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The Critical Appraisal of Services Delivery in Gagra Tehsil, District Buner under Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Local Government Act (Amendment) 2019

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ABSTRACT

This study examines delivery of services at grassroots level to people of Tehsil Gagra, District Buner Khyber Pakhtunkhwa under the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Local Government (Amendment) Act, 2019 (KP LGA, 2019). Using a mixed-methods approach, the research combines quantitative data from structured questionnaires administered to rural and urban residents with qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews conducted with local government officials, community leaders, and elected representatives. Secondary sources, including government documents and policy reports, are also analyzed to contextualize the findings. The results indicate that although the 2019 amendment introduced institutional reforms aimed at strengthening local governance, its implementation has been constrained by limited financial resources, inadequate capacity and training of elected representatives, and weak intergovernmental coordination. Significant disparities in service delivery between rural and urban areas were identified, with rural communities experiencing greater challenges. The study contributes to the growing body of literature on decentralization and local governance in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa by providing empirical evidence from a rural tehsil context.

Keywords: Local Government, Decentralization, Service Delivery, Tehsil Gagra.

Introduction

Local government represents the closest tier of governance to citizens and plays a central role in delivering essential public services such as education, healthcare, sanitation, and local infrastructure. In Pakistan, decentralization has undergone several structural transformations, with the KP LGA, 2019, marking a significant shift in the province's governance framework. The amendment restructured the institutional design of local government by devolving key service delivery responsibilities from the district level to the tehsil level, aiming to bring governance closer to the people (Mahmood, 2025).

This transition reflects an important step toward grassroots decentralization. It has introduced complex administrative and institutional challenges. The abolition of the district tier, changes in oversight mechanisms, limited fiscal and human resource autonomy, weak intergovernmental coordination, and delays in framing subordinate legislation have affected the operational effectiveness of the new system. Concerns regarding inadequate financial resources, limited representation, and bureaucratic dominance further shape the functioning of local institutions under the amended framework (Janjua, 2022).

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa comprises 35 districts and 131 City/Tehsil Local Governments, with District Buner consisting of six tehsils, including Gagra. Tehsil Gagra, characterized by

moderate population density and comparatively low literacy rates, provides an important rural context for assessing the practical implications of decentralization reforms. This study examines the role of local government under the Act of 2019 in service delivery, focusing on eight selected Village Councils of Tehsil Gagra. By analyzing institutional performance, community participation, and implementation challenges, the study contributes empirical evidence to the broader discourse on decentralization and local governance in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, particularly within rural settings.

Literature Review

Decentralization and local governance have been widely examined as mechanisms for improving service delivery, democratic participation, and institutional accountability. In the Asia-Pacific context, Carrasco, Rahemtulla, and Rohdewohld (2022) highlight the critical role of local governments in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly in sectors such as education, health, and infrastructure. Their analysis emphasizes that effective localization of development goals depends not only on formal devolution but also on administrative capacity, fiscal empowerment, and intergovernmental coordination.

In Pakistan, decentralization has evolved through repeated institutional restructuring. Cheema, Khwaja, and Qadir (2005) argue that past decentralization initiatives were often politically motivated and lacked long-term institutional consolidation. Similarly, Malik and Rana (2019) trace the historical evolution of local governance and note that discontinuity in reforms has weakened institutional stability. Riaz (2019), through a comparative examination of provincial local government laws, demonstrates significant variation in administrative and fiscal authority across provinces, raising concerns regarding uneven decentralization outcomes.

Focusing on Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Khan (2016) identifies structural weaknesses in the Local Government Act 2013, including excessive provincial control, weak institutional capacity, and limited citizen participation. Janjua (2022) further analyzes the 2019 amendments to the local government framework and observes that while the restructuring aimed to enhance grassroots governance by shifting responsibilities to the tehsil level, challenges such as fiscal constraints, coordination gaps, and regulatory delays persist. More recently, Syed, Qais, and Mumtaz (2023) link decentralization reforms in Pakistan to SDG attainment, arguing that weak capacity and political interference continue to constrain effective service delivery.

At the micro level, Mahmood (2025) provides an empirical assessment of the implementation of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Local Government (Amendment) Act, 2019 in Tehsil Gagra, District Buner. The study highlights rural–urban disparities in service delivery, insufficient financial resources, inadequate training of elected representatives, and limited public participation as key factors affecting governance outcomes. The findings reinforce broader concerns identified in national-level studies regarding fiscal dependency, weak coordination, and institutional capacity deficits. While existing literature examines decentralization at macro and provincial levels, limited research evaluates the post-2019 institutional restructuring at the tehsil level in rural KP.

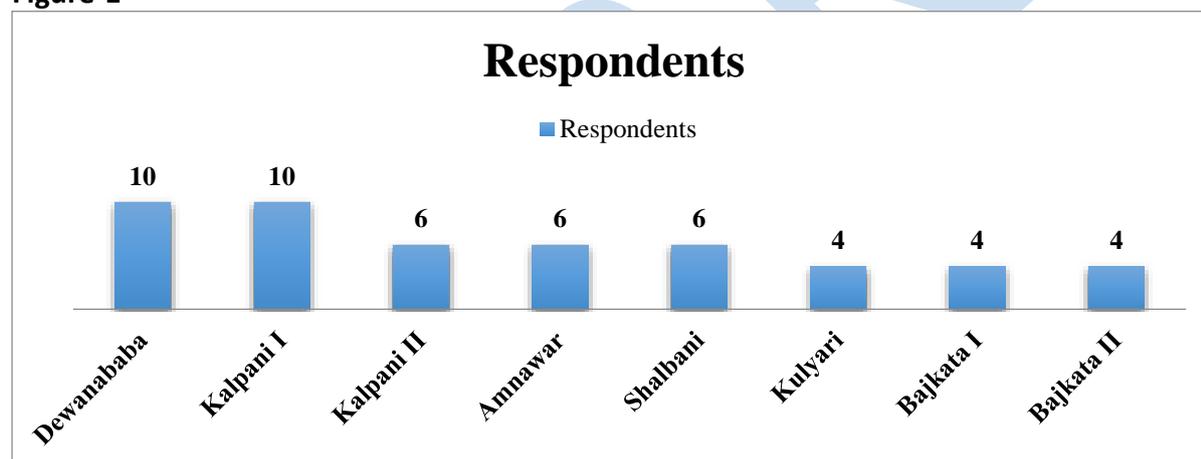
Khan (2016) highlights the significance of local government system and its role in flourishing democracy at grassroots and also the hidden structural and functional problems under KP LGA Act 2013. Khan (2014) discussed the influence of bureaucracy on local government

institutions and its role to hinder the flourishing the growth of local government in the country with a fear by losing its monopoly. Khan (2013) shed light on the importance of education for the success of local government institutions in Pakistan. Khan (2012) discussed the status of minorities, their exiting issues and possible solutions under LGO, 2001. Khan (2011) discussed the status of ladies union councillors, their main problems to play an effective role in service delivery and also recommendations to overcome those issues under LGO, 2001. Khan (2010) emphasised on major problems and solutions of local government under LGO, 2001 in the Pakistan.

Methodology

This study primarily is based upon mixed method composed of both qualitative and quantitative. Primary (semi-structured interview schedule, participatory observation and semi-structured questionnaire) and secondary (research articles and theses) sources have been consulted. In addition, stratified-purposive sampling has been used; and fifty respondents hailing from village council representatives, and tehsil officials. The selected respondents in each selected VC have been demonstrated in Figure-1 (Mahmood, 2025).

Figure-1



Additionally, 200 structured questionnaires were administered to members of the general public using purposive sampling. To ensure balanced representation, respondents were equally selected from rural (50%) and urban (50%) areas. Urban respondents are reflected in Figure-2.); while rural respondents are reflected in Figure-3.) (Mahmood, 2025).

Figure-2

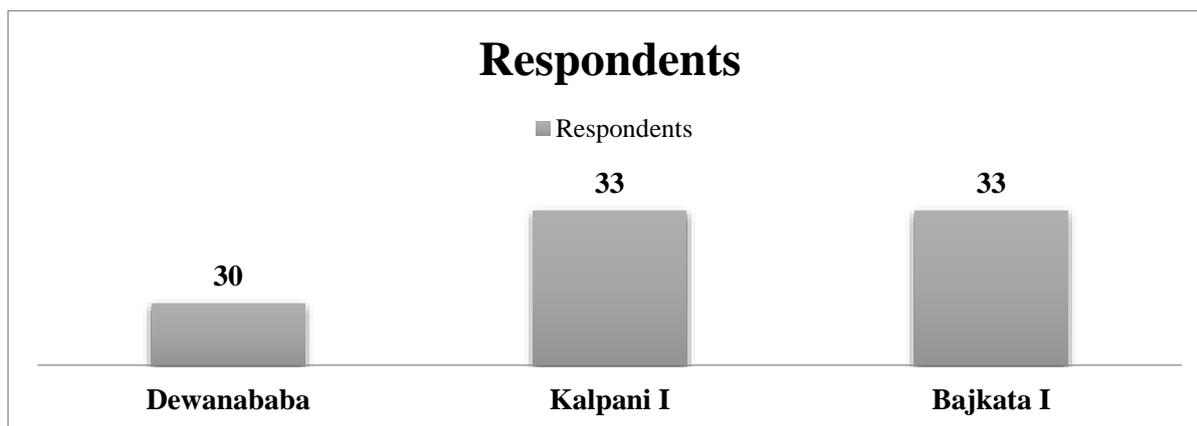
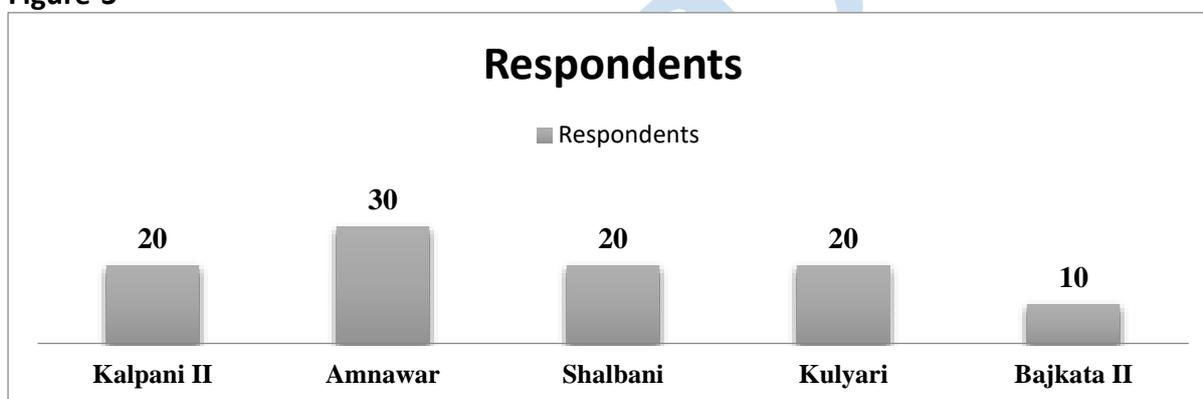


Figure-3



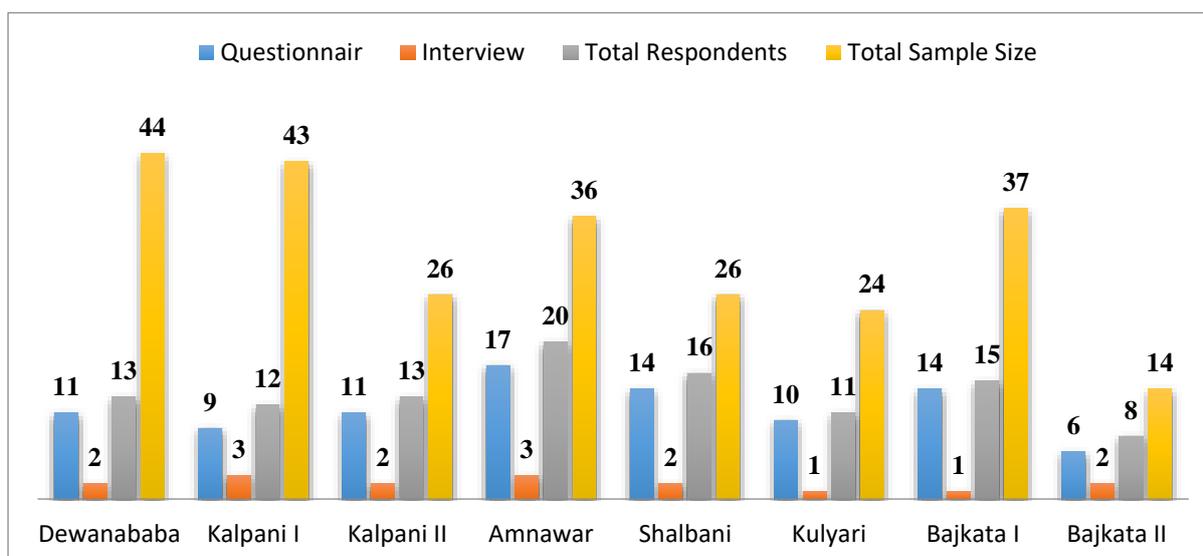
Data Analysis

Quantitative data has been analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques, including frequency distributions through Microsoft Excel Sheet. Qualitative data obtained from interviews were examined using content analysis to identify recurring themes related to service delivery effectiveness, institutional capacity, governance challenges, and community participation. Ethical considerations have been observed throughout the study and Informed consent was obtained from all respondents. In addition, confidentiality of responses was ensured (Mahmood, 2025).

Discussion

For the Service Delivery Analysis in the post-2019 scenario, the scholars have conducted Fifty (50) semi-structured interviews and distributed two hundred (200) structured questionnaires to various segments of society. The data about respondents in selected VCs of Gagra Tehsil, District Buner are detailed below (Mahmood, 2025).

Figure-4



The findings from survey and interview data indicate that the implementation of the KP LGA, 2019 has produced mixed outcomes in Tehsil Gagra. The results show that certain administrative and social services have improved at the village council level, structural and infrastructural services remain uneven, particularly across rural areas (Mahmood, 2025)

Administrative Services

The results reveal that administrative services particularly the issuance and registration of birth, death, marriage, and divorce certificates are perceived as the most effective function of local government. Approximately 77.1% of respondents identified certification services as the most important service provided, while 52.1% reported improvement in this area over the past five years. Interview responses from local officials further confirm that decentralization to the village council level has increased accessibility and reduced procedural delays.

Developmental and Infrastructure Services

In contrast, perceptions of developmental works and infrastructure improvements were more moderate. Only 25% of respondents reported significant improvement in developmental works, while 33.6% identified sanitation and protection services as areas requiring further enhancement. Water supply services were reported as least improved (3.2%), indicating persistent deficiencies in basic infrastructure provision.

Public Health and Social Services

Qualitative evidence suggests that local government played an active supportive role in polio campaigns, COVID-19 awareness, sanitation drives during Eid ul-Adha, and plantation initiatives. Such involvement reflects functional collaboration with district administration and line departments. However, these initiatives appear largely coordination-based rather than financially autonomous interventions.

Citizen Satisfaction and Participation

Overall satisfaction levels remain moderately positive: 70.6% of respondents reported being either satisfied or very satisfied with local government services. Furthermore, 44.5% strongly agreed that local government plays a crucial role in village betterment.

However, information dissemination remains centralized through media (84.7%), with limited direct engagement through councilors, suggesting weak grassroots communication mechanisms.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that while administrative service delivery has improved under the 2019 amendment, infrastructural and developmental services remain constrained by financial and institutional limitations.

Challenges in Implementing KPLGA 2019

Despite observable improvements in specific service domains, multiple structural challenges hinder effective implementation.

Financial Constraints

Financial limitations emerged as the most significant challenge. Approximately 78.2% of respondents indicated that increasing financial resources is essential for improving local governance effectiveness, while 80.4% recommended greater fund allocation to address future challenges. Interview data further confirm delays in fund transfers, limited revenue generation authority, and fiscal dependency on the provincial government.

Institutional and Human Resource Capacity

Weak institutional capacity remains a persistent concern. Interview participants highlighted limited technical expertise, absence of monitoring mechanisms, and inadequate training of elected representatives. Human resource shortages, high turnover, and politicized recruitment further undermine performance.

Without systematic capacity-building initiatives, administrative devolution alone appears insufficient for sustainable service improvement.

Political Interference and Overlapping Jurisdictions

Respondents frequently cited excessive political interference and unclear division of powers between provincial, district, and tehsil levels. Approximately 90.2% of respondents attributed low electoral participation to perceptions of unfair electoral processes, indicating concerns regarding political trust and governance legitimacy.

Overlapping mandates and weak coordination mechanisms create ambiguity in service responsibilities, particularly in sectors such as water supply and infrastructure.

Limited Public Participation and Gender Representation

Although voter turnout in the 2021 local elections reached approximately 41% in Gagra Tehsil, effective citizen participation in decision-making remains limited. Public engagement mechanisms beyond elections are weak, and awareness about local government functions remains low.

Furthermore, qualitative evidence highlights persistent underrepresentation of women in leadership and decision-making roles, shaped by socio-cultural constraints and limited empowerment opportunities.

Recommendations

Based on the empirical findings, the following measures are recommended.

- i. The provincial government should introduce a predictable, formula-based fiscal transfer mechanism linked to population size and service delivery indicators. Enhancing local revenue authority particularly in property taxation and service charges would reduce fiscal dependency and improve financial sustainability.
- ii. Structured training programs for elected representatives and administrative staff should be institutionalized. Capacity-building initiatives must include financial management, project planning, monitoring and evaluation, and participatory governance.
- iii. Clear delineation of responsibilities between provincial departments and tehsil governments is essential to prevent jurisdictional overlaps. Establishing formal coordination platforms between tiers of government would improve policy coherence and implementation efficiency.
- iv. Local governments should institutionalize public consultation forums, village-level participatory planning sessions, and social accountability mechanisms. Strengthening transparency through public disclosure of budgets and project reports would improve trust and responsiveness.
- v. Targeted leadership training programs for women, mentorship initiatives, and enforcement of reserved seat provisions should be strengthened. Gender-sensitive budgeting and inclusive policy frameworks would further enhance equitable participation.
- vi. Given public concerns regarding water scarcity and unemployment, local governments should prioritize investment in water supply systems and community-based economic initiatives in collaboration with provincial authorities.

Conclusion

The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Local Government Act, 2019, represents a significant step towards decentralization and empowerment of local governments in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. While the Act has introduced several positive reforms, such as increased devolution of power, financial autonomy, and community participation, implementation challenges have hindered its full potential. Financial constraints, the lack of qualified personnel, weak institutional, political interference, overlapping jurisdictions and underrepresentation of women in local government have been major obstacles, limiting the ability of local governments to deliver essential services.

The findings of this study, while specific to Tehsil Gagra in District Buner, can provide valuable insights for practitioners working on local governance reforms in other areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and beyond.

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