

Decentralized Governance as a Pathway to Sustainable National Development: A Case Study of Pakistan

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Abstract

National development depends greatly on how well governance systems work and how effectively administrative units provide services. In many large and highly populated countries, including Pakistan, governance often struggles with inefficiency, bureaucratic hurdles, and unequal service delivery. These issues weaken development outcomes even when governments spend heavily on social and economic programs. This paper suggests a Union Council-based decentralized governance framework as a practical solution. By placing decision-making and service delivery closer to local communities, the model can improve efficiency, accountability, and access. It also helps reduce delays in the judicial process, ensures fairer distribution of resources, and encourages inclusive participation in development. Comparative case studies and quantitative evidence demonstrate that empowering Union Councils creates opportunities for sustainable growth, better infrastructure, and grassroots wealth generation. Overall, a decentralized system focused on Union Councils can make governance more responsive and strengthen Pakistan's path toward balanced national development.

Keywords: Decentralization, Union Councils, Governance reform, Service delivery, Judicial efficiency, Local accountability, Grassroots development, Revenue generation, Equitable development, Citizen participation, Inclusive growth, Sustainable governance.

1. Introduction

Mostly centralized governance in highly populated countries often leads to inefficiency, mismanagement, and wasted resources. Pakistan, with an estimated population of 250 to 300 million, clearly reflects many of these challenges. One of the most pressing issues is bureaucratic overhead. A large portion of public spending is absorbed by complex and multi-layered administrative structures, leaving only a small share available for real development at the community level [1]. This system also contributes to weak security coordination. Responsibilities among federal, provincial, and district law-enforcement agencies frequently overlap, which slows down response times and reduces the overall effectiveness of crime prevention [2].

Another serious challenge is the accumulation of judicial backlogs. Recent reports indicate that more than two million cases remain pending across Pakistan's courts, placing severe strain on the justice system and delaying access to timely redress [3]. In addition, regional development remains highly unequal. Resources and services are usually concentrated in major cities or in politically influential areas, while rural and less developed regions struggle with neglect [4]. Together, these problems highlight how centralization can undermine governance and development. They also show why Pakistan needs a more decentralized system that prioritizes local needs and ensures fairer distribution of resources.

2. Objective

This study explores how a well-organized Union Council level governance model can help to improve efficiency, support fairness, and sustainable development. By shifting administrative authority and resources closer to local communities of every union council, this model aims to reduce many of the bureaucratic delays, ensure a balanced distribution of services, and creating opportunities for long-term growth that directly benefit to the people at the grassroots.

3. The Problem of Centralization

Centralization in large countries often creates multiple inefficiencies that slow down progress and weaken governance. One of the main issues is decision-making bottlenecks. Policies designed at the federal or provincial level often fail to address the realities of local communities, leaving many problems unresolved [5]. Another challenge is resource misallocation. A large share of public funds is consumed by administrative layers, which leaves fewer resources available for frontline services that directly impact citizens' lives [6]. Security systems also suffer under this model. Local crime patterns and community-specific concerns are frequently overlooked, resulting in poor law enforcement and slow responses [7].

Accountability is another weakness in a centralized system. Citizens often struggle to identify which authority is responsible for addressing local problems, which creates gaps in public trust and accountability [8]. These structural issues are especially visible in Pakistan. The country faces serious challenges such as unemployment, rising inflation, illegal encroachments, and underdeveloped rural areas. Centralized administration has proven ineffective in dealing with these concerns, as distant authorities cannot respond quickly or equitably. This situation highlights the urgent need for administrative restructuring that brings governance closer to communities and ensures resources are used more effectively for balanced national development.

4. Proposed Model: Union Council–Centric Governance

Pakistan's governance system has long struggled with inefficiency, unequal distribution of resources, and bureaucratic obstacles that weaken service delivery. With a population estimated between 250 and 300 million, the country's centralized administrative model faces enormous strain. Federal and provincial governments are burdened with responsibilities that they cannot effectively manage across diverse regions. This results in mismanagement, resource wastage, and public dissatisfaction. To overcome these challenges, we propose dividing Pakistan into approximately 500 Union Councils, each serving a population of about 200,000 to 250,000 people. Every Union Council would function as a self-contained administrative and developmental unit, equipped with localized offices, judicial bodies, and service delivery systems. This decentralized framework has the potential to improve accountability, strengthen institutions, and promote equitable development at the grassroots level.

4.1. Single Department Offices at the Council Level

One of the central features of this model is the establishment of single department offices within each Union Council. These offices would handle essential services such as education, health, policing, agriculture, forestry, and mineral management. By operating locally, they would ensure that services are available where people need them most. Each department would be staffed with trained professionals, working around the clock to address local demands in real time.

The benefits of such an arrangement are evident in comparative international examples. In the Indian state of Kerala, decentralization of health and education to the panchayat level has been a key factor in achieving higher human development indicators compared to the rest of the country. Localized management allows services to be more responsive, transparent, and efficient. For Pakistan, replicating such a model at the Union Council level would not only cut through bureaucratic delays but also improve the quality of service delivery for millions of citizens.

4.2. Local Judiciary for Timely Justice

Judicial inefficiency remains one of Pakistan's most pressing problems, with nearly six million pending cases across courts. Centralization of judicial processes contributes to long delays and overburdened courts. To address this, each Union Council would host a tribunal of three judges.

These judges would operate in shifts to ensure that judicial services remain available 24 hours a day.

Disputes would be resolved within council boundaries, and appeals beyond the Union Council would be restricted to specific categories, preventing excessive case escalation. This structure would significantly reduce judicial backlogs and guarantee faster access to justice for citizens. Switzerland provides a strong comparative example. Canton-level courts there handle most disputes locally, which ensures that justice is not delayed by unnecessary layers of appeal. A localized judicial system in Pakistan could replicate this success by making justice more immediate, accessible, and fair.

4.3. Direct Accountability of Administrative Officials

Another important aspect of this governance framework is direct accountability. Under the current system, bureaucratic layers separate citizens from the officials responsible for their welfare. This often leads to mismanagement, corruption, and a lack of responsiveness. In the Union Council model, department heads in each sector—such as education, health, policing, and agriculture—would report directly to the elected councilor.

The elimination of intermediate layers of bureaucracy would strengthen transparency and make it easier for citizens to hold officials accountable. While the councils would manage local administration, the federal government would continue to oversee critical national functions such as defense, foreign affairs, and fiscal policy. This division of authority ensures that decentralization enhances service delivery without weakening the cohesion of the state.

4.4. Wealth Production and Local Revenue Generation

A sustainable governance model requires not only efficient service delivery but also mechanisms for wealth creation and financial independence. Each Union Council would act as an economic unit, generating revenue from local industries, agriculture, trade, and resource management. To ensure balance between local development and national integration, a revenue-sharing mechanism would be introduced. Councils would retain 35 percent of their locally generated revenue for development projects within their boundaries, while contributing 65 percent to federal revenue.

This approach incentivizes councils to foster local economic activity while still supporting the national economy. The example of Singapore's town councils illustrates how local governments can effectively manage budgets, resources, and community projects. By allowing councils in Pakistan to operate in a similar way, local infrastructure, businesses, and public services could grow more efficiently, leading to greater self-reliance at the grassroots level.

4.5. Strengthening Law Enforcement

Law enforcement is another area where centralized governance has struggled. Overlapping responsibilities between federal, provincial, and district agencies often create confusion and weaken security coordination. Under the proposed Union Council system, local police would report directly to councilors. Technology-based monitoring and intelligence networks would ensure transparency and accountability in police operations.

Localized accountability would make corruption more difficult, as officers would be directly answerable to the community through its elected representatives. Quick responses to local crime patterns and disputes would strengthen public trust in law enforcement. This model could reduce crime rates and create a more secure environment for development.

4.6. Education and Health Services

Education and health are the foundations of sustainable development. In Pakistan, both sectors suffer from inefficiency, lack of funding, and bureaucratic delays. By placing schools and

hospitals under the direct control of Union Councils, services would be localized, making them more accessible and transparent. Funds would bypass multiple bureaucratic layers and be directly utilized for service delivery.

This model ensures better quality control, as communities would be able to monitor performance closely. Teachers, doctors, and healthcare workers would be locally accountable, while parents and patients would have direct channels to raise concerns. Over time, localized oversight would improve literacy rates, healthcare outcomes, and overall human development indicators.

5. Comparative Case Studies

Around the world, countries facing governance challenges have turned to various forms of decentralization and localized administration to improve efficiency, accountability, and service delivery. These experiences show that sustainable development is not determined only by the abundance of resources, but by how effectively institutions are designed to deliver services and respond to citizens. Pakistan, struggling with inefficiencies in its centralized system, can learn from these international examples. By studying cases such as Singapore, Switzerland, Kerala in India, Estonia, and Rwanda, important insights can be drawn about how smaller administrative units, local accountability, and community engagement strengthen governance and development outcomes.

5.1. Singapore: Central Planning with Localized Execution

Singapore is a small country in terms of size, but its governance model offers lessons that go beyond geography. The government uses centralized planning to ensure national-level consistency in policy design, while execution is decentralized into small administrative units. Town councils, for example, manage housing estates, local infrastructure, and community services. This arrangement enables efficient monitoring and rapid service delivery because problems are identified and resolved at the local level without waiting for higher bureaucratic approvals [9].

What makes Singapore's model remarkable is its balance between central coordination and local implementation. By keeping administrative units small and accountable, the government has built trust with citizens while ensuring efficient use of resources. For Pakistan, this suggests that even with limited resources, effective governance is possible if services are delivered closer to communities under direct local oversight.

5.2. Switzerland: Cantonal Decentralization and Citizen Engagement

Switzerland represents one of the strongest examples of a decentralized governance system. Its cantonal model gives significant autonomy to each canton in matters such as education, legal systems, and economic regulation. Cantons not only design policies suited to their local populations but also provide mechanisms for high levels of citizen engagement. Direct democracy practices, including frequent referendums, ensure that citizens have a direct say in decision-making [10].

The strength of Switzerland's system lies in its ability to tailor governance to diverse communities while maintaining national unity. Legal disputes, for example, are resolved primarily at the cantonal level, which keeps the judicial system efficient and accessible. For a country like Pakistan, where centralized judicial processes have resulted in massive case backlogs, Switzerland's approach demonstrates how decentralization can reduce delays and build stronger connections between citizens and the state.

5.3. Kerala, India: Local Administration and Human Development

Kerala provides one of the most striking examples of how decentralization can transform development outcomes, even in resource-constrained environments. Unlike many other Indian

states, Kerala devolved health, education, and welfare programs to local councils, often equivalent in size and scope to Pakistan's proposed Union Councils. These councils take responsibility for schools, health centers, and welfare distribution [11].

The results are evident in Kerala's superior human development indicators. Literacy rates, life expectancy, and health outcomes are consistently higher in Kerala compared to national averages, despite the state having relatively limited financial resources. The key has been effective local planning, community participation, and accountability at the grassroots level. This case illustrates for Pakistan that decentralized governance is not only about administrative reform but also about improving the quality of human life by empowering communities.

5.4. Estonia: Digital Governance and Civic Participation

Estonia, emerging from the collapse of the Soviet Union, faced the challenge of building efficient institutions from scratch. The country chose to decentralize governance while heavily investing in digital infrastructure. Local governments were empowered to manage service delivery, and digital tools were introduced to improve transparency, efficiency, and citizen participation [12].

Today, Estonia is recognized as one of the most advanced digital democracies in the world. Citizens can access health records, pay taxes, and even vote online, all through secure digital platforms. Decentralization, combined with digital innovation, has reduced bureaucratic inefficiencies and increased public trust. For Pakistan, Estonia highlights how technology can complement decentralization by making local governance more transparent and responsive. With Pakistan's rapidly growing population, adopting digital systems could also help overcome resource and capacity limitations..

5.5. Rwanda: Post-Conflict Decentralization and Local Councils

Rwanda's experience is unique because it came in the aftermath of devastating conflict and genocide. The government chose decentralization as a tool for reconciliation, rebuilding trust, and promoting development. Local councils were created to take charge of health, education, and land management. These councils became the focal point for citizen participation and community decision-making [13].

By placing governance close to the people, Rwanda was able to increase civic engagement and ensure that development efforts addressed local needs. The system has contributed to significant improvements in healthcare, education, and agricultural productivity. Although Rwanda is a much smaller country than Pakistan, its experience shows that decentralization can play a critical role in healing divisions, strengthening accountability, and driving inclusive development.

6. Implementation Mechanism

Designing an effective governance system is not only about proposing reforms but also about creating a clear and practical implementation mechanism. For Pakistan to successfully move toward a Union Council-centric model, careful planning is required in terms of elections, judicial operations, monitoring, financial management, and human resource development. The following framework outlines the practical steps that can make such a system work.

6.1. Selection of Councilors and Officials

The legitimacy of any governance system rests on the credibility of its leadership. For Union Councils to function effectively, the process of selecting councilors and officials must be transparent and fair. Local elections would be organized under the supervision of an independent election commission to minimize the risk of manipulation. Candidates for councilor positions should be required to meet clear eligibility standards, ensuring they have both the competence and the trust of their communities [14].

Once elected, councilors would serve as the central authority within their Union Council. To ensure professionalism in administration, departmental staff—covering education, health, policing, agriculture, forestry, and resource management—would be trained at national institutes before being deployed to local offices [6]. This national-level training would standardize professional competence while also preparing staff for the unique challenges of working within diverse regions.

This two-tier approach—transparent elections for councilors and professional training for staff—creates a governance structure where leadership is democratically accountable, and administration is handled by skilled professionals.

6.2. Judicial Operations

A major weakness in Pakistan's current system is the overwhelming backlog of judicial cases, which erodes public trust in the rule of law. In the Union Council model, judicial functions would be localized through the creation of council tribunals. Each tribunal would consist of three judges working in continuous shifts, ensuring that justice is available around the clock. This continuous operation reduces delays and signals to citizens that justice is a priority service, not an inaccessible privilege.

Mandatory timelines would be introduced for case resolution, preventing prolonged disputes and unnecessary appeals. Only certain categories of cases would move beyond the Union Council level, reducing the burden on higher courts and allowing them to focus on constitutional and complex legal matters [15].

This localized judicial system has several advantages. It makes justice more accessible, strengthens accountability within communities, and prevents the central courts from being overwhelmed by routine disputes. It also allows ordinary citizens to see their grievances addressed quickly, restoring confidence in the fairness of governance.

6.3. Monitoring and Technology Integration

In a modern governance framework, monitoring and transparency are essential to reducing corruption and improving performance. Information technology can play a central role in achieving this. Each Union Council would maintain a comprehensive database covering departmental performance, citizen grievances, local revenue collection, and development projects.

These databases would not remain isolated. Councils would be required to share key constitutional and national security matters with the federal government, ensuring that local autonomy operates within a framework of national unity [16]. At the same time, local governments would retain the authority to monitor and manage their own operations, using digital dashboards to track progress in education, healthcare, policing, and revenue generation.

IT-driven monitoring also provides a reliable system for performance evaluation. By using real-time data, councils can quickly identify gaps in service delivery and take corrective action. Transparency in record-keeping would also allow citizens to access information about budgets, expenditures, and the outcomes of local projects, creating an environment where accountability is built into everyday governance.

6.4. Revenue and Resource Management

Financial independence is a critical factor in the sustainability of local governance. In the Union Council model, councils would generate their own revenue through local economic activities, industries, agriculture, and natural resource management. This localized revenue base ensures that councils have a direct interest in promoting local economic growth, since their own budgets would depend on it.

To prevent corruption and misuse of funds, revenue would be tracked through transparent accounting systems accessible both to citizens and to federal oversight bodies. Each council would allocate resources equitably, with a set percentage devoted to local development projects such as schools, clinics, roads, and water systems. A portion of revenues would also be contributed to the federal government to maintain fiscal balance at the national level [17].

This dual approach of local retention and national contribution creates incentives for Union Councils to become engines of economic growth while maintaining solidarity with the broader federation. It also ensures that wealth produced locally directly benefits the community, reducing the sense of neglect and marginalization often felt in rural and underdeveloped regions.

6.5. Capacity Building and Training

No governance system can succeed without investing in human capital. For Union Councils to function effectively, continuous training of officials, councilors, and judges is essential. National institutes would be established to provide standardized and ongoing training programs, covering subjects such as public administration, law, financial management, education policy, health systems, and technology use [18].

This training would not be a one-time event. Instead, it would operate as a continuous cycle of capacity building, with officials returning for refresher courses and professional development. Judges would be trained not only in law but also in mediation and conflict resolution, equipping them to handle community-level disputes effectively. Similarly, councilors would receive training in leadership, ethics, and participatory governance, enabling them to engage with citizens and lead their communities responsibly.

By institutionalizing professional training, Pakistan can ensure that Union Councils do not simply reproduce the inefficiencies of existing bureaucracies. Instead, they would emerge as modern administrative units with the capacity to deliver services efficiently, transparently, and fairly.

7. Expected Outcomes

The introduction of a Union Council–centric governance framework in Pakistan is expected to generate far-reaching benefits for the state, its institutions, and most importantly, its citizens. By addressing long-standing inefficiencies within the centralized system, this model can transform the way services are delivered, justice is administered, and resources are distributed. The following outcomes highlight the potential impact of implementing such a system.

The appointment of permanent staff at the ward level within Union Councils is essential for strengthening Pakistan’s statistical system. Currently, many data collection tasks are handled by temporary or ad hoc workers, which often results in inefficiency, inconsistency, and a lack of accountability. By assigning permanent staff to each ward, the government can ensure continuity, reliability, and proper monitoring of statistical activities. Permanent staff members would develop familiarity with the local population and resources, allowing them to maintain accurate and updated records. This stability would also enhance coordination with Numberdars and Chowkidars, creating a more integrated data collection network. Additionally, permanent employees can be trained in digital tools, ensuring smoother integration with NADRA and other national databases. Such an arrangement would minimize errors, reduce data gaps, and build a long-term foundation for effective planning and development initiatives.

7.1. Efficient Service Delivery for All Citizens

One of the most immediate benefits of decentralization is improved service delivery. In the current centralized system, citizens often face long delays, bureaucratic hurdles, and poor access to basic services such as education, healthcare, and local infrastructure. By establishing Union

Councils as self-contained administrative units, services would be provided directly at the community level. Schools, hospitals, agricultural offices, and police stations would no longer be distant or bogged down by provincial-level approvals. Instead, they would operate under the direct oversight of elected councilors, ensuring that citizens receive faster and more reliable services. This efficiency not only improves daily life but also strengthens trust between the public and the state.

7.2. Rapid Judicial Resolution and Responsive Law Enforcement

A second outcome relates to justice and security. Currently, Pakistan's courts are overwhelmed with millions of pending cases, leading to delays that can span years or even decades. Under the Union Council model, tribunals operating at the local level with strict timelines for resolution would drastically reduce these backlogs. Citizens would be able to resolve disputes quickly and fairly within their communities rather than navigating a distant and overburdened judicial system.

Law enforcement would also become more responsive. Local police reporting directly to councilors would be accountable to the community they serve. By removing multiple bureaucratic layers, policing would become faster, more transparent, and better adapted to the specific security needs of each area. Together, these reforms would create a system where justice is no longer delayed, and security is managed with greater efficiency.

7.3. Equitable Socio-Economic Development Across All Regions

Centralization has long resulted in uneven development, with urban centers and politically influential regions receiving a disproportionate share of resources. Rural and marginalized areas are often left behind, fueling social inequality and resentment. By contrast, the Union Council model ensures that every community has its own budget, administrative authority, and developmental agenda. Resources would be allocated locally, and councils would have the power to prioritize projects that directly benefit their populations, whether in agriculture, education, healthcare, or infrastructure.

This localized approach reduces regional disparities and creates a sense of ownership over development. Citizens in smaller towns and rural areas would no longer feel sidelined by a distant state. Instead, they would see tangible improvements in their quality of life, fostering social cohesion and balanced growth.

7.4. Reduced Bureaucratic Expenditure and Corruption

The proposed system also promises financial efficiency. In the existing structure, large sums of money are consumed by bureaucratic overhead, leaving little for real development. By eliminating unnecessary administrative layers, the Union Council model reduces wastage and ensures that funds go directly into service delivery.

Furthermore, corruption thrives in centralized systems where accountability is diffuse. With local officials reporting directly to elected councilors and being monitored by citizens through transparent IT systems, opportunities for misuse of funds would be significantly reduced. Smaller administrative units are easier to monitor, and direct citizen engagement acts as a powerful check on corrupt practices. Over time, this would not only reduce financial leakage but also improve the credibility of governance institutions.

7.5. Sustainable Wealth Generation at the Grassroots Level

Economic development is not sustainable if it remains concentrated in a few urban centers. The Union Council model addresses this by empowering local communities to act as economic units. Councils would generate revenue from local industries, agriculture, and resources, with a share retained for reinvestment in local development. This arrangement encourages communities to

take initiative in creating opportunities, managing resources responsibly, and fostering entrepreneurship.

By linking revenue generation with local development, councils create a virtuous cycle of wealth creation and reinvestment. Over time, this grassroots economic activity would reduce dependence on central transfers, strengthen local economies, and contribute to national growth in a more balanced manner.

7.6 Increased Citizen Participation and Local Accountability

Perhaps the most transformative outcome is the empowerment of citizens. In the centralized model, people often feel detached from the decision-making process, unsure of which authority is responsible for addressing their concerns. The Union Council system bridges this gap by placing governance directly in the hands of elected representatives who live and work within the community.

This proximity makes governance more personal and participatory. Citizens would have regular opportunities to engage with their councilors, raise concerns, and monitor service delivery. Local accountability ensures that officials cannot ignore public demands, and the community itself becomes an active participant in governance. This participatory culture not only strengthens democracy but also nurtures civic responsibility and collective problem-solving.

8 | Conclusion

The Union Council-centric decentralized governance model presents a realistic and adaptable framework for improving governance in a country as large and complex as Pakistan. Centralization has long proven inadequate in addressing the diverse needs of citizens, leaving gaps in service delivery, justice, and economic opportunity. By devolving authority to Union Councils that directly serve populations of 200,000 to 250,000 people, governance becomes more accessible, accountable, and efficient.

Localizing administrative functions means that essential services such as health, education, and policing are provided where they are most needed, without unnecessary delays caused by distant bureaucratic structures. Similarly, a local judicial system allows for faster resolution of disputes, reducing the overwhelming backlog in higher courts. These changes strengthen public trust in governance by making institutions more responsive to everyday needs.

Economic growth is also supported by this model, as councils retain a portion of their revenue for reinvestment in community projects. This approach empowers local economies, creates opportunities for grassroots wealth generation, and ensures that development is not concentrated in a few urban centers but is spread more evenly across regions. Direct accountability to elected councilors further minimizes corruption and strengthens democratic participation.

The success of similar decentralized systems in other contexts provides valuable lessons for Pakistan. Singapore's town councils, Switzerland's cantons, Kerala's panchayats, Estonia's digital local governance, and Rwanda's community councils all demonstrate that decentralization enhances efficiency, improves transparency, and deepens citizen engagement.

In conclusion, adopting a Union Council-centric governance model can help Pakistan overcome persistent challenges of inefficiency, inequality, and weak accountability. It is not merely an administrative adjustment but a pathway toward inclusive, sustainable national development. By empowering local councils, Pakistan can create a governance system that genuinely reflects and serves its people.

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