan to convert the 43 km corridor into an electric mass rapid transit system capable of transporting 550,000 passengers daily (The Express Tribune, 2026). This plan is also facing problems due to governmental miscoordination between federal and provincial governments regarding the clearance of extensive urban encroachments along the track, which delayed physical infrastructure development (The Express Tribune, 2026; World Bank, 2025). With all these difficulties in modernization of the transport system, the Sindh government, to align Karachi's transport with SDG 11.2 and 11.6, started the Peoples Bus Service (PBS) in June 2022. On one hand, BRT is a fixed-route system, while PBS is primarily a flexible system designed to connect areas that are not on BRT routes by utilizing nearly 340 hybrid-diesel and electric buses on 13 different routes (KTS, 2026).

The Sindh government also started another initiative for female passengers known as the Pink Bus Service, which is totally dedicated to women so they can use public transport with ease and security (Pakistan Today, 2026). This governmental step directly links with SDG 11.2. To protect the environment of Pakistan's largest metropolitan city and align with SDG 11.6, the government in 2026 launched different electric bus routes, such as the Gulshan-e-Maymar to Tower corridor, by introducing electric vehicles to reduce urban emissions (ARY News, 2026). This step may solve problems for a short time and also reduce dependence on the private transport mafia (Think Transportation, 2026). Most of the projects, unlike Lahore, are still in the development or planning phase, mainly due to system incapacity and fragmentation.

To improve coordination between different governmental institutions, the Sindh Mass Transit Authority (SMTA) was established in 2014. SMTA is the primary provincial body responsible for planning, developing, managing, and integrating Karachi's transport systems (SMTA, 2026). This body oversees not only different BRT corridors, especially the Yellow Line, but also supervises the Peoples Bus Service, which had a large fleet by May 2026 (ProPakistani, 2026). However, to run the affairs of the Red Line and its development, another specialized agency called TransKarachi was created under SMTA. It specifically carries out activities related to Bio-CNG (biomethane) infrastructure, which involves complex coordination with the cattle colony in Landhi to produce fuel for the buses (TransKarachi, 2026). In April 2026, the major construction contracts were cancelled because of the need to relocate utilities and difficulties related to land use, an indication of governance issues in the fragmented land governance system in Karachi (Pakistan Today, 2026).

This entire discussion has implications for comparatively lower state capacity in terms of administrative coordination. For successful implementation, Fukuyama (2013) argues that there needs to be coherent institutional authority. Unlike the Punjab Mass Transit Authority, there is no central body to oversee transport projects in Karachi, and this is why while projects are implemented, they are done at a slower pace with less predictability. Karachi's political economy only adds to the complexity. Malik (2021) suggests that political settlements influence infrastructure development in Pakistan. The political situation in Karachi is more polarized, as federal, provincial, and local political actors engage in competition with each other in Karachi. This diminishes the capacity to prioritize and plan infrastructural needs for the long term.

The BRT systems have enhanced transport facilities on some routes from the public's viewpoint by offering comparatively cheap and more structured transport opportunities. But the coverage is limited as compared to the size and population of Karachi. The BRT network serves only part of the population, and part of the population continues to rely on informal transport like minibuses and rickshaws (World Bank, 2020). This reduces inclusiveness and accessibility that is expected under SDG 11.2. It is important to consider environmental issues in Karachi as well. While projects like the Red Line are designed for environmentally friendly transport, these are yet to be realized and therefore not yet fully visible in the reduction of emissions. Due to already high levels of transport pollution in Karachi, the absence of a fully functional low-emission transport system is still impacting SDG 11.6 targets (ADB, 2026).

Another key challenge is the complexity of land and infrastructure management. The high population density of Karachi, low standards of living in the slums, and the lack of clarity regarding land use cause it to be more difficult to implement transport projects. These factors not only slow down project completion but also raise costs and decrease efficiency (World Bank, 2020).

In general, Karachi is characterized by the lack of effective governance and relative underperformance in state capacity in the execution of technically advanced projects; institutional and political issues work against the project process. While some improvements are being made to urban transport, these have been hindered by the lack of co-ordination and the absence of central authority. Karachi thus contrasts starkly with Lahore and serves as a good reminder of the importance of governance in meeting SDG 11 and its two specific targets, 11.2 and 11.6.

6- Comparative Analysis

The foregoing sections discussed the two cities of Lahore and Karachi separately, and both cities were identified as having different approaches towards the development of urban transport. These two cities are governed under the system established by the Eighteenth Amendment of the Constitution of Pakistan (2010), which decentralized the control of city planning and transport to the provincial governments. This decentralization theoretically should have enhanced efficiency and local responsiveness. However, the results in both cities indicate that decentralization alone is not enough. Differences in institutional coordination and political alignment have produced very different outcomes. These variations can be clearly understood through a systematic comparison given below.

Metropolitan Transport Comparative Matrix (2026 Context).

The comparison presented below is based on estimated and reported institutional and policy data. Since there are differences in reports and many projects are still continuing, the data should be taken as estimates rather than exact, but it is sufficient to show the difference in scale and performance between the two cities.

Characteristics	Lahore (Centralized Model)	Karachi (Fragmented Model)	Sources
Main Transport Systems	Metro Bus, Orange Line Metro Train, Speedo Feeder Buses, Electric Buses	Green Line BRT, Red Line BRT, KCR, Peoples Bus Service	PMTA (2026); SMTA (2026)
Governance Structure	Centralized governance under PMTA	Fragmented governance between SMTA, Trans Karachi, local and federal bodies	Fukuyama (2013); Malik (2021)
Institutional Coordination	Strong administrative coordination and quicker decision making	Weak coordination with overlapping authorities	World Bank (2020); ADB (2026)
Metro/BRT Corridor Length	Metro Bus 27 km, Orange Line 27 km	Green Line 21–22 km, Red Line 26.6 km	PMTA (2026); Trans Karachi (2026)
Speed of Implementation	Metro Bus completed in about 11 months	BRT projects taking 4–6 years or more	PMTA (2013); Pakistan Today (2026)
Daily Ridership	Metro Bus 140,000–160,000 daily passengers; Orange Line over 250,000 passengers daily	Green Line around 135,000 passengers	Dunya News (2026); Pakistan Today (2026); Icons (2026)
International Support	Orange Line developed under CPEC cooperation	Red Line funded by ADB and international investors	ADB (2020); ADB (2026)
Environmental Policy	Electric buses linked with smog reduction strategy	Biogas-powered buses and electric vehicle routes	Government of Punjab (2025); Trans Karachi (2026); ARY News (2026)
SDG 11.2 (Accessibility)	Wider urban connectivity through integrated systems	Limited corridor-based accessibility	World Bank (2020); ADB (2026)
SDG 11.6 (Environment)	Focus on reducing urban smog and emissions	Focus on low-emission and waste-to-energy transport	Government of Punjab (2025); GCF (2025)
Major Governance Problems	Dependence on subsidies and centralized planning	Institutional fragmentation, land encroachments, political conflicts	PIDE (2021); World Bank (2025)
Planning Vision	Lahore Master Plan 2050 and Blue Line proposals	Karachi Breeze and KCR modernization plans	LDA (2024); SMTA (2026)

Design of Institutions and Administrative Capacity.

The statistics indicate that after the 18th Amendment, Lahore has been more successful in utilizing the opportunities created by decentralization. Planning and implementation can be carried out more quickly because of the presence of a centralized body like the Punjab Mass Transit Authority (PMTA). Karachi, on the other hand, experiences institutional fragmentation. Authority is shared among different agencies, which has resulted in duplication of roles and delays in implementation. This limits the practical value of decentralization, especially in large-scale infrastructure

development (World Bank, 2025; ADB, 2026). This difference supports the argument that institutional coherence is essential for successful state capacity (Fukuyama, 2013).

The CPEC and Development Pathways.

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has had a significant impact on urban transport development in these two cities. One of the developed projects under CPEC is the Orange Line Metro in Lahore. Such projects were able to operate in a centralized and fast-track fashion, with administrative processes streamlined and political backing strong. This facilitated faster completion and administrative efficiency (ADB, 2020; PIDE, 2021). However, Karachi has not been granted such kind of assistance from CPEC. Rather, it has financed large-scale projects, particularly the Red Line, with multilateral bodies like the Asian Development Bank (ADB). This is despite these projects being technically sophisticated and environmentally sound, but necessitating adherence to strict procedures, thus lengthening implementation time. Hence, while CPEC boosted implementation capability in Lahore, the difference between this and Karachi lay in the latter's reliance on multilateral financing models, which led to slower development and caused fragmentation.

Dynamics of Political Economy and Governance.

The political difference is also responsible for the difference between the two cities. The implementation of transport projects in Lahore follows a centralized political leadership, with infrastructure serving as a means of asserting the legitimacy of the government and its electoral mandate. This means alignment of the political leadership with administration, continuity, and speed of delivery (PIDE, 2021; Malik, 2021). Karachi's political landscape is more compartmentalized, with a multi-layered system of governance. This results in "veto points" that slow down project implementation. This kind of "fragmented political settlements" has the negative effect of reducing the capacity of the state to maintain infrastructure development (ADB, 2026).

The assessment is done in relation to SDG 11.2 (Transport Accessibility).

Lahore is comparatively doing well in relation to SDG 11.2. The city has a comprehensive transport network of buses, trains, and feeder transport systems covering a significant part of the urban population. Accessibility is increased by higher ridership and integration of systems (World Bank, 2020). The Green Line and Red Line in Karachi are welcome initiatives; however, these are still small and low-ridership projects, and many people still use the informal transport system. This restricts the development of inclusive urban mobility (ADB, 2026).

Assessment according to SDG 11.6 (Environmental Sustainability).

Regarding SDG 11.6, the comparison is relatively balanced. Lahore has introduced electric buses and linked transport policy with smog mitigation, which reflects adaptive governance at the provincial level (Government of Punjab, 2025). However, Karachi appears more technologically innovative because of the biogas system planned for the Red Line, which aligns with environmental sustainability and long-term circular economy principles (ADB, 2026; GCF, 2025).

Gender-Specific Transport Initiative

Karachi introduced the Pink Bus Service under PBS specifically for female passengers to improve safety and accessibility in public transport, to Aline system with 11.2.1, while Lahore has not introduced any separate women-specific public bus system so in 11.2.1 unlike Lahore Karachi perform better in this regard (UNEP, 2025; Pakistan Today, 2026)

Financial and Environmental Sustainability

Karachi Red Line BRT is Pakistan's first zero-subsidy transport project through its system of converting cities waste-to-fuel Bio-CNG model, to reduce dependence on government subsidies and lower carbon emissions, while Lahore's transport systems still rely heavily on provincial government subsidies despite recent introduction of electric buses for environmental improvement (Trans Karachi, 2026; ADB, 2025)

After all progress in planning and new ideas for betterment of transport system along with little progress in some areas, but overall result indicates that differences in outcomes are largely connected with variations in state capacity. Lahore's centralized governance framework makes it easier to coordinate implementation and deliver more services. Karachi is an example of a disunited governance system, where the effectiveness of governance is hampered by overlapping institutions and political competition. Hence, while both cities are governed by the same constitution, the ability of the two cities to realize SDG 11 largely relies on the organization and coordination of the state institutions.

7- Findings and Policy Recommendations

The Karachi-Lahore comparison creates the view that institutional structure is an important determinant of policy outcomes. Lahore has a well-established mechanism of governance which ensures coordination and relatively faster implementation of activities through PMTA. Karachi, however, is made up of several actors, including SMTA, Trans Karachi, local government, and federal actors, which creates overlapping jurisdictions and multiple conflicting points, limiting implementation. This is consistent with the notion of institutional coherence as the basis of state capacity.

The direct impact of political centralization on implementation capacity is also apparent, as projects in Lahore can remain in continuity and have momentum because of the centralized political structure, whereas in Karachi, this is hampered due to the multi-level political fragmentation, where there are competing interests of provincial, local, and federal political bodies that cause delays even in funded projects. The Eighteenth Amendment of the Constitution of Pakistan (2010) transferred power to provinces, but it has not turned out to be as successful in Sindh as in Punjab, which has seen greater empowerment of its provinces, while Sindh has failed to make devolution a reality.

The projects of Lahore under CPEC were advantageously fast-tracked, whereas the projects of Karachi, supported by ADB and other organizations, are comparatively more cautious and therefore take more time but appear more sustainable. There is a trade-off between efficiency and sustainability between Lahore and Karachi, as Lahore is comparatively more efficient in accessibility (SDG 11.2), while Karachi appears more innovative in environmental sustainability (SDG 11.6).

From a policymaking perspective, Karachi should focus on improving coordination among agencies, whereas Lahore should maintain efficiency while also improving transparency. Sindh needs to strengthen provincial-local coordination, while Punjab should ensure greater local involvement. There should also be a balance between speed and sustainability, with Lahore increasing its environmental focus, so it should move towards a Bio-Gas transport system through the use of city waste, similar to Karachi's Red Line model. This may not only reduce dependence on fuel subsidies but also help in controlling smog and urban pollution. At the same time, Karachi needs to reduce implementation delays and improve institutional coordination for better project completion.

Political coordination is equally important, with Karachi requiring stronger inter-governmental coordination and Lahore maintaining policy continuity. Inclusive transport growth is also essential, where Karachi needs to expand coverage while Lahore should focus more on improving last-mile connectivity. Finally, political signaling through large infrastructure projects should be controlled, and greater importance should be given to long-term public benefits. Governments should also focus on the maintainability of transport systems by continuous funding and proper operational support after project completion, even if such policies provide comparatively smaller political benefits. So, Pakistan can come closer to achieve SDGs objectives till 2030

Conclusion

This paper looked at the role of state capacity in implementation of SDG 11 in Lahore and Karachi. The results show that financial and technical constraints play a secondary role in the explanation of urban transport outcomes differences – the differences are indeed strongly related to institutional structure, political alignment, and governance capacity. Lahore embodies a governance system that is centralized, with sound administrative coordination and political support, which has helped projects move through the transport sector in a relatively short amount of time and improved accessibility and service delivery. This model does, however, have important concerns for long term environmental sustainability.

Karachi, however, has a more complex governance system with overlapping institutional functions and political conflicts that have severely restricted implementation capacity. Despite these constraints, there has been some interesting innovation in the environment in Karachi, especially in the area of more sustainable transport systems. The paper also underlines the failure of decentralization under the 18th amendment to deliver equal outcomes, and the impact of external development models like CPEC and multilateral financing models on project implementation speed and nature.

The results of this study more broadly underscore that the success of SDG 11 is highly dependent on the quality of subnational state capacity organization, in particular with regard to institutional alignment, governance effectiveness and political coordination.

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