



Beaconhouse National University
BNU Center for Policy Research

13 Km, Off Thokar Niazbeg, Raiwind Road,
Lahore- 53700, Pakistan.

Tel: +92-42-38100156 ext. 357,423,426

Email: bcpr@bnu.edu.pk | Web: www.bnu.edu.pk



Report
National Conference on
“Local Governance in Pakistan: Empowering Communities”

Report By: **Arsam Tufail Butt**, *Research Associate and Outreach Coordinator, BCPR*

Assisted by: **Maria Ashraf**, *Intern BCPR*

Saman Zahra and Alishba Khan Barech, *Students of SMC & SLASS, BNU*

Introduction:

Local governments form the bedrock of effective governance in modern states. They deliver essential services, mediate community needs, and serve as the primary interface between citizens and the state. Pakistan’s local governance landscape, however, stands at a critical juncture as it remains fragmented, politicized, and structurally weak. Despite constitutional guarantees under Article 140A and decades of experiments with decentralization, local governments remain the weakest, most inconsistent, and often the most contested tier of governance because in practice:

- Provincial governments delay or avoid local elections.
- Fiscal devolution remains negligible.
- Administrative authority is retained by provincial bureaucracies.
- Governance responsibilities are outsourced to authorities and companies.

This disconnect, between constitutional aspiration and political reality served as the foundation for the **National Conference on “Local Governance in Pakistan: Empowering Communities”**, which was held by Beaconhouse National University’s Center for Policy Research (BCPR) in collaboration with Sanober Institute Islamabad on 1st December 2025 in BNU Lahore. It convened leading policymakers, scholars, bureaucrats, journalists, and practitioners to examine the structural, political, and administrative impediments to effective grassroots governance, and to formulate actionable pathways for reform.



Beaconhouse National University
BNU Center for Policy Research

13 Km, Off Thokar Niazbeg, Raiwind Road,
Lahore- 53700, Pakistan.
Tel: +92-42-38100156 ext. 357,423,426

Email: bcpr@bnu.edu.pk | Web: www.bnu.edu.pk



The conference was divided into two Roundtables with the following themes:

Roundtable I	Roundtable II
a. Historical Context and Current State of Local Governments	a. National & International Best Practices
b. Political, Legal, and Administrative Challenges	b. Role of Technology and Digital Governance
	c. Way Forward towards Effective Grassroot Governance

Across these intensive roundtables, speakers converged on several central themes and stated:

1. The historical trajectory of Pakistan's local governance is cyclical, interrupted, and dominated by political expediency, with military regimes often supporting LG systems for reasons of political engineering.
2. Provinces have not fully operationalized Article 140A, resulting in uneven devolution, legislative gaps, and frequent dissolution of local bodies.
3. Elite capture across political parties, bureaucracy, and provincial administrations undermines decentralization, with MNAs and MPAs resisting meaningful devolution of fiscal and administrative authority.
4. Local governments lack the financial autonomy to serve effectively, with taxation powers centralized and service delivery increasingly outsourced to companies, authorities, and private contractors.
5. Technology offers transformative potential, but its utility is wasted without corresponding structural reforms.
6. International examples, from Europe to China, demonstrate that sustained decentralization is foundational to economic development, social inclusion, and administrative efficiency.



Beaconhouse National University
BNU Center for Policy Research

13 Km, Off Thokar Niazbeg, Raiwind Road,
Lahore- 53700, Pakistan.

Tel: +92-42-38100156 ext. 357,423,426

Email: bcpr@bnu.edu.pk | Web: www.bnu.edu.pk



The conference underscored that the challenge is not merely administrative, structural, or political; rather, it is deeply rooted in Pakistan's historical trajectory. Pakistan cannot achieve inclusive development, democratic deepening, or effective service delivery without empowered local governments that are constitutionally protected, financially autonomous, and politically legitimate. An urgent national consensus is therefore required, embodied in a National Framework for Local Governance with clear constitutional protection and a robust institutional framework.

Inaugural Session:

In their welcome remarks at the Inaugural session, Dr. Zainab Ahmed, *Deputy Director BCPR*, and Ambassador (R) Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhary, *Chairman Sanober Institute*, highlighted the purpose of convening the conference and the urgency of strengthening local governance in Pakistan. They emphasized the importance of research-driven dialogue and collaboration between academia, policymakers, and practitioners. Both stressed that empowered local governments are central to inclusive development, and a stronger state–citizen relationship.

In his opening remarks, Dr. Moeed Yusuf, *Vice Chancellor Beaconhouse National University*, underscored the role of universities as spaces for informed dialogue, critical thinking, and evidence-based policymaking. He highlighted BNU's commitment to fostering research-led conversations on governance and public policy. He emphasized that strengthening local governance requires sustained engagement between academia, policymakers, and communities.

Addressing the inaugural session as Chief Guest, Engr. Khurram Dastagir Khan, *former Federal Minister of Foreign Affairs, Defence, Energy, Commerce*, emphasized that strong and empowered local governments are essential for effective service delivery and democratic stability in Pakistan. He highlighted the need for institutional continuity, policy coherence, and fiscal decentralization to bring governance closer to citizens. He stressed that sustainable development cannot be



Beaconhouse National University
BNU Center for Policy Research

13 Km, Off Thokar Niazbeg, Raiwind Road,
Lahore- 53700, Pakistan.
Tel: +92-42-38100156 ext. 357,423,426

Email: bcpr@bnu.edu.pk | Web: www.bnu.edu.pk



achieved without strengthening grassroots governance and ensuring meaningful citizen participation.

Roundtable Discussions:

During the discussion, *on Historical Context, Political, Legal, and Administrative Challenges and the Current State of Local Governments in Pakistan*, in the Roundtable 1, Mr. Ahmed Nawaz Sukhera, *retired bureaucrat and former Secretary Cabinet Division*, highlighted the deep structural weaknesses within Pakistan's state apparatus, noting that while the bureaucracy can play a stabilizing role, excessive centralization often disrupts local empowerment. He emphasized the need for a specialized bureaucracy at each tier of government, arguing that local governments require dedicated cadres with long-term postings rather than a uniform generalist service. Stressing fiscal federalism, he underscored that robust local governments cannot function without genuine financial devolution aligned with NFC principles. He called for the substantive, not symbolic, implementation of Article 140A, with clear transfer of political, administrative, and financial powers. He also pointed to constitutional ambiguity with respect to the form and structure of local government, capacity gaps, and the need for clarity in administrative powers, rules of business, and judicial interpretations as key challenges to effective local governance.

Mr. Ahmed Bilal Mehboob, *President PILDAT*, presented empirical evidence highlighting deep structural and electoral imbalances in Pakistan's governance system, noting that nearly 70% of citizens' issues originate at the local level, yet local governments remain the weakest in many provinces, and largely absent in Punjab. He pointed out that only about half of local government seats have elected representatives, compared to 73% at the provincial and national levels, despite the fact that a country of over 240 million people is governed by just 1,181 MNAs, MPAs, and Senators. He observed a paradox whereby 53% of local government laws were enacted under military or quasi-military regimes, while democratic governments have often resisted devolution,



Beaconhouse National University
BNU Center for Policy Research

13 Km, Off Thokar Niazbeg, Raiwind Road,
Lahore- 53700, Pakistan.
Tel: +92-42-38100156 ext. 357,423,426

Email: bcpr@bnu.edu.pk | Web: www.bnu.edu.pk



viewing local governments as political threats rather than partners. He further highlighted severe fiscal marginalization, with local governments receiving only 5–8% of development expenditure instead of the required 30–35%. Emphasizing reform, he called for strengthening Article 140A, expanding Article 28 to include the citizens’ rights to the grassroots governance, ensuring continuity of local governments, reducing centralization, and mobilizing public pressure to compel meaningful parliamentary reform.

Mr. Usama Khawar Ghumman, *Advisor to the Speaker Punjab Assembly on Parliamentary Development and Special Initiatives*, offered a political perspective on resistance to local governance, arguing that local government is a political idea that cannot be suppressed indefinitely. He traced its instrumental use from the Minto-Morley reforms to post-partition military regimes, noting that it often served as a tool of control rather than genuine empowerment. He contended that MNAs and MPAs rarely oppose local governments openly, instead framing resistance through concerns of capacity, corruption, or functionality, reflecting deeper conflicts of interest between provincial governments, federal ministries, and entrenched bureaucracies. He also highlighted Pakistan’s overdeveloped civil-military relationship and high polarization in the society as structural barriers to devolution. Referring to Article 7’s potential role in enabling fiscal autonomy, he concluded that the constitutional vision of a “third tier” of government remains unrealized due to selectively absent political will.

In Roundtable 2 discussing *National & International Best Practices, Role of Technology and Digital Governance and Way Forward towards Effective Grassroot Governance*, Mr. Fawad Chaudhry, *Former Federal Minister for Information & Broadcasting and Science & Technology*, highlighted the sharp disconnect between rapid technological advancement and Pakistan’s weak institutional readiness, noting that while technology is available, the governance architecture does not support its effective deployment. He argued that political parties view local governments as existential threats, and an “autocratic spirit” within party structures prevents the emergence of



Beaconhouse National University
BNU Center for Policy Research

13 Km, Off Thokar Niazbeg, Raiwind Road,
Lahore- 53700, Pakistan.

Tel: +92-42-38100156 ext. 357,423,426

Email: bcpr@bnu.edu.pk | Web: www.bnu.edu.pk



bottom-up leadership that local governments naturally produce. Tracing this resistance to colonial administrative legacies, he pointed to enduring power hierarchies embodied in institutions such as the police and district administrative services. He further stressed that although Article 7 defines the state through taxation powers, local governments remain fiscally starved, with resources concentrated at the provincial level. Criticizing current expenditure and subsidy practices, particularly in Punjab, he argued that elite capture by political, bureaucratic, and military actors continues to block meaningful devolution and accountability.

Ambassador Naghmana Naheed Hashmi, *Former Ambassador of Pakistan to China and the EU*, offered a comparative international perspective, describing decentralization as the engine of modern development. She noted that in Europe, nearly 87% of EU and national legislation is implemented through the local level, reflecting deep administrative devolution, particularly in countries such as France and Germany. Drawing on China's experience, she observed that despite perceptions of centralization, China has maintained a deeply devolved governance system for over two millennia, with even the smallest villages embedded in administrative structures that execute national planning. She emphasized that effective decentralization requires not only legal reforms but a fundamental shift in mindset, arguing that Pakistan must “think central but act local,” combining empowerment at the grassroots with confidence, security, and strong monitoring from the center.

Dr. Seemi Waheed, *Professor of Governance and Public Policy at the University of Management & Technology*, argued that Pakistan's governance discourse narrowly focuses on “local government” while neglecting the deeper principle of local self-government. She emphasized that democracy requires citizens not only to elect representatives but also to meaningfully hold them accountable, noting that Pakistan's state and society remain structurally non-democratic. She highlighted that post-colonial practices, such as non-party local elections, continued reliance on colonial administrative structures, and discretionary grants to MNAs and MPAs, undermine



Beaconhouse National University
BNU Center for Policy Research

13 Km, Off Thokar Niazbeg, Raiwind Road,
Lahore- 53700, Pakistan.

Tel: +92-42-38100156 ext. 357,423,426

Email: bcpr@bnu.edu.pk | Web: www.bnu.edu.pk



pluralism and the principle of subsidiarity. Citing survey evidence, she pointed out that 68% of respondents identify bureaucracy and political influence as major obstacles to effective local governance. She concluded that without devolved taxation, regular elections, and genuine self-rule, local governments remain hollow shells rather than foundations of democratic development.

Mr. Salman Abid, *Senior Journalist Analyst and Local Government Expert*, called for evaluating local governance through the lens of service delivery at the citizen's doorstep. He argued that Pakistan remains trapped between centralization and selective, cosmetic decentralization, citing Punjab's prolonged refusal to hold local elections and the outsourcing of core local functions to dozens of companies and authorities. He emphasized the absence of a National Framework for Local Governance and incompatible provincial systems have fragmented accountability and weakened elected local institutions. He stated that essential services such as water, waste, and sanitation are routinely shifted away from elected representatives, reflecting elite resistance to genuine devolution. He concluded that without uniform frameworks, mandatory electoral cycles, and clear accountability mechanisms, decentralization will remain symbolic rather than transformative.

Closing Session:

Malik Muhammad Ahmad Khan, *Speaker Provincial Assembly of the Punjab*, attended the closing ceremony of the National Conference as the Chief Guest. Addressing the conference, Speaker Malik Muhammad Ahmad Khan said that without local government, the state cannot breathe. Just as the existence of the federation and the provinces is essential, local governments are also a fundamental part of the state structure. He further stated that if there is any unfinished agenda of the Constitution of Pakistan, it is the system of local government. He remarked that in today's age, people consider dialogue a crime, yet in the Punjab Assembly, all political parties, including the



Beaconhouse National University
BNU Center for Policy Research

13 Km, Off Thokar Niazbeg, Raiwind Road,
Lahore- 53700, Pakistan.

Tel: +92-42-38100156 ext. 357,423,426

Email: bcpr@bnu.edu.pk | Web: www.bnu.edu.pk



opposition, passed a unanimous resolution fully agreeing on providing constitutional protection to the existence of local governments.

The Speaker added that many members of the Assembly met him and stressed the need for constitutional guarantees for local governments. He shared that the agenda on this matter has already been forwarded to the Chairman Senate, the Speaker National Assembly, and the Prime Minister of Pakistan. He said that a person who thought about these issues 140 years ago had a better understanding than many today of how important public issues, such as healthcare, could be effectively resolved after the establishment of local governments. He questioned how it is possible for the Constitution to define a system as important as local government in just a single sentence. He remarked that if local governments are not empowered, the relationship between the state and its citizens weakens. “How long can 1,100 or 1,200 people govern a population of 250 million?” he asked. Unless citizens are made genuine participants in state affairs, improvement cannot take place. “Power grows by being shared, and this is the foundation of a strong state.”

The Speaker stressed that the National Finance Commission (NFC) Award must be transferred to the local level, because equitable distribution of resources forms the basis of a strong social system. Giving an example, he said that thousands of rupees are spent monthly on students studying in major institutions of large cities, whereas the amount spent on children in rural areas is far lower, an unfair disparity. In conclusion, Speaker Malik Muhammad Ahmad Khan said that he was speaking directly to the state as a citizen: “If the state provides me with good transportation, quality education, and basic facilities, I will stand with it. But unless I have local ownership, things cannot function.”

At the closing ceremony, Speaker of the Provincial Assembly of the Punjab, Malik Muhammad Ahmad Khan, presented souvenirs to the distinguished panelists in recognition of their valuable



Beaconhouse National University
BNU Center for Policy Research

13 Km, Off Thokar Niazbeg, Raiwind Road,
Lahore- 53700, Pakistan.
Tel: +92-42-38100156 ext. 357,423,426

Email: bcpr@bnu.edu.pk | Web: www.bnu.edu.pk



insights and contributions. The gesture marked a meaningful conclusion to a day of rich dialogue, shared learning, and collective commitment to strengthening grassroots governance in Pakistan.

Key Takeaways and Recommendations:

Across both roundtables, several themes consistently emerged:

1. Constitutional Gaps vs. Political Resistance

While Article 140A exists, political parties, bureaucracies, and other power centers consistently resist its full implementation.

2. Fiscal Centralization as a Core Barrier

Local governments cannot function without taxation powers and Pakistan's current fiscal structure fosters dependency rather than autonomy.

3. Elite Capture Across Levels

Political parties fear losing control; bureaucracies fear losing relevance. Centralization is often a deliberate political strategy rather than a constitutional necessity.

4. Governance Requires Elections

Delays in holding local elections, such as in Punjab, reflect reluctance to devolve authority.

5. Learning from International Models

Countries that embraced decentralization early have progressed faster. Pakistan continues to operate under colonial-era governance practices.

6. Technology Alone Cannot Compensate

Digitization cannot replace empowered institutions and structural reforms.

Recommendations:

The recommendations that surfaced through this conference were as follows:



Beaconhouse National University ***BNU Center for Policy Research***

13 Km, Off Thokar Niazbeg, Raiwind Road,
Lahore- 53700, Pakistan.
Tel: +92-42-38100156 ext. 357,423,426

Email: bcpr@bnu.edu.pk | Web: www.bnu.edu.pk



A. Constitutional & Legal Reforms

1. Fully implement and amend Article 140A to:
 - a. Prohibit arbitrary dissolution of local governments.
 - b. Guarantee fiscal devolution.
 - c. Standardize local government tenure at 4–5 years across provinces.
2. Introduce a National Framework for Local Governance to harmonize structures while respecting provincial autonomy.
3. Revise Article 7 to explicitly include local governments as integral to the state, particularly regarding taxation.

B. Administrative Reforms

1. Establish dedicated local government civil service cadres.
2. Transfer core service delivery functions (water, sanitation, waste management, parks, etc.) to local governments rather than authorities or companies.
3. Stabilize posting tenures of local government officers to ensure continuity and prevent disruption and undue influence.

C. Strengthening Democratic Processes

1. Mandate regular local government elections.
2. Introduce party-based local elections nationwide.
3. Restrict and reduce development funds of MNAs/MPAs and increase their oversight powers.

Conclusion:

The conference underscored that Pakistan’s journey toward effective local governance is as much political and structural as it is legal. Across history and contemporary practice, local governments have faced elite capture, fiscal centralization, and bureaucratic resistance, leaving the “third tier”, the tier closest to citizens, weak, fragmented, and often symbolic, in the governance chain despite constitutional mandates and decades of experimentation. Speakers highlighted that meaningful



Beaconhouse National University
BNU Center for Policy Research

13 Km, Off Thokar Niazbeg, Raiwind Road,
Lahore- 53700, Pakistan.

Tel: +92-42-38100156 ext. 357,423,426

Email: bcpr@bnu.edu.pk | Web: www.bnu.edu.pk



decentralization requires not only constitutional and legal safeguards, such as the full implementation of Article 140A, fiscal devolution, and regular elections, but also a fundamental shift in political will, administrative structures, and societal mindset. International examples from Europe and China demonstrated that empowered local governance, coupled with accountability and citizen participation, drives sustainable development and social cohesion.

The consensus was clear: Pakistan must move beyond cosmetic reforms, embrace structural and fiscal empowerment of local governments, and “think central, act local” to ensure a truly participatory, resilient, and democratic state because only with empowered, accountable, and constitutionally protected local governments can Pakistan achieve truly democratic governance and sustainable development.