

Socio economics impacts of CPEC on Pakistan; the dark side of the project

Malik Shozab Hassan¹

Abstract:

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a flagship project under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with significant investments in energy projects, infrastructure development, and special economic zones. While CPEC has been praised as a game-changer for Pakistan but major concerns have been raised about its negative socio-economic impacts. This research article spreads light on a comprehensive literature review to find out these impacts and identify research gaps that the researchers have not filled yet. This paper reveals that CPEC intensifies existing socio-economic inequalities, displaces local communities, causes environmental degradation, and raises concerns about debt sustainability of Pakistan. The lack of transparency in project execution has further boosted these issues. In this paper I have examined the experiences of aboriginal communities and gendered repercussions, investigated labor rights and waged conditions, and environmental impacts. As the project is still not fully completed, new issues may arise with the completion and passage of time. By conducting the research further deep, policymakers can gain a better understanding of the potential outcomes of CPEC and develop strategies accordingly to eliminate any negative impact that can be hazardous for Pakistan's economy, environment, and society.

Keywords: CPEC, Investment opportunities, Negative Impacts, Environmental degradation. Economic disparity

¹M.Phil Scholar, Department of International Relations, IQRA University Islamabad
Corresponding author's Email: malikshozabhassan@gmail.com

Introduction:

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship project under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), intends a total investment of approximately \$62 billion (Javaid, 2021). The project, which focuses mainly on energy projects, infrastructure development, and special economic zones (SEZs), aims to boost Pakistan economically and enhance regional connectivity (Hussain, 2018). However, this paper examines these potential benefits, but the negative impacts of CPEC cannot be denied. So this research article looks at the negative socio-economic impacts of CPEC on Pakistan by conducting a broad literature review and identifying gaps in the existing research. Being a flagship project, CPEC has been the subject of massive research and analysis, with many studies focusing on the possible benefits and negative impacts of the project. Many studies have already highlighted the lack of transparency in the

implementation of the project, with many experts and researchers raising questions about the Chinese government's role in the project. According to a report by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), there are many concerns about the quality of infrastructure projects and the debt sustainability due to lack of transparency of the project.

Several studies have spread light on the environmental concerns related to CPEC. The project can have a damaging effect on the environment especially in the areas where roads and other type of infrastructures are aimed. Because such kinds of projects require a mass level deforestation. For instance, Karakoram Highway and Gwadar. The paper aims to highlight the possible risks related to the project. Such as loss of habitat, loss of biodiversity and the climate change. Not only that, another major concern due to the project is the displacement of the native communities. The Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) stated that the project has caused displacement of thousands of people in Balochistan and other parts of Pakistan. This displacement has resulted in the loss of livelihoods and has impacted the socio-economic area of the region.

Although scholars have conducted extensive research in this area to find out the potential benefits and negative impacts related to the project, but a more in-depth and a long term research is needed because the project is yet under construction. So that the policy makers will found out that how it is impacting the economy, environment and the society of Pakistan. Not only that, there is also a need for research that examines the impact of the project on the human rights conditions in Pakistan.

This paper is purely based on an ample literature review, including articles, government reports, and policy papers to analyze the negative socio-economic impacts of CPEC on Pakistan. By critically examining existing research, this paper aims to provide a complete understanding of the project's negative consequences.

Dependency theory has been used in this paper as a lens to deeply understand the possible outcomes of the CPEC on Pakistan. Dependency Theory is a theoretical framework that examines the economic, political, and social relationships between two or more countries, particularly between developed (core) and developing (periphery) countries. The theory was mainly developed in the 1960s and 70s by Latin American scholars and economists, notably Raúl Prebisch, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, and Andre Gunder Frank (Sunkel, 1969; Frank, 1966). This paper investigates Dependency Theory, discussing its development and application to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

Literature Review:

Socio-Economic Inequalities

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship project of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), signifies an important development approach that intends to connect Gwadar Port in southwestern Pakistan with China's northwestern region via a network of highways, railways, and pipelines (Rana, 2022). While the idea has done quite good to the country and a lot I is yet to come but concerns about socioeconomic disparities have emerged.

The majority of the projects related to CPEC are developed and being developed in the regions which are already considered as developed areas of Pakistan. Such as the provinces of Punjab and Sindh, leading to concerns of further demotion of less developed regions like Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Ajmal et al., 2020). The division of CPEC projects has been criticized for worsening the existing regional inequalities, reinforcing the socioeconomic hierarchy in Pakistan.

Most of the projects related to the CPEC is utilizing the Chinese workers which is concerning for the local labors amid the job opportunities. Due to the language barrier and some other factors, Chinese firms often bring their own workforce, which limits the job opportunities for locals (Small, 2015). Not only that, the Pakistani labors are not skilled enough to work in the CPEC projects hence making their heavy reliance on the Chinese labors and a missed opportunity for local employment and skill development (Rizvi, 2018).

The CPEC is also linked with economic inequalities, especially in terms of debt and trade imbalances. Pakistan's debt to China has ominously increased due to CPEC projects, with concerns that this could lead to indefensible levels of debt (Hussain, 2018). Moreover, after the initiation of CPEC, the trade deficit has been increased significantly. Which has widened the trade imbalances between Beijing and Islamabad (Javaid, 2020).

While the CPEC intends the economic growth, it is a necessity to address the socioeconomic inequalities it creates. Measures should be taken to ensure just dissemination of projects across all regions, enhancing local capability for employment, and addressing the economic imbalance with China. This will certify that the benefits of CPEC are broadly shared and viable.

Impact on Employment and Wages:

The impact of CPEC on employment and wages is a complex issue. It ranges beyond simple job creation and includes aspects such as the nature and quality of jobs, wage levels, skill requirements, and differences between local and imported labor.

A vital concern is the inequality between the employments of local Pakistani workers versus Chinese workers brought in for CPEC projects. While the invasion of Chinese labor may bring capability and higher efficiency levels, it also raises concerns about limited job opportunities for locals (Jacob, 2017). So, it is very important to study that how much jobs are going to local workers compared to the foreign labor and how this is affecting overall employment rates in the regions affected by CPEC.

It is also substantial to figure out that what type of jobs are being created due to CPEC and what type of skill sets it may require? For instance, CPEC projects in infrastructure development and energy may require the labors with a higher level of skills, which may not be easily available in the local workforce. As the result, the local workforce is heavily dependent on the Chinese labors. Which limits opportunities for local employment and wage growth (Rizvi, 2018). Therefore, it is a need for the Pakistani government to create training centers for the local labors, to be able to work independently. Wage level is also amongst the key consideration areas. Are the wages according to the work required in the job? Is there any difference in the wages

between the local and the foreign labors? Addressing such kind of questions is important to remove any type of socioeconomic disparities between the both Nations related to the CPEC.

Furthermore, the policy makers should look upon the sustainability of the jobs. For instance, are the jobs created by CPEC projects temporary? Are these jobs short term? Or do they lead to sustainable long-term employment opportunities? Understanding this can help in planning for the long-term economic policies for the regions affected by CPEC.

Overall, a more in-depth comprehensive study is required to assess these aspects and understand the broader impacts of CPEC on employment and wages. Such studies would be helpful to ensure that CPEC leads to equitable and long term economic growth for Pakistan.

Regional Development Disparity:

As mentioned earlier, the CPEC related projects are mostly developed and are being developed in the areas which are already developed areas of Pakistan, such as Punjab and Sindh. Sidelining the less developed areas of Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Creating a regional development disparity when considering the socio-economic impact of the CPEC. (Ali & Guo, 2019).

The evaluation of the regional development disparity is not only about the geographical projects related to the CPEC, it also includes the benefits related to these projects, which are distributed across the different parts of the country. The benefits includes economic indicators such as income levels and poverty rates, as well as access to education, healthcare, and infrastructure. For instance, it is essential to compare the income rates and poverty level of other areas with the areas where CPEC projects are located.

Moreover, there may be direct or indirect effects on regional development as well. For example, since the CPEC projects are confined to some areas, these area may attract more labors then the less developed areas, not only the labors but the flourishing areas may also attract investments which can lead to increased internal migration, which can change local demographics, and further worsening regional disparities.

A more in depth study is required to address the issues related to the regional disparities related to the CPEC, to insure a more just distribution of the projects. This can stop the unjust distributions of the benefits and essential services related to the CPEC. Hence creating equal opportunities for both the developed areas and undeveloped areas.

Environmental Impact Assessment:

The environmental implications of CPEC are noteworthy concern. The studies that provide environment related information such as air and water quality, deforestation rates, and biodiversity, can provide a comprehensive understanding of the project's environmental footprint. Such studies can help to stop the damage at early stages so that we assure that we are not getting economic benefits at the cost of environmental collapse.

Debt Sustainability:

CPEC investments is not only increasing the economic prosperity but is also increasing Pakistan

debt heavily, since Pakistan alone does not have enough capital required for the projects related to the CPEC. A more in depth study is required to track Pakistan's debt levels, repayment capacity, and the revenue dedicated to debt repayment can provide critical understandings of the project's impact on the country's fiscal health.

Quality of Life and Social Impact:

As the infrastructure projects require a mass level deforestation, CPEC doesn't only interfere with Pakistan's economic matters, it also leaves negative impacts on the quality of life of Pakistani societies. Longitudinal studies are required to provide valuable data on changes in health outcomes, access to the essential services, and education levels in areas affected by CPEC. Such studies can help us to eliminate the negative impacts that we are or will be facing in the future because of the project to increase the potential benefits compared to the negative impacts.

Displacement and Rehabilitation:

Some development projects under CPEC requires evacuation of the local communities from the lands where the projects are supposed to be made. Hence creating serious issues for the local people of these areas such as living conditions, lifestyles, and access to the essential services over time. A long term study can help to understand the long-term impacts of displacement and evaluating the effectiveness of rehabilitation efforts. To make sure that the local people are getting long term benefits instead of long term loss because of the project.

Displacement and Marginalization of Local Communities

No doubt, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a multi-billion-dollar infrastructure project of China's Belt and Road Initiative and it has strong potential to surge economic development in Pakistan, but as I have mentioned earlier that even beneficial things come up with its negative impacts. That's why the concerns are being raised about the displacement and demotion of local communities, particularly in the less developed regions of Pakistan (Javaid, 2020)

The construction of large scale infrastructure projects such as the development of highways, railways, and pipelines under the CPEC has led to large-scale displacement of local communities. Many people have been forced to relocate into another area due to land acquisition for these projects, without getting an adequate compensation (Ali & Guo, 2019). For instance, in Balochistan, local communities have been displaced by the development of the Gwadar port and related infrastructure (Mustafa, 2017). Since the CPEC is getting into the second phase of the development as stated by the premier of Pakistan, many projects are yet to come. Which can cause further displacement issues for the local communities as it has caused earlier.

Physical displacement is not the only issue, the local communities of the less developed areas are also facing increase marginalization (Small, 2015). The job markets are not available for them the way it is for the Chinese workers because the local workers doesn't have the skills required in the job market. But that is not the only issue, even if they acquire the required skills, the language barrier is yet another issue. The local people cannot speak Chinese hence depriving them from the benefits related to the CPEC projects (Khan, 2018).

Furthermore, the arrival of the Chinese culture and language has created concerns about the cultural and social marginalization of local communities. These concerns are specifically related to the undeveloped regions, such as Balochistan and Gilgit-Baltistan (Rizvi, 2018).

The CPEC which is considered as a future changer for Pakistan is raising serious concerns about the displacement and marginalization of local communities. To ensure equitable and sustainable development, it is vital to look into the needs and rights of local communities into the policies and implementation of CPEC projects.

Environmental Degradation

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a flagship project of the Belt and Road initiative (BRI) and it promises substantial economic growth and development for Pakistan. However, alongside these potential benefits, the project has raised significant environmental concerns as well. Which are as follows:

Deforestation

The construction of infrastructure like roads, railways, and pipelines, under the CPEC has led to considerable deforestation. Which causes habitat destruction, loss of biodiversity, and increased greenhouse gas emissions, further damaging environment and climate change (Ali & Guo, 2019). For instance, the construction of the Karakoram Highway has led to significant deforestation in Gilgit-Baltistan (Mustafa, 2017). Pakistan's contributions to the global carbon emissions is almost 0.9% but yet Pakistan is facing large scale environmental catastrophe (UNFCCC, 2021).

Water Pollution

The development of the Gwadar Port and other industrial projects under CPEC are also contributing to water pollution because the discharge of industrial waste is going directly into water bodies without adequate treatment. Which is not only damaging sea creatures but also effecting the health of local communities (Javaid, 2020).

Air Pollution

Air pollution is another major concern associated with CPEC. Most of the projects that require energy, is linked with the coal-fired power plants, making the coal-fired power plants a significant component of CPEC, hence it is also a major source of air pollution. Carbon Emissions from these power plants contribute to poor air quality, which is causing respiratory illnesses and premature deaths in the CPEC related areas. Not only that, it's also impacting global climate change (Kugelman, 2017).

While the CPEC can bring a lot of economic and social benefits to Pakistan, it is also very important to come up with better policies to reduce the environmental damage it can cause. These policies should include Sustainable development practices, including rigorous environmental impact assessments, adequate waste management, and the use of renewable

energy sources, only then we'll be able to get the most out of CPEC projects instead of getting negative impacts out of the projects.

Impact on Indigenous Communities

CPEC has raised numerous concerns for the local communities regarding its impacts on them. The project requires significant land use, causing demographic changes, which can disproportionately affect local communities. Here are some potential negative impacts:

Displacement:

Infrastructure development often requires land acquisition, which can lead to the displacement of the local communities. These displacements can disrupt traditional lifestyles, separate communities from one another, and result in loss of homes and livelihoods of local people. Hence facing alienation in a new environment and land, far away from their homes.

Cultural Erosion:

The influx of Chinese workers and new settlers can lead to forceful cultural dilution and erosion in indigenous communities. The new developments can dominate traditional practices, languages, and customs of local people, leading to a loss of cultural heritage.

Environmental Degradation:

Many indigenous communities rely heavily on their natural surroundings for livelihoods (Iram et al., 2024). Infrastructure and industrial development associated with CPEC could lead to environmental degradation, impacting biodiversity, water scarcity, and overall ecosystem loss, which can directly affect the livelihoods of these communities.

Limited Economic Participation:

While CPEC promises economic growth, the benefits may not equally reach indigenous communities. They face barriers to participate in the new economic activities due to lack of necessary skills, and the nature of the jobs created by the project is not aligning with their traditional ways, because of which they are facing discrimination.

Inadequate Compensation:

There are concerns that the compensation provided for land acquisition of local people or displacement may not be adequate or fair. In some cases, there are delays in providing the compensation, causing further hardships for the affected communities.

Lack of Consultation and Participation:

Indigenous communities often report a lack of meaningful consultation and participation in decision-making processes related to development projects on their local area. This lack of

involvement can lead to outcomes that are not in their best interests, which disregard their rights and needs.

Adequate amount of research needs to be done on the large scale projects like CPEC to highlight the potential impacts it can have on the local people of the area. Precautionary measures should be taken by the policy makers to minimize the potential harm, protect the rights of indigenous communities and ensure that they share equitable amounts of benefit related to CPEC (Asghar et al., 2024).

Gendered Implications

Although CPEC has overall brought a lot of economic benefits to Pakistan and has the potential to change the future of the country's socioeconomic landscape. However, the gendered implications of this economic transformation have not been sufficiently addressed, and there is a need to understand that how it is effecting the females of Pakistan. Which are 49% of the total population (Census, 2017).

Impact on Female Employment:

Most of the CPEC projects especially development and infrastructure are predominantly male-oriented sectors, and the opportunities for direct employment of women are limited (Adeney & Kennedy, 2020; Ishfaq et al., 2024). Thus, the employment benefits of CPEC are not gender-neutral, potentially worsening existing gender disparities in employment.

However, CPEC's indirect impact on female employment could be more beneficial. With improved infrastructure and greater economic activity, there could be a rise in sectors where female participation is traditionally higher, such as retail, hospitality, and textiles. An increase in employment in these sectors could potentially lead to greater economic opportunities for women (Wang, 2016). Causing women empowerment in Pakistan.

Impact on Gender Inequality:

The second major gendered implication of CPEC is that it can exacerbate gender inequality. The gender disparities in the benefits of CPEC could worsen the already high level of gender inequality in Pakistan, currently ranked 151st out of 153 countries in the Global Gender Gap Index 2020 (World Economic Forum, 2020). CPEC projects, if not designed with better policies and specifically a gender perspective, may not address the social, economic, and political barriers that hinder women's full participation and could potentially worsen gender disparities in Pakistan.

Impact on Displacement:

Large infrastructure projects often requires the displacement of the local populations, same is the case with CPEC. Which can affect the life quality of these people regardless of their gender. But studies have shown that displacement often has an unequal impact on women, exacerbating their vulnerability and reducing their access to resources and services that they

require (Cernea, 1997). Better policies are required regarding the displacement of women amidst the CPEC projects.

Labor Rights and Working Conditions

CPEC can attract foreign investments hence transforming Pakistan, but Pakistan. Currently, has seen many transformations without creating Jobs. I hope this is not the case with the CPEC. Currently there are nine zones under CPEC, Export Processing Zones (EPZs) and Special Economic Zones (SEZs). EPZs are exempt from the general labor laws of the country (Iftikhar, 2017). With the change of the governments and premiers, the policy shift is not a big deal as we have witnessed in the past. While some studies have discussed the violation of the labor rights of the local labor, further in depth research is needed. No doubt the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a flagship project of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which promises to transform Pakistan's economic landscape (Zaidi, 2015). However, its implications on labor rights and working conditions on the local labor of Pakistan need closer examination by the policy makers. This paper aims to explore the impact of CPEC projects on labor rights, the quality of working conditions, and the consequences for Pakistani workers.

Labor Rights under CPEC

While CPEC is expected to generate numerous employment opportunities both for Pakistan and China, Major concerns persist regarding labor rights of the local labor. Chinese companies have been criticized a lot for their disregard for labor rights in their international operations (Chan, 2019). Most of the CPEC related projects are implemented by Chinese firms, these concerns are valid in Pakistan's context as Instances of long working hours, low wages, and inadequate health and safety measures have been reported (Mustafa, 2019).

Working Conditions under CPEC

Since the Reports on working conditions within CPEC projects are not transparent enough, they paint a mixed picture. Some evidence suggests that Chinese firms offer better wages compared to local firms, which can contribute positively to local livelihoods (Amjad, 2019). However, concerns have been raised about the health and safety standards of the labor, particularly in construction and energy projects (Hassan, 2017). The lack of transparency in CPEC project is not allowing the policy makers to improve the working conditions of labors and ensuring their rights (Kugelman, 2020).

Policy Implications

Currently the labor rights and working conditions under CPEC are not according to the international standards. It is very important for both Chinese and Pakistani authorities to ensure compliance with the international labor standards in all CPEC projects. Furthermore, greater transparency in CPEC projects and greater inclusion of labor unions could contribute to better working conditions and the protection of workers' rights.

Environmental Impact Assessments

CPEC related benefits for Pakistan, such as infrastructure development, energy projects, Special Economic Zones, Gwadar Port are not hidden. But more in depth analysis is required to assess the environmental damage related to the project to ensure that the economic prosperity is not coming at the cost of the environment.

Impacts on the Marine Ecosystem

The capacity of the Gwadar Port is planned to be increased up to 400 million tons of cargo per year and expansion of the port to a hundred berths by 2045. That is due to the significance of the port as a cross-regional connectivity (Xinhua, 2024). The increase in the development and shipping activities could potentially harm marine biodiversity. Because they are leading to marine pollution, disturbing the delicate balance of marine life (Khan & Bukhari, 2024). The risk of oil spills is also increased significantly, which is another major threat to marine ecosystems, and this issue requires further research.

Impacts on Wildlife and Biodiversity

Infrastructure projects often fragment habitats of the animals residing in those areas. Disrupting their migratory routes and increasing their accessibility of remote areas. Which leads to increased robbing and illegal wildlife trade (Harris, 2019). As mentioned earlier, in the case of CPEC, numerous projects cut through ecologically sensitive areas, such as the Karakoram mountain range, which hosts rare and endangered species like the snow leopard (*Uncia*) and Marco Polo sheep (*Ovis ammon polii*). The environmental assessments conducted for these projects often focus on the narrow impacts, neglecting the long term and broader ecological context.

Impacts on Air Quality

Several Special Economic Zones are created to foster the economic activities. To fulfil the energy requirements, most of the power plants are coal based, causing increase in the carbon emissions. Which is increasing air pollution issues in Pakistan, a country already grappling with poor air quality (Greenpeace, 2019). Studies have indicated that the carbon emissions from these coal-fired power plants and diesel-powered trucks can significantly deteriorate air quality, posing a threat to human health (He, et al., 2020).

Conclusion:

While the positive outcomes of the CPEC are well known already, this paper examines the negative possibilities and outcomes to get most benefits out of the project. Reducing the negative socio-economic impacts of CPEC on Pakistan through a comprehensive literature review and filling the gaps in the existing research. Policymakers can work towards ensuring inclusive and sustainable development in the country by addressing all of the concerns discussed in this paper. However the project is yet under process, new kind of issues and impacts can arise

as the project moves further towards its completion. So the researchers will need more in depth studies to find out further research gaps to sort out further issues related to the project.

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