

## **Social Cohesion and Economic Inclusion in Border Regions: A Policy-Driven Perspective**

Muhammad Bilal Khan<sup>1</sup>

Saira Iqbal<sup>2</sup>

### **Abstract**

Border regions serve as both gateways and barriers to development. In Pakistan, these areas—particularly the western and northern frontiers—are characterized by social diversity, economic potential, and historical neglect. Despite their strategic importance, border regions often remain underdeveloped due to inadequate connectivity, limited state presence, and weak governance mechanisms. The lack of inclusive development has contributed to social fragmentation, economic inequality, and at times, political unrest. Social cohesion—the sense of belonging and trust among communities—forms the foundation for peaceful coexistence, while economic inclusion ensures equal access to resources and opportunities. Policy-driven approaches must therefore prioritize the empowerment of border communities through targeted investments in education, infrastructure, entrepreneurship, and participatory governance. This paper explores these dimensions through a policy lens, offering actionable strategies for building cohesive and economically resilient border societies in Pakistan.

### **The Socioeconomic Landscape of Border Regions:**

Pakistan's border regions, encompassing Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Gilgit-Baltistan (GB), and parts of Sindh, are characterized by a complex mix of geographic isolation, socio-economic marginalization, and limited state investment. Despite being rich in natural resources—such as minerals, energy reserves, and agricultural potential—these areas suffer from weak infrastructure, limited access to markets, and a shortage of skilled labor. The historical neglect of border regions can be traced back to centralized policy frameworks that prioritized urban and industrial centers over peripheral zones. This has resulted in uneven development, poor road connectivity, inadequate health and education facilities, and minimal private sector engagement. Moreover, persistent security challenges and cross-border tensions have hindered long-term investment and discouraged industrialization. In Balochistan, for instance, local communities face unemployment rates significantly higher than the national average, while in the tribal districts of KP, socio-political instability continues to restrict mobility and trade. These issues collectively contribute to a sense of exclusion among border populations, fostering mistrust toward central governance structures. Therefore, sustainable progress requires a multidimensional approach—one that strengthens infrastructure, encourages micro-enterprise development, and promotes cross-border trade through transparent, community-centered economic reforms. Such measures can bridge regional disparities and enable border regions to contribute effectively to Pakistan's overall economic growth and social cohesion.

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<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan.

<sup>2</sup> Associate Professor, School of Economics, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

### **Policy Frameworks for Social Cohesion and Integration:**

A well-structured policy framework for social cohesion and integration in Pakistan's border regions must go beyond short-term relief measures and instead focus on systemic, inclusive, and sustainable reforms. Effective governance in these areas requires decentralization of authority, empowering local institutions to make context-specific decisions that reflect the needs and aspirations of their communities. The devolution of power under the 18th Constitutional Amendment provides a foundation for such transformation, yet its implementation remains uneven, particularly in remote border districts. Policies promoting participatory governance—where local stakeholders, tribal leaders, and community organizations actively engage in planning and oversight—are essential to strengthen accountability and trust in the state.

Social cohesion can be further enhanced through integrated social welfare programs addressing education, healthcare, and gender equality. For instance, establishing vocational training centers, mobile health units, and women's economic empowerment projects can significantly reduce disparities and foster inclusion. Government initiatives such as the Aghaz-e-Haqooq-e-Balochistan Package, the erstwhile FATA Development Program, and the Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment Order have shown promise in bridging regional divides; however, they often lack continuity, transparency, and measurable evaluation mechanisms. To overcome these limitations, there is a need for consistent policy monitoring, public reporting, and collaboration between federal, provincial, and local authorities. Furthermore, aligning border region policies with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—particularly SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions)—can create a comprehensive framework that promotes unity, fairness, and participation. Ultimately, policy-driven social cohesion must prioritize inclusivity, trust-building, and institutional legitimacy to transform historically marginalized border societies into integrated contributors to Pakistan's socio-economic development.

### **Economic Inclusion through Cross-Border Cooperation:**

Economic inclusion through cross-border cooperation represents one of the most promising avenues for transforming Pakistan's border regions from zones of neglect into hubs of regional connectivity and prosperity. The strategic geographical position of Pakistan—bordering Afghanistan, Iran, India, and China—offers immense potential for trade, energy exchange, and cultural exchange. However, realizing this potential requires robust institutional frameworks, transparent trade policies, and security mechanisms that facilitate rather than hinder economic collaboration. Initiatives like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) are redefining the economic landscape by improving transport infrastructure, energy supply, and industrial capacity, yet the benefits must be localized to ensure inclusion of border populations in Balochistan, Gilgit-Baltistan, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Developing small and medium enterprises (SMEs) can play a transformative role in this process. SMEs not only create employment opportunities but also encourage entrepreneurship among youth and women, thereby reducing dependency on informal economies. The establishment of cross-border markets at key trade points—such as Taftan (Iran border), Torkham (Afghanistan border), and Khunjerab (China border)—can strengthen local trade networks and improve livelihoods. To maximize benefits, vocational training centers and skill development programs

should be introduced to equip the local workforce with expertise in logistics, mining, tourism, and agri-based industries. Moreover, formalizing trade routes and adopting digital customs systems can reduce smuggling, improve revenue collection, and ensure fair market competition.

Collaborative economic frameworks, including joint chambers of commerce, regional business councils, and cultural exchange platforms, can further enhance trust and cooperation among neighboring countries. Such people-centric economic diplomacy not only strengthens bilateral relations but also contributes to peacebuilding and regional stability. In essence, inclusive economic cooperation—anchored in equitable policy design, community participation, and institutional transparency—has the potential to turn Pakistan's borderlands into engines of sustainable growth and symbols of integration within the broader South and Central Asian region.

### **Role of Governance and Institutional Capacity:**

Effective governance and institutional capacity play a central role in transforming Pakistan's border regions from marginalized peripheries into vibrant and integrated territories of growth. Strong, transparent, and accountable institutions are essential to bridge the governance gap that has historically hindered development in areas such as Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Gilgit-Baltistan. A major challenge lies in weak institutional coordination among federal, provincial, and local authorities, which often leads to overlapping responsibilities, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and misallocation of resources. Building institutional capacity therefore requires a multi-level governance model where each administrative tier operates with clear mandates, measurable outcomes, and community participation mechanisms.

One of the most important aspects of effective governance is **transparency in resource allocation and spending**. The introduction of participatory budgeting—where local citizens and community representatives contribute to planning and monitoring public expenditures—can enhance trust and legitimacy in government institutions. This model ensures that funds are directed toward locally prioritized needs such as clean water, education, healthcare, and road infrastructure. Moreover, promoting **digital governance** through e-procurement systems, online monitoring dashboards, and open data initiatives can significantly curb corruption and improve service delivery efficiency.

Public-private partnerships (PPPs) can also play a transformative role by leveraging private sector innovation and investment for public benefit. These collaborations are particularly relevant in border regions where the state's fiscal capacity is limited but the demand for infrastructure and services is immense. Successful PPPs in the transport, energy, and communication sectors can provide sustainable solutions that generate employment and stimulate local economies. Furthermore, **capacity-building programs** for local bureaucracies, development authorities, and civil servants can enhance institutional responsiveness and decision-making. Strengthening local governance through training, performance evaluation, and citizen engagement ensures that institutions remain adaptive and people-centered.

Ultimately, governance reform must be accompanied by a culture of **accountability and inclusivity**. Establishing independent audit bodies, encouraging civic participation, and integrating traditional leadership structures into formal decision-making can strengthen the social contract between the state and border communities. When governance becomes transparent,

inclusive, and efficient, it not only accelerates development but also reinforces social cohesion, national unity, and long-term stability in Pakistan's strategically vital border regions.

### **Future Directions: Towards Inclusive and Sustainable Development**

The future of inclusive and sustainable development in Pakistan's border regions depends on adopting an integrated, long-term strategy that combines economic growth with social justice, environmental stewardship, and institutional resilience. These regions face unique challenges—ranging from ecological fragility and youth unemployment to inadequate infrastructure and limited connectivity—which require comprehensive and forward-looking policies. Sustainability must be at the heart of this vision, ensuring that development initiatives not only meet immediate economic needs but also preserve natural ecosystems and cultural heritage for future generations. Building climate-resilient infrastructure, such as flood-resistant roads, renewable energy grids, and sustainable housing, is essential to mitigate the impacts of environmental degradation and climate change, which disproportionately affect border communities.

At the same time, youth empowerment and education are central to fostering inclusive growth. Establishing technical and vocational training institutes can provide the younger population with employable skills in sectors such as logistics, agriculture, tourism, and digital entrepreneurship. Equipping youth with modern technological knowledge will enable them to participate in cross-border trade and innovation-driven economies. Similarly, community-led monitoring and evaluation systems can enhance accountability and ensure that development programs remain responsive to local needs. Empowering local communities—especially women and marginalized groups—to play an active role in planning and implementation helps strengthen social cohesion and reduce inequalities.

Integrating border development initiatives within national and international policy frameworks, particularly the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), ensures alignment with global standards of equity, inclusion, and sustainability. Goals such as SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) provide a roadmap for coherent, inclusive development. Moreover, collaboration with international organizations such as UNDP, ADB, and the World Bank can enhance funding, technical assistance, and policy innovation. To ensure lasting progress, Pakistan must institutionalize data-driven policymaking, promote transparency in resource utilization, and foster regional cooperation with neighboring countries. In essence, a sustainable future for border regions lies in a people-centered development model that values inclusivity, resilience, and empowerment—transforming peripheral zones into dynamic engines of social harmony and economic prosperity.

### **Human Capital Development and Education Reform:**

Human capital development and education reform are central to achieving equitable growth and social transformation in Pakistan's border regions. Education not only provides individuals with knowledge and skills but also strengthens civic identity, social cohesion, and resilience against extremism. Unfortunately, border districts such as Gwadar, Chaman, and North Waziristan continue to suffer from systemic educational exclusion due to decades of underinvestment, insecurity, and geographical isolation. Schools in many of these areas operate without adequate

facilities, trained teachers, or gender-sensitive infrastructure, leading to high dropout rates—especially among girls. Addressing these disparities requires a holistic education reform strategy that prioritizes both access and quality.

Expanding **vocational and technical education** tailored to local economic needs—such as mining, agriculture, fisheries, and logistics—can bridge the skill gap and create employment opportunities within the region. Establishing community-based learning centers and mobile education units can also help reach remote populations where traditional schooling infrastructure is limited. Collaboration between the government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the private sector can accelerate innovation in digital learning through e-classrooms and radio-based education programs, particularly in areas with limited connectivity.

Furthermore, promoting **gender-inclusive policies** is essential to ensure that women and girls participate equally in education and economic life. Initiatives such as conditional cash transfers for girls' schooling, teacher training programs emphasizing inclusivity, and female leadership development can significantly enhance participation. Introducing **regional scholarships and quota systems** for students from border areas in national universities can reduce inequality and foster social integration. Education reforms must also incorporate peace and civic education to promote tolerance, cultural understanding, and democratic values. By aligning educational policies with broader national frameworks like Vision 2025 and global frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4: Quality Education), Pakistan can nurture a generation of skilled, informed, and responsible citizens capable of leading their border regions toward sustainable development, stability, and prosperity.

### **Security, Peacebuilding, and Trust-Building Mechanisms:**

Security, peacebuilding, and trust-building mechanisms are indispensable for the sustainable development of Pakistan's border regions, which have long been shaped by complex historical legacies of conflict, marginalization, and cross-border instability. The persistence of militancy, arms trafficking, and smuggling across borders—particularly with Afghanistan and Iran—has not only disrupted local economies but also weakened public confidence in state institutions. For development initiatives to succeed, **security and peace must precede and accompany economic reform**. This necessitates a comprehensive, multi-dimensional approach that blends traditional security measures with community-driven peacebuilding and inclusive governance.

**Community policing** is a key element in building mutual trust between local populations and law enforcement agencies. When local residents are actively involved in security efforts—through village defense committees, local peace councils, and border-watch programs—it enhances information-sharing, reduces alienation, and fosters a sense of collective responsibility. Recruitment of youth from border areas into security forces such as the Frontier Corps, Levies, and police not only improves local representation but also provides stable employment opportunities that deter participation in illicit economies. In parallel, **border management modernization**—through surveillance technologies, biometric systems, and secure trade routes—can reduce illegal activities and improve legitimate cross-border commerce.

Peacebuilding must also include **socio-economic rehabilitation programs** for conflict-affected populations. Providing psychosocial support, livelihood training, and reintegration programs for



displaced families can restore normalcy and rebuild trust in government institutions. Integrating **conflict-sensitive approaches** into all development projects ensures that initiatives are inclusive and do not exacerbate existing grievances. For example, infrastructure projects should be designed with community consultation to avoid perceived favoritism or land disputes.

Additionally, **dialogue and reconciliation mechanisms**—involving tribal elders, religious scholars, women leaders, and youth representatives—are essential to mediate tensions and promote inter-community harmony. Initiatives such as peace jirgas and interfaith dialogues can strengthen the social fabric and prevent the recurrence of violence. International cooperation with neighboring countries is equally critical, as cross-border coordination can help curb terrorism and smuggling while promoting people-to-people exchanges. In essence, durable peace and security in border regions depend not merely on military strength but on **inclusive governance, local empowerment, and mutual trust**—the true foundations of social cohesion and sustainable development.

### Infrastructure Connectivity and Regional Trade Corridors:

Infrastructure connectivity and the development of regional trade corridors serve as a cornerstone for promoting economic inclusion, stability, and integration in Pakistan's border regions. Historically, these areas have suffered from isolation due to rugged terrain, limited transportation networks, and insufficient investment in logistics infrastructure. Enhancing connectivity through strategic infrastructure development—including highways, rail links, energy pipelines, and digital communication systems—can drastically reduce geographic and economic marginalization. Projects like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and its associated initiatives, such as the Gwadar Port, M-8 Motorway, and Khunjerab Pass upgrades, demonstrate how cross-border infrastructure can transform peripheral regions into thriving centers of trade and investment. These projects not only improve accessibility but also integrate Pakistan into broader regional supply chains linking South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East.

Beyond physical infrastructure, digital connectivity is equally vital in fostering inclusion and innovation. Expanding broadband access, telecommunication networks, and e-governance systems across border regions can enhance education, healthcare delivery, and entrepreneurial opportunities. Such initiatives enable rural populations to participate in digital economies, bridging the gap between remote areas and urban markets. Moreover, border-specific economic zones and industrial parks, like those planned under CPEC in Bostan (Balochistan) and Rashakai (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), hold significant potential to attract both domestic and foreign investment. However, their success depends on ensuring that local communities are genuine beneficiaries—through job creation, skill development, and fair compensation for land and resources.

Environmental sustainability must remain a guiding principle in infrastructure expansion. Large-scale construction projects can disrupt ecosystems, water resources, and traditional livelihoods if not properly managed. Therefore, environmental impact assessments (EIAs) and community consultations should be mandatory components of every project to safeguard ecological balance and social harmony. Similarly, prioritizing local labor and materials in infrastructure development can strengthen community ownership and ensure that economic benefits circulate within the region rather than bypassing it.

Furthermore, regional trade corridors should be aligned with diplomatic and trade policies to promote cross-border cooperation with neighboring countries like China, Iran, and Afghanistan. Simplifying customs procedures, harmonizing trade regulations, and introducing modern logistics hubs can facilitate the free flow of goods and services. Ultimately, well-planned infrastructure connectivity not only enhances economic growth but also deepens social cohesion by linking previously isolated communities to national and international markets—creating a virtuous cycle of prosperity, stability, and inclusion in Pakistan’s borderlands.

### **Gender Inclusion and Women’s Economic Empowerment:**

Gender inclusion and women’s economic empowerment are indispensable pillars of sustainable development in Pakistan’s border regions, where patriarchal traditions, limited mobility, and socio-cultural barriers have long constrained women’s participation in public life. In areas such as Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Gilgit-Baltistan, women often remain excluded from formal employment, education, and decision-making processes due to structural inequalities and conservative gender norms. This exclusion not only limits their personal development but also deprives local economies of a vital labor force and creative potential. Promoting gender inclusion requires targeted, culturally sensitive policies that create an enabling environment for women to thrive both socially and economically.

**Access to education and skills development** must be the foundation of empowerment. Establishing girls’ schools, vocational training institutes, and digital literacy programs tailored to the local context can equip women with practical skills for employment and entrepreneurship. Additionally, microcredit and microfinance programs—implemented through government banks and NGOs—can support women in starting small businesses in sectors like handicrafts, food processing, textiles, and agribusiness. In border regions where informal trade is widespread, facilitating women’s participation in **cross-border trade networks** can provide stable income sources while promoting cultural exchange and cooperation across borders.

The creation of **women-led cooperatives** and self-help groups can further strengthen collective bargaining power, enabling women to access larger markets, share resources, and negotiate fair prices for their products. Government and international development agencies should ensure **gender mainstreaming** in all border development policies, which means integrating gender perspectives into every stage of planning, implementation, and evaluation. Establishing women’s community centers and safe workplaces can foster social interaction, mentorship, and entrepreneurship while addressing cultural barriers that restrict women’s public participation.

Furthermore, empowering women politically through **representation in local councils and development committees** ensures that their voices are heard in policymaking processes. When women are included in decision-making, development outcomes tend to be more equitable and sustainable. Studies have shown that households led or co-managed by empowered women exhibit better health, education, and financial outcomes. Therefore, gender inclusion not only benefits individual women but also enhances **family welfare, community resilience, and national cohesion**. By investing in women’s education, leadership, and entrepreneurship, Pakistan can unlock the untapped potential of half its population, driving a more inclusive, just, and prosperous future for its border regions.

### Environmental Sustainability and Resource Management:

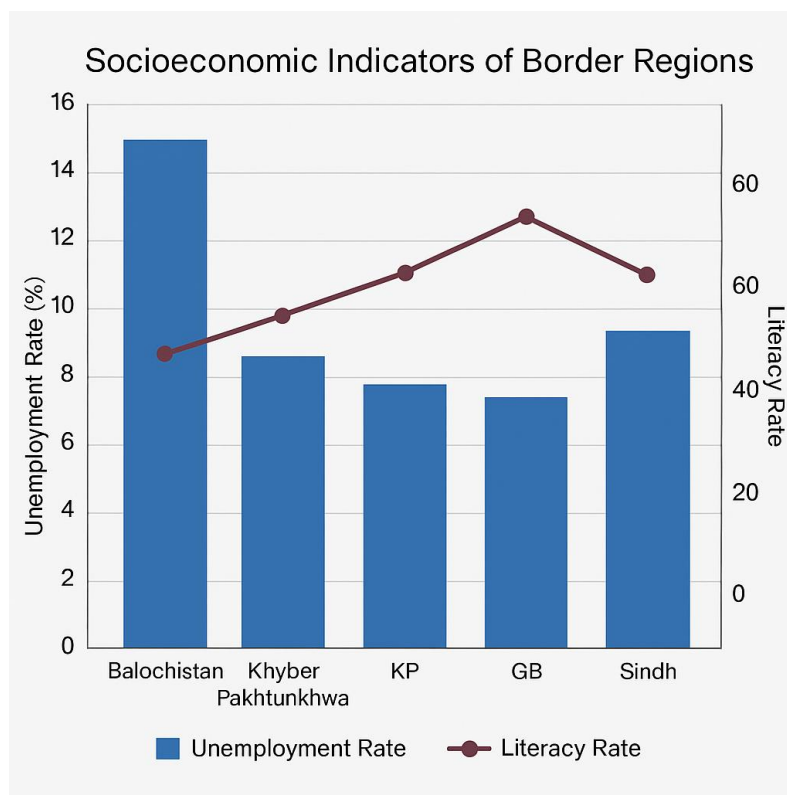
Environmental sustainability and resource management are critical components of inclusive and long-term development in Pakistan's border regions, where ecological fragility directly affects livelihoods, food security, and social stability. Many border districts—particularly in Balochistan, Tharparkar, and Gilgit-Baltistan—are experiencing rapid environmental degradation due to deforestation, overgrazing, unsustainable mining, and water scarcity. These challenges are further exacerbated by the impacts of climate change, including rising temperatures, erratic rainfall, and glacial melt, which threaten both agricultural productivity and human settlements. Therefore, a **comprehensive environmental strategy** that integrates sustainability into all stages of border development is essential for maintaining ecological balance and ensuring human well-being.

**Sustainable resource management** begins with conserving vital ecosystems such as forests, rangelands, and water bodies. Large-scale **afforestation programs** and community-based tree-planting campaigns can help combat desertification and soil erosion, especially in arid regions like western Balochistan. Similarly, introducing **efficient irrigation systems**—including drip irrigation and rainwater harvesting—can improve agricultural output while reducing water waste. Promoting **renewable energy solutions**, such as solar and wind power, is particularly important in remote border areas where electricity access remains limited. These eco-friendly energy sources not only reduce dependence on fossil fuels but also create green jobs for local youth, supporting sustainable livelihoods.

Moreover, **environmental education and awareness programs** should be launched to engage communities in protecting their local ecosystems. Encouraging traditional knowledge in resource management—such as indigenous water storage and grazing practices—can complement modern conservation techniques. Government agencies, in collaboration with NGOs and local councils, must implement **community-based conservation programs** that empower residents to monitor and manage natural resources responsibly. These initiatives foster a sense of ownership, accountability, and cooperation among local populations.

The integration of **environmental sustainability into border development policies** also requires strong institutional frameworks. Conducting **Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs)** for all major infrastructure and industrial projects ensures that development does not come at the cost of ecological damage. Additionally, aligning national policies with global commitments—such as the **Paris Climate Agreement** and the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 13: Climate Action)**—can attract international funding and technical support for green initiatives. By embedding sustainability within governance structures, Pakistan can ensure that economic expansion in border regions remains equitable, resilient, and environmentally responsible. Ultimately, protecting natural resources is not only an ecological necessity but also a social and economic imperative for securing the future of Pakistan's border communities.





### Summary

The development of Pakistan's border regions requires a multidimensional policy approach that intertwines social cohesion with economic inclusion. Sustainable progress in these areas can only be achieved through comprehensive policies that address infrastructural deficits, strengthen governance, and empower marginalized communities. Investment in education, trade connectivity, and institutional transparency can transform border areas into hubs of regional cooperation and peace. Cross-border trade, combined with community-based development and state accountability, can help bridge social divides and promote national unity. Ultimately, fostering inclusion and cohesion in border regions is not only a developmental imperative but also a strategic necessity for long-term national stability and prosperity.

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