

Incompatibility Between Regulations and Implications: Under-Explored Impacts of Sindh’s Local Government Policies on Sukkur’s Urban Governance

Zubair Ahmed Pirzada¹ *, Nida Shafat² and Shoukat Ali Mahar¹

1-Shah Abdul Latif University, Khairpur Mir, Pakistan

2-Lecturer, Iqra University, Karachi

*Corresponding Author: zubair.pirzada@salu.edu.pk

ABSTRACT

Although Article 140-A mandates the decentralisation of political, administrative, and fiscal authority to local governments, Sindh retains key municipal functions. This study investigates whether such partial devolution impairs Sukkur’s local governance and whether the resulting governance gap is genuine or overstated by political rhetoric. The research hypothesises that incomplete devolution constitutes a measurable governance gap that degrades service delivery and citizen trust. The research adopts an exploratory qualitative case-study design and triangulates the transcripts with official documents and scholarly literature. Six semi-structured interviews have been conducted with policymakers, municipal officials, and residents. Inductive thematic analysis extracted recurrent patterns of authority overlaps and fiscal dependency. The stakeholder findings confirm the gap’s reality while revealing competing narratives that sometimes magnify or downplay its scale. Findings revealed 80% reliance on provincial transfers, overlapping jurisdictions that delay infrastructure, and chronic water, sanitation, and waste services failures. Stakeholders broadly link these deficits to insufficient local autonomy, confirming the hypothesis. The research clarifies that statutory authority and guaranteeing predictable fiscal resources are prerequisites for responsive urban governance in Sindh’s secondary cities; the findings guide policymakers seeking to operationalise constitutional mandates and enhance service delivery nationwide.

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INTRODUCTION

Local government is widely viewed as the tier of governance closest to citizens, capable of delivering services effectively through decentralised decision-making (Mohammed et al., 2024). In Pakistan, “devolution of power” has been a recurring theme in governance reforms, aiming to transfer political, administrative, and fiscal authority from provincial governments to elected local bodies. A constitutional provision, Article 140-A, even mandates that “each Province shall, by law, establish a local government system and devolve political, administrative and financial responsibility and authority to the elected representatives of the local governments” (Constitution of Pakistan). In practice, however, the implementation of devolution has been uneven. This is more evident than in Sindh province, where critics argue that an incomplete devolution of power to local governments has hindered municipal governance (Naz et al., 2024). Centralisation has had clear impacts. Municipal corporations face chronic shortfalls in core services, i.e., water, sanitation, and solid waste management. They also rely on irregular provincial funding transfers and have limited administrative discretion, which dampens citizen participation and accountability (Bank (2018) ; (Dino et al., 2021). These deficits collectively erode public trust and impede the developmental role that local governments are constitutionally expected to perform within Pakistan’s devolved governance architecture. To address this problem, this study focused on Sukkur, a major secondary city in Sindh, by analysing under the framework of the of Sindh (2013), under which authority over critical municipal functions remains vested in provincial line departments (of Sindh (2013)). Furthermore, assess how this structural constraint shapes local government outcomes. It evaluates the extent to which incomplete devolution constitutes the principal impediment to service delivery and civic participation versus alternative factors such as administrative-capacity deficits and managerial inefficiencies (Kausar (2021), (Ayub, 2023). Given the limited availability of quantitative data at the municipal level, the research adopts a qualitative case-study approach, conducting semi-structured interviews with municipal officials, legislators, and residents, alongside a review of findings with official documents, scholarly literature, and international development analyses. This combination provides comprehensive insights into the governance gap and divergent stakeholder perspectives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Decentralisation and Local Governance: Concepts and Context

The efficient local government depends critically on devolution and the movement of power from higher to lower elected government levels. According to international literature, empowered local governments bring decisions closer to communities by improving responsibility, responsiveness, and equity (Anderson et al., 2022). According to decentralisation theory, devolution of political power and resources helps local officials handle particular community needs effectively, lower bureaucratic delays, and provide customised solutions (Bueno & Salapa, 2022). Pakistan's decentralisation initiatives—especially the 18th Constitutional Amendment (2010)—mandate provinces under Article 140-A to create empowered local governments, so theoretically aligning with these ideas (Secretariat (2010) ; Bhatti (2022). Meanwhile, this research shows that Pakistan's devolution process is still unfinished and politically divisive (Rafi, 2022). Establishing local councils or choosing mayors does not always give them sufficient authority or funds. Though constitutionally protected, local governments often remain under provincial control and retain little policy autonomy. Pakistan's shift toward provincial autonomy was triggered by the 2010 Eighteenth Constitutional Amendment, which reassigned wide-ranging legislative and fiscal powers from the federation to the provinces; however, devolution from the provincial to the local tier has since largely stagnated (Ayub, 2023). Many times, "reluctant sovereigns," provinces are disinclined to distribute authority for political reasons (Feehan (2024). Comparative international data points to incomplete decentralisation, often resulting in divided responsibility, policy ambiguity, and accountability gaps. Local governments can thus become accountable for results over which they have little influence, leading to governance inefficiencies—a phenomenon usually noted in Pakistan (Trlin & Olovčić, 2024).

Evolution of Devolution Reforms in Pakistan

Pakistan's local government reforms have historically been cyclical: neglected under civilian rule and empowered under military government (Bandesha, 2024). Prior reforms, such as Zia-ul-Haq's local councils (1980s) and Ayub Khan's Basic Democracies (1960s), mostly justified military control rather than providing actual autonomy (Zahra & Bouckaert, 2022). General Musharraf's decentralisation (2000–2001) substantially gave elected district Nazims, including those in Sukkur, power over education, health, and municipal services (International Crisis Group, 2004). However, democratic restoration in 2008 brought the PPP-led Sindh government to undo Musharraf's reforms, restoring provincial bureaucratic control (Ali, 2018; Rahim, 2023). Following Supreme Court intervention, local elections resumed in 2015 under the , significantly re-centralising vital

functions like water, sanitation, and infrastructure at the provincial level (Hirani & Chandio, 2024; Zaidi & Khalid, 2022). This remarkably curtails local power. Analysts contend that provincial resistance to decentralisation, rooted in political interests and patronage networks, remains evident despite the 2021 amendments promoted as “grassroots empowerment” (“PPP delegated power to grassroots through Local Government Act”, 2021). Consequently, local governments continue to experience limited autonomy and constrained resources (Cheema et al., 2024; Paul, 2024). Analysing such incomplete and contested decentralisation, especially in Sukkur, helps to clarify relationships between theoretical discussions and actual results of governance.

Local Government Outcomes in Sukkur and Sindh

Along with public satisfaction, democratic procedures, and development progress, service delivery in sectors including water, sanitation, waste management, and roads is a significant indicator of local government outcomes. Often associated with provincial centralisation, Sindh’s urban service delivery has either stagnated or declined (Bank (2018) ; (Ayub, 2023; Toheed, 2023). Though Karachi usually gets noticed for bad government, similar problems affect smaller cities like Sukkur (Library (2019)). Sukkur’s experience shows the complexity resulting from partial devolution: successful municipal initiatives including public buses, parks (Reporter (2022)), and nationally recognised waste management improvements (Arsalan et al. (2015) contrast with ongoing infrastructure problems due to provincial control, notably in the water and sanitation sectors. Particularly with aging pipelines and poor maintenance, provincial neglect poses serious health hazards (Correspondent (2016)). Local authorities sometimes point to inadequate autonomy for tackling these issues. Unchecked development and encroachments resulting from provincial dominance in urban planning until judicial intervention in 2022 (Bhatti, 2022) aggravate municipal-provincial institutional overlaps.

Limited fiscal autonomy is another important problem resulting from inadequate decentralisation. Local government that is effective calls for both functional and financial freedom (Oecd, 2021). Municipalities in Sindh, however, mainly rely on erratic provincial transfers; the Provincial Finance Commission under SLGA 2013 is only operating at half capacity. Sukkur’s reliance on provincial funds has slowed down important infrastructure projects and limited expansion. Unlike local governments in Punjab and KPK, those in Sindh have poor capacity for generating income (Group (2017)). Legal challenges to Sukkur’s local revenue projects, including road toll proposals, draw attention to financial limitations (Ayub, 2024). Thus, partial decentralisation greatly limits Sukkur’s capacity for governance, thus impeding infrastructure development, citizen satisfaction,

and service quality. Still, structural constraints by themselves cannot adequately explain problems in governance. This leads to a state described as "local governments without governance," operational inefficiencies, corruption, local administrative shortcomings, political conflicts, and intergovernmental tensions (Dino et al., 2021), severely influencing governance outcomes. Although the provincial government claims that recent legislative changes solve such shortcomings (Ghani (2021)), their real effectiveness is still questionable. This work aims to clarify the degree to which Sukkur's governance problems result from operational flaws or politically motivated explanations rather than inadequate decentralisation.

METHODOLOGY

Through a case study approach, the study employed an exploratory qualitative design to investigate governance challenges in Sukkur, Pakistan. Data collection involved six semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample: two municipal officials (one elected council member and one bureaucratic officer), two national legislators (one MNA and one MPA), and two local residents (one male and one female). Participants were selected using snowball sampling through local government and civil society networks to ensure grassroots representation. Although the sample is modest, thematic saturation was reached by the fifth interview, as no new codes emerged; this supports the adequacy of the dataset while acknowledging the limitation for broader generalisation. Interviews were conducted in Urdu and Sindhi, lasted 45 to 60 minutes, and were audio-recorded with permission, transcribed, and translated into English. In addition to primary interviews, secondary data, including government documents, scholarly literature, and credible media reports, were reviewed to contextualise findings. Data analysis followed an inductive thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, all transcripts were read repeatedly to establish immersion. Open coding was applied line by line to identify initial codes, which were then organised into a draft codebook. A second researcher independently coded two transcripts to ensure reliability, and the discussion resolved discrepancies. Codes were iteratively refined and grouped into overarching themes such as power constraints, fiscal challenges, and service delivery issues. Strict adherence to ethical guidelines ensured informed consent, confidentiality, and respect for participants' rights.

FINDINGS (THEMATIC ANALYSIS)

Through the thematic analysis of stakeholder interviews, several salient themes emerged regarding how the incomplete devolution of power has affected local

governance in Sukkur. The perspectives ranged from high-level political views to on-the-ground citizen experiences. However, they collectively painted a picture of the challenges and contentions surrounding Sukkur’s local government. Four major themes were identified:

- Limited Local Authority and Overlapping Jurisdictions,
- Fiscal Constraints Undermining Local Projects,
- Impact on Service Delivery and Citizen Perceptions, and
- Competing Narratives: Genuine Grievance vs. Political Rhetoric.

Each theme is elaborated below with supporting quotes and insights from the interviews. Table 1 summarises the four major themes, their subthemes, and representative interview quotations that illustrate the crux of each finding.

Table 1.
Summary of Themes, Subthemes, and Representative Quotes

Theme	Subthemes	Representative Quote
1. Limited Local Authority and Overlapping Jurisdictions	● Provincial control over services ● Overlapping jurisdictions ● Accountability gaps	“We have zero say over water and sewage...we end up taking the blame for issues we cannot fix.” - Senior Municipal Officer
2. Fiscal Constraints Undermining Local Projects	● Dependence on provincial transfers ● Politicisation of funding ● Deferred maintenance	“They cover eight percent of our budget; our own income is meagre...requests for pump-station overhauls are deferred until an emergency strikes.” - Mayor’s financial adviser
3. Impact on Service Delivery and Citizen Perceptions	● Water supply failures ● Waste management improvements. ● Mixed infrastructure outcomes ● Civic trust erosion	“We receive water only three days per week...Initially, I blamed the city, then learned it is provincial.” - Resident “Trash once piled up for days; now, collection is more regular.”- Local resident
4. Competing Narratives: Genuine Grievances vs. Political Rhetoric	● Devolution as a genuine gap ● Devolution as a rhetorical device ● Political exploitation ● Citizen ambivalence	“Give Sukkur control for five years – you’ll see a transformation. It’s the system holding us back.” - MNA “Every time something isn’t done, people cry ‘devolution, devolution.” - MPA

LIMITED LOCAL AUTHORITY AND OVERLAPPING JURISDICTIONS

A recurring theme exposed Sukkur’s limited local government power, which resulted from provincial meddling. Every municipal official and lawmaker that I spoke with admitted to partial administrative devolution. One senior municipal

officer related a "tug-of-war" involving provincial agencies:

Municipal officer: "On paper, the municipal office has an elected council, and a mayor meant to oversee municipal operations. We are meant to run the city, but departments like Public Health Engineering still answer to Karachi – The Provincial Capital; So, we have basically got zero say over water and sewage. We can clear a small clog ourselves, but we need the province's sign-off as soon as anything serious happens. So, we end up taking the blame from people for issues we cannot fix."

This quotation highlights provincial control over important local services and overlapping jurisdictions. The MNA linked the problem to post-18th Amendment laws, pointing out that provinces retained powers instead of being devolved further: "Under General Musharraf's devolution, the city district government had broad authority over health, education, planning, even police monitoring to some degree through public safety commissions. Once that system was thrown out, Sindh's 2013 law limited the new local bodies mostly to municipal services. As a result, the power vacuum remains official at the city level. For instance, the city administration cannot change land use policies without provincial approval."

This viewpoint is supported by the criticism of Sindh's intrusion into local government operations by the Supreme Court (Bhatti, 2022). Though somewhat defensive, the PPP-affiliated MPA also gave up overlapping duties that caused annoyance:

MPA: "The rules are centralised, which limits municipal offices' authority. However, the province must maintain standards and control. The municipal offices should show irritation at excessive red tape – 'we cannot even purchase new garbage trucks without permission'. Moreover, recently welcomed the Sindh Assembly's recent amendments granting local councils more influence. Indeed, there can be delays resulting from overlapping responsibilities."

The mayor's office staff confirmed that procurement delays resulting from provincial approvals were indeed a problem. Provincial clearance was needed for a planned city cleanliness campaign, which caused significant delays. Parallel entities like the Sukkur Municipal Corporation (SMC) added even more jurisdictional uncertainty. The MNA raised this issue, implying that activation of such bodies could totally compromise the authority of elected councils.

People felt these overlaps as gaps in responsibility and clarity. A local retailer expressed annoyance at unclear roles between local and provincial departments: "I keep bouncing between the Taluka Municipal Office and the Highways Department. Each says it is others' problem, while the streetlights stay broken, and I still have no clue who is actually supposed to fix it."

Theme 1 reveals that incomplete devolution in Sukkur has led to limited local authority, with frequent overlaps with provincial bodies. Elected officials feel their hands are tied by provincial oversight in many domains, and even provincial lawmakers admit that ambiguities exist. The consequence is not only administrative inefficiency but also a diffusion of accountability – local officials point to provincial authorities for a lack of action. In contrast, the province may insist on its oversight role, leaving citizens caught in between. The theme sets the stage for understanding subsequent issues, particularly the resource dimension and service outcomes, which are deeply interlinked with these power constraints.

FISCAL CONSTRAINTS UNDERMINING LOCAL PROJECTS

Emphasising a direct link between few resources and diminished authority, the second theme focuses on financial constraints influencing Sukkur's local government. All stakeholders agreed that Sukkur's local government's problems stemming from poor revenue generation and firm reliance on provincial funding were caused by:

The mayor's financial advisor specifically noted the city's apparent fiscal reliance: "The Provincial Finance Commission award and other provincial grants cover about eighty percent of the Mayor's Office's budget. The Mayor's Office's source income is meagre and hardly covers staff wages from local taxes and fees." With just PKR 500 million generated locally, he reported the total municipal budget for the previous fiscal year as almost PKR 2.5 billion. Emphasising the inadequacy and irregularity of provincial budgets, he said: "They are not what we ask for or usually on time." For example, Sukkur asked for PKR 300 million for development projects but only received PKR 150 million, which would cause delays or cancellations in line with research showing local governments in Sindh often get half their allocated development funds.

From the provincial perspective, the MPA contended that cities like Sukkur should make better use of their revenue sources: "Look, the provincial government has limited resources too and many priorities – health, education, etc. It cannot simply pass everything to municipal services. Sukkur and other cities have to work on their tax collection. Not fully tapped are trade licenses, property taxes, etc. The truth is that their capacity to use even more money effectively is dubious even if provincial government give it to them." Despite acknowledging local administrative shortcomings, the MNA identified the centre point of issue as the politicisation of fiscal transfers. He argued that "provinces deliberately leverage budget transfers to control local governments: Funds are the main tool provinces have to oversee local governments," MNA stated.

Further, MNA added, “Opposition-held municipalities are deliberately ‘starved for money’, illustrating how politicised budgeting deepens the governance gap and undermines municipal autonomy.”

Citing swings linked to political alignment rather than objective criteria, he claimed fund distribution lacked transparency and was politically driven. Though unverified personally, such opinions show mistrust of fiscal decentralisation. Administratively, insufficient financing directly affected the maintenance of infrastructure. Using Sukkur’s drainage system as an example, a municipal engineer said regular maintenance is financially impossible. “We usually lack the budget for regular maintenance, let alone new projects,” noting that requests for stormwater pump station overhauls are routinely deferred until failures precipitate citywide flooding, rectified by emergency provincial grants following CM intervention, following media pressure. This cycle of deferred maintenance and funding interruptions has eroded public trust: one resident recalled, “They excavated our street for some sewage line, but for months, nothing happened. Our road was one that had been dug.” Later, she found out from a council member that delays in provincial funding had caused contractor payments to stop. Another resident voiced uncertainty regarding municipal budgets: “No concept. With every budget, they promise fresh ideas, but half never come to pass.” These accounts underscore an accountability gap in which reliance on unpredictable provincial allocations undermines service delivery and citizen confidence. However, the mayor’s advisor proposed that expanding local taxation authority, for instance, securing a larger share of property tax revenues, could double municipal income and establish a stable funding base. The MPA noted similar conversations about proposed local road tolls for Karachi (Ayub, 2024), although political opposition still remains major.

Theme 2 generally emphasises how Sukkur’s local government is severely undermined by financial restrictions resulting from inadequate decentralisation. Closely linked with declining service quality, financial dependence limits planning, delays infrastructure improvements, and reduces responsiveness to public needs—a theme investigated next.

IMPACT ON SERVICE DELIVERY AND CITIZEN PERCEPTIONS

Theme 3 explores how power and funding constraints affect Sukkur’s municipal services and shape citizen perceptions. Interviews suggest that limited local authority hinders service delivery, though certain areas have recently improved.

Service Delivery Gaps:

Respondents frequently noted shortcomings in water and sanitation services. Although the provincial Public Health Engineering Department manages water

provision, residents attribute service failures to the municipality. One resident reported, "We receive water only three days per week; many resort to private boreholes or tankers." When pressed, he admitted to initially blaming the city despite understanding the provincial responsibility. A municipal officer described protests in Old Sukkur, where residents presented empty pots to the council and summoned PHED (Public Health Engineering Dept) officials: "It is embarrassing; we appear incompetent despite lacking control." These accounts exemplify reveal how incomplete devolution creates an accountability gap.

In contrast, waste management improved after the solid-waste board was transferred to the divisional authority. One resident recalled that trash once piled up for days and only moved for VIP visits, but has since become more regular under the mayor's "Clean Sukkur" campaign. Road maintenance and street-lighting outcomes were mixed: major thoroughfares remain under provincial agencies, while side streets saw repairs. This pattern underscores that uneven devolution directly undermines service delivery and public trust.

Citizen Trust and Participation: Service delivery strongly influences civic engagement. One shopkeeper commended his council chairman but lamented repeated funding delays: "He is a good man, but he is often waiting on funds or approval, so what can he do?" A second resident questioned the value of voting when even municipal leaders lack authority. These reactions reveal an accountability gap in which elected representatives are held responsible for service failures yet lack the resources to address them, eroding public trust and depressing civic participation." Politicians disagreed on public perceptions. The MPA highlighted provincial projects like the Lansdowne Bridge renovation and the Sukkur Barrage rehabilitation (Ayub, 2024) as proof of provincial commitment. By contrast, the MNA observed that people see the local government as powerless: "There is a perception that having a mayor is cosmetic because he cannot even transfer a junior engineer without provincial sanction."

So, theme 3 finds that incomplete devolution undermines basic services, particularly water and sewerage, by eroding citizen confidence. Where authority was delegated (as with waste management), outcomes have improved. This confirms that "incomplete devolution" significantly affects daily life in Sukkur, though its prominence can be politically contested.

COMPETING NARRATIVES: GENUINE GRIEVANCE VS POLITICAL RHETORIC

The final theme reveals a meta-level insight: some interviewees view incomplete devolution as Sukkur's central governance problem, while others believe it is overstated or used politically. This directly addresses whether the gap genuinely exists or is exaggerated. Opinions essentially split along political lines, with some

practical overlap.

On one side, the MNA and certain municipal officials, who are not aligned with the ruling party, argue that incomplete devolution constitutes a genuine and pressing governance challenge. They see Sukkur's limited autonomy as the root cause of its shortcomings. The MNA declared, "Give Sukkur control of its affairs for just five years – you'll see a transformation. We have capable people at the local level. It's the system that's holding them back." Citing global examples of smaller towns managing services effectively, he argued that Sukkur could do the same with actual empowerment. A municipal officer added, "When you treat a local government like an unwanted stepchild, you cannot expect it to thrive. We need respect and autonomy to function effectively." These sentiments align with the Supreme Court's verdict and constitutional principles (Bhatti, 2022).

On the other hand, the PPP-affiliated MPA and some citizens suggested that the significance of incomplete devolution is often overstated when explaining municipal shortfalls. The MPA criticised this framing as a rhetorical device: "Every time something isn't done, some people cry 'devolution, devolution.'" He argued that blaming provincial constraints cannot absolve local authorities of responsibility for their inefficiencies and observed that similarly governed towns have delivered services effectively through superior administrative capacity. This exchange underscores an alternative narrative: managerial competence, not statutory limitations alone, shapes governance outcomes," and stressed leadership and governance quality, echoing research on local capacity (Dino et al., 2021).

The MPA further suggested that opposition parties exploit claims of disempowerment to embarrass the provincial government, asserting that "it is fashionable to say PPP does not devolve power," while defending PPP's incremental reforms—such as the 2021 amendments and divisional waste boards—as proof of their "commitment to devolution ... with efficiency and equity." Citizens reflected this ambivalence: one sceptic charged officials with deflection - "They shift blame upwards," and another lamented, "hum gharibon ka nuksan hota hai (common folk suffer)." This exchange captures the main point of the debate: political rhetoric and mutual recrimination mask both genuine structural constraints and the potential for practical governance improvements."

A sub-theme involves the fear of centralisation versus local misgovernance. The pro-devolution side, led by the MNA, warned that failing to address the gap could derail local democracy, recalling how bodies were suspended in 2009. "We cannot let that happen again. People have a right to local representation," he urged. Meanwhile, the MPA stressed caution: "We also cannot just hand over everything to a local body that may not have the capacity. Then, if they mess up, the same people will ask the province, 'Why did you allow

this? So, we get blamed either way.” Recent developments include the Supreme Court decision. Municipal officials and the MNA saw it as validating their stance: “Even the Supreme Court said the Sindh government had to empower cities” (Bhatti, 2022). While publicly respectful, the MPA privately resented judicial involvement: “Judiciary stepping in complicates things; elected institutions should sort governance...now everyone thinks it is only because of the court.” Under pressure, Sindh may reactivate the Provincial Finance Commission or grant mayors greater roles. Ultimately, whether incomplete devolution truly cripples Sukkur or is exaggerated depends on perspective. For local officials, it is a structural flaw that is hurting governance, supported by legal experts and evidenced by service gaps. For provincial allies, it can be a scapegoat for inefficiency or a gradually resolving issue. Theme 4 thus illustrates that the truth lies somewhere in between, setting up the discussion on whether Sukkur’s devolution gap genuinely undermines governance or is overblown.

DISCUSSION

The findings from Sukkur offer a microcosm of the broader debate on decentralisation in Pakistan. By examining the themes from the interviews in light of existing literature and reports, this discussion evaluates the reality of the “incomplete devolution” gap and its impact on local governance outcomes. Overall, the evidence from Sukkur suggests that the gap is real and consequential. However, there are elements of political narrative that can sometimes amplify or mask parts of the issue. The discussion is organised into three sub-sections: (1) Validity of the Devolution Gap – assessing whether Sukkur’s experience confirms a tangible shortfall in devolved power; (2) Consequences for Governance Outcomes – linking the gap to actual performance and democratic outcomes in Sukkur; and (3) Exaggeration vs. Other Factors – analysing to what extent the issue might be overstated or intertwined with other governance challenges.

Validity of the Devolution Gap in Sukkur

The situation of Sukkur amply illustrates insufficient local government devolution. Power moved from the federal to provincial level following the 18th Amendment, but provinces have insufficiently devolved responsibilities to local authorities, so producing an “unfinished” decentralisation (Ayub, 2023). Particularly with regard to vital tasks like urban infrastructure and water management, which are still governed provincially, Supreme Court interventions affirm this inadequate devolution (Bhatti, 2022). The court’s rejection of some SLGA 2013 clauses for violating Article 140-A highlights even more important governance dispar-

ities (Bhatti, 2022). Stakeholder interviews revealed themes of "Administrative and Power Overlaps" and "Fiscal Constraints," highlighting operational challenges resulting from provincial intervention rather than personal complaints. For example, Sukkur's lack of autonomy in water services draws attention to real structural constraints that line up with research characterising local government powers as "truncated" (Dino et al., 2021). This disorder most certainly reflects larger provincial trends, implying a systematic rather than a localised problem. Still, appreciating structural shortcomings does not attribute all governance shortcomings to insufficient decentralisation. For example, improving local administrative capacity without addressing provincial-local power dynamics would be useless, as shown by water management problems (Dino et al., 2020). Thus, both structural analysis and stakeholder experiences in Sukkur confirm the relevance of the decentralisation gap, greatly supporting this study's main argument. This confirmation of a systematic shortfall in devolved powers directly addresses the study's central question by demonstrating that incomplete devolution constitutes a genuine governance gap in Sukkur.

Consequences for Local Governance Outcomes

Sukkur's experience emphasises how closely local government results and incomplete devolution are related. Three important areas especially suffer:

Fragmented authority directly fuels Sukkur's unreliable water supply, inconsistent waste collection, and urban flooding brought on by inadequate drainage. Lack of clear local autonomy reduces responsibility and slows the process of decision-making. If local authorities had the mandate and budget for infrastructure improvements—a priority more likely recognised at the city level but neglected provincially due to more general competing priorities—Sukkur's continuous water supply problems might be resolved. In line with global research stressing responsive local governments, recent partial transfers of authority and resources to the city government indeed improved solid waste management efficiency (International Crisis Group, 2004). Sukkur's infrastructure and development projects suffer from limited fiscal autonomy, which sometimes leaves these projects incomplete or underfunded. While Sindh's reluctance to share fiscally leaves its cities "chronically under-resourced," comparative studies within Pakistan indicate that empowered local governments effectively use fiscal resources (World Bank, 2024). Often below 20%, Sukkur's low capital expenditure reflects these budgetary restrictions that impede urban mobility, park development, and economic vitality. Decentralisation theory holds that local governments, by being closer to their residents, improve accountability under democratic standards and administrative efficiency. Sukkur's situation, however, runs counter to this potential: unclear authority frustrates citizens and fosters

political disengagement, thereby limiting their responsiveness. Moreover, conflicting provincial-local responsibilities slow administrative innovation, demoralise local bureaucracies, and postpone decision-making. For example, requiring provincial permission for simple operational decisions discourages proactive government and creativity. This corresponds with UNDP findings of administrative “grey areas” erasing local autonomy and efficiency (Khan, 2021). Still, inadequate devolution by itself cannot fully explain all governance flaws. Further influencing results are local mismanagement or capacity restrictions. Still, efficient local government and meaningful capacity-building initiatives depend on well-defined powers and responsibilities. Sukkur’s governance problems, when taken together, obviously reflect the negative consequences of inadequate devolution. Performance gains and the strengthening of local authority confirm the need to close the devolution gap. These findings illustrate how the governance gap identified in Sukkur translates into concrete deficiencies in municipal performance, thereby reinforcing the importance of devolution for local government effectiveness.

Is the Issue Exaggerated? Other Considerations

Though opinions of its importance vary depending on political interests, the link between incomplete devolution and local governance outcomes in Sukkur is relatively straightforward. The results show that, depending on their agendas, stakeholders may exaggerate or minimize the difference even if the structural constraints imposed by provincial control influence service delivery, fiscal autonomy, and administrative efficiency. Aiming for more autonomy, opposition members and local officials may stress provincial limitations while minimizing local administrative flaws. However, this framing can hide internal inefficiencies unrelated to provincial meddling. Citizen observations observed, for instance, that similar cities enhanced cleanliness just by better local organisation, implying that Sukkur’s difficulties might not be related only to inadequate devolution. Therefore, even if Sukkur surely has structural limitations, local government problems also develop independently from poor local capacity or mismanagement.

On the other hand, provincial authorities sometimes minimize the degree of the governance gap, characterizing demands for more financial autonomy as politically driven or exaggerated—that is, as the MPA names them “fashionable” politics. Consistent low per capita development spending and underfunded infrastructure point to this dismissiveness, possibly undermining justified concerns about fiscal empowerment (World Bank, 2024). Provincial initiatives to present devolution as sufficiently carried out (based on local elections and legislative changes) could hide valid criticism. Acknowledging these politicized

narratives, this study emphasizes that although partial devolution is clearly a real problem with observable effects, it should not be seen as the only factor causing problems with governance. Good government calls for fiscal independence, well-defined authority, local responsibility, capacity building, and openness. Sukkur's waste management post-devolution marks evidence of the advantages of empowered local government (International Crisis Group, 2004). Even fully empowered local governments need good management and openness to reach optimal outcomes. Political instability in Pakistan aggravates governance through the cyclic collapse and restoration of local bodies, impeding the growth of areas like Sukkur. Sukkur especially requires ongoing empowerment and well-defined authority to implement significant changes. Therefore, unfinished devolution is a political exaggeration and a significant structural obstacle linked to other government problems. International experience indicates that instead of efficient solutions, partial decentralisation usually results in blame-shifting (Cavuldak, 2018). Successfully meeting this difficulty calls for an awareness of the actual devolution gap and a strengthening of local government capacity and responsibility through thorough reforms. Although political rhetoric can sometimes downplay structural deficiencies, the persistent operational constraints identified here affirm that incomplete devolution remains the principal factor undermining governance in Sukkur, as set out in the research question.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative exploration set out to (1) examine the nature and extent of powers and resources devolved to Sukkur's local authorities, (2) evaluate local governance outcomes in service delivery and civic participation, and (3) compare stakeholder narratives to determine whether perceived governance deficits reflect incomplete devolution or political exaggeration. Through in-depth interviews with a cross-section of stakeholders – elected representatives, municipal officials, and ordinary citizens – and critical review of pertinent literature and reports confirms that limited administrative authority (Objective 1) over functions such as water, sanitation, and urban planning, coupled with fiscal dependency on irregular provincial transfer (Objective 2), has resulted in unreliable service delivery, stalled infrastructure projects, and eroded citizen trust. While improvements in waste management following divisional devolution illustrate the potential benefits of empowerment, conflicting jurisdiction and politicised funding underscore how incomplete devolution continues to constrain municipal performance. Furthermore, stakeholder accounts reveal that most participants view incomplete devolution as a genuine governance gap, whereas provincial actors sometimes frame it as an “excuse” for local

inefficiencies, demonstrating the competing narratives identified in Objective 3. These findings underscore the need for clear statutory mandates and predictable, formula-based fiscal allocations to bolster local capacity, enhance responsiveness, and restore public confidence. Addressing these issues will fulfill constitutional requirements and provide a roadmap for strengthening urban governance in Sukkur and other secondary cities across Pakistan.

Key Findings Recap

Operating under limited authority, Sukkur's local government lacks control over important tasks, including urban planning, water and sanitation systems, and local revenue generation. Service delivery has suffered as a result of this mismatch between authority and responsibility; unreliable water supplies, infrastructure backlogs, and delayed development projects are outcomes. Moreover, reliance on provincial financing aggravates these problems even more. Consistent with the Supreme Court's conclusions that Sindh's local governments need more empowerment, citizens often show annoyance over unclear responsibility (Bhatti, 2022). The study also revealed polarizing narratives about inadequate devolution. Stronger local governance advocates highlight this gap as a basic obstacle; provincial officials counter that, although the problem is often overstated, they partly blame local mismanagement. According to the study, both points of view have elements of truth. While resolving incomplete devolution by itself will not ensure success without increased local capacity and responsibility, it is a significant structural barrier.

Consequences for Sukkur

Giving Sukkur's local government more power would significantly increase its responsiveness and efficiency. Clearer authority and a consistent financial base would enable municipal officials to handle local issues better, enhance service quality, and apply creative ideas. Recent developments in waste management after partial empowerment show the valuable results of real devolution (Reporter (2024). On the other hand, keeping the status quo runs the danger of extending systematic governance shortcomings, which fuels public disenchantment.

Policy Suggestions

The results led to several policy decisions that became top concerns:

- The Sindh government should follow Supreme Court recommendations, clearly devolving necessary municipal functions (e.g., urban planning, utilities management, local revenue collecting) to Sukkur's local government, thereby removing administrative overlaps and uncertainty.

- Reactivating the Provincial Finance Commission (PFC) with a fair, predictable, formula-based funding mechanism would help Sukkur's budget planning be better, and dependency on arbitrary provincial transfers would be less. Global experiences point to consistent financial transfers and local revenue autonomy, improving responsibility and efficiency.
- Sukkur's local government needs capacity building through focused training, enhanced local responsibility systems (e.g., council oversight, community boards), and administrative modernisation, including e-governance tools for service requests and financial transparency.
- Regular coordination between provincial and municipal bodies through joint committees or platforms should be institutionalised under a collaborative governance culture, promoting trust and cooperation instead of rivalry and benefiting the city and province.

Knowledge Contribution

This research offers a thorough understanding of the effects of decentralisation outside Sindh's metropolitan centre. It emphasises Sukkur's experiences as a mirror of more general regional issues. Using thematic analysis, the study reveals the entwined structural and perceptual elements of incomplete devolution, thus offering nuanced viewpoints sometimes missed in top-down studies. Dealing with these calls is not only for legislative changes but also for changes in governance culture toward mutual trust and teamwork.

Future Research: Limitations

The results of a qualitative case study concentrated on Sukkur could not be applicable everywhere. To further knowledge of successful decentralisation models, future studies could combine quantitative measures of governance outcomes pre- and post-devolution reforms, compare Sukkur's experiences with other Pakistani cities (such as Punjab or Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), or include more general samples of stakeholders.

Final Thought

Is partial devolution either truly significant or overblown? According to Sukkur's data, rhetoric is not only a rhetorical but also a significant obstacle to good government. Still, appreciating the reality of the gap does not release local officials from accountability. The important question is how local and provincial level stakeholders might work together to close this disparity so that Sukkur can realise its governing potential. The city's future depends on real, thorough devolution combined with increased local responsibility and capability.

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