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CPEC: An Assessment of Its Socio-economic Impact on Pakistan

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China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was launched in 2015 when 51 agreements and MoUs (Memorandums of Understanding) worth USD 46 billion were signed between China and Pakistan (Rauf, 2017). This grand-scale bilateral project is a flagship constituent of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). CPEC started out with the goal of modernising Pakistan's road, rail, air and energy transportation systems and enhancing connectivity between its Gwadar and Karachi ports to the Chinese province of Xinjiang and beyond (Rauf, 2017). Over the years, this project has resulted in Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and cooperation between the two partner countries in other domains such as outer space— all to monitor this massive project. While China has a lot to gain from this crucial component of its BRI dream, many Pakistani leaders and other observers have called CPEC a “game-changer” for Pakistan time and again. The CPEC deal was indeed a significant event for a struggling Pakistani economy, which was also endangering levels of social development in the country. For Pakistan, CPEC not only meant an opportunity to address its existing challenges like the energy crisis but also a golden moment to emerge as a hub for economic activities in the region (Bhattacharjee, 2015).

A Center for Strategic and International Studies report had found that as of 2020, 32 of the 122 announced projects have been completed, which corresponds to USD 20 billion of the estimated USD 87 billion in funding (Hillman, 2020). This underperformance is often attributed to a number of factors, including domestic politics, corruption and terror. The COVID-19 pandemic has further caused delays in the progress of CPEC projects. Despite the lag in CPEC projects, the impact that it has had on Pakistan is too substantial to be overlooked. This paper will focus on the socio-economic aspect of this impact and try to assess how positive or negative this impact has been.

Socio-economic indicators and parameters for assessment

There has been a growing focus on the non-economic aspects of development in recent times. However, these aspects are not independent of the level of economic development of an individual or society. Therefore, socio-economic development as a measure of a society's economic performance and social progress has gained more recognition. There are various indicators that serve to identify the level of socio-economic development in a society. Broadly, the umbrella of socio-economic indicators includes concepts like ‘happiness’, ‘well-being’, ‘quality of life’, ‘living conditions’, ‘life situations’, ‘social capital’, ‘generalised and political trust’, ‘environmental concepts’ etc (UNECE, 2017: 1). This diversity makes measuring the level of socio-economic development a complex task. A number of composite indicators have been devised to accomplish this task. One of the most common of these is the Human Development Index (HDI) by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The HDI is a composite index to track socio-economic development, and it aggregates life expectancy, educational attainment and income (UNECE, 2017: 2).

Composite socio-economic indicators have often been suspected of hiding information “behind a single number of dubious significance (UNECE, 2017: 2).” Even in the case of CPEC, the prime focus of this paper, one argument that has been asserted by those who support the project has been that the progress of CPEC is improving the HDI of Pakistan (The Nation, 2018). However, this paper will exercise caution and therefore not use one single composite socio-economic indicator for a simplistic conclusion of a complex project that holds great significance for Pakistan.

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Instead, this paper will focus on four central factors to understand its socio-economic impact– employment, political trust, gender equality and environment. This paper will not seek to reach a black-and-white verdict of boon or bane, but it will attempt to analyse the impact of CPEC on Pakistan along these four contours.

Existing literature

Most scholarly literature on the socio-economic impacts of CPEC had been published around the time of the megaproject's initial phases. However, not much study has been conducted in recent times to assess the socio-economic performance of CPEC. Moreover, the early works are heavily influenced by the massive hype about this project that ensued right after its announcement. These works also focused on one or just a few aspects of the project, usually those related to economic gains. One work that was published the year after the signing of the CPEC agreement had kept 'transportation' in focus and had used its case to conclude that CPEC's impacts and benefits were more valuable for the community than its costs (Ali et al., 2016). This study was primarily based on a survey conducted among the local residents of a selected area. The expectations of the locals, that is, their perceived benefits of CPEC were used to argue for the promising socio-economic impact of CPEC. However, while public opinion regarding such lifestyle-altering projects and policies are crucial, they are not sufficient to establish their connection with a final socio-economic level of development. In the case of CPEC, the promotion of the deal had generated widespread optimism in Pakistan, but now that some years have passed, a lot of concerns have also surfaced. Even the aforementioned study had acknowledged that it has some limitations, and "future study" would be needed to assess the total impact of CPEC (Ali et al., 2016: 91). This paper is an attempt in this direction.

Meanwhile, some existing studies do highlight the positives of the project using numerical data available during the initial phases of CPEC, but essential details are lacking. For example, a 2017 study concluded that CPEC would create "millions of jobs" and "improve the living standard of Pakistani people." (Ali et al., 2017: 195) However, details like the kind of jobs, permanency of employment– contractual, sub-contractual or otherwise, rights granted to the employees, income details etc. were missing. Such details are central while trying to assess the totality of CPEC's impact on the socio-economic development in Pakistan. Besides, the lack of transparency in CPEC-related information makes assessing its performance a challenge in general. It has been observed that even the information that is in the public domain sometimes do not match and at other times, information is seldom available at any one place or not available at all (Jacob, 2017). Some argue that the nature of governance and politics in both China and Pakistan obstructs the availability of transparency in CPEC-related information (Jacob, 2017). Nonetheless, there have been recent studies conducted by analysts across the world in which different promises and claims about CPEC– rather the BRI as a whole, are contradicted (AidData, 2021).

This paper attempts to explore four components of socio-economic development (employment, political trust, gender equality and environment) to assess the impact of CPEC on Pakistan till now. It will evaluate both the positives and negatives in these four domains using the data available, and will also weigh contradictory claims, wherever applicable. Additionally, this paper will try to draw attention to factors like political trust that are not directly linked with economic progress. This helps in viewing a more balanced picture as the usual narrative around CPEC has been dominated by economic factors like jobs, GDP growth, income growth, etc.

Impact of CPEC on employment

Pakistan currently features in the top five of the list of countries with the highest population sizes.^[1] Moreover, the median age in Pakistan is just 22.8 years.^[2] A low median age implies that the majority of people in Pakistan will be entering the working-age group in the coming years, and therefore the demand for jobs is expected to grow in the country. Therefore, a major expectation from CPEC– Pakistan's biggest development assistance, is the realisation of its promise of generating employment for Pakistani citizens. As is the case with most "official" data on CPEC, the data on employment generated by CPEC projects is not very clear. Official statements from Pakistan or China often refrain from giving exact numbers for jobs created or likely to be created (Jacob, 2017). Even when numbers regarding employment generated are released, details such as the nature of jobs, the relevant skillsets involved, duration of availability of these jobs etc. are not provided (Jacob, 2017).

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The launch of CPEC was followed by optimistic predictions regarding employment generation in Pakistan. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) had estimated that CPEC could create 400,000 jobs in Pakistan, while the country's Planning Commission had estimated a figure of 800,000 jobs by 2030 (Zia and Waqar, 2018: 3). Despite such figures widely promoted by the Pakistani and Chinese governments, what was observed in the early harvest projects of CPEC was a mismatch between job availability and skills of those seeking employment. The early harvest projects were demanding in terms of precise and definite skills, and the domestic workers of Pakistan lacked in most of them (Zia and Waqar, 2018: 2). As a consequence, Chinese companies became more inclined to hire foreign workers (Zia and Waqar, 2018: 2). For instance, in 2017, i.e., during the initial phase of the CPEC projects, out of the total 1,100 skilled labour working in the Gwadar Free Zone, only 250 were Pakistani while the remaining 850 were Chinese nationals (Zia and Waqar, 2018: 13). It is worth noting that the requirement of labour in Gwadar projects at that stage were highly skilled jobs like Pilots/Tig operators, engineers, marine scientists, quality control officers, hydrographic officers etc (Zia and Waqar, 2018: 13).

For the projects that have successfully proceeded beyond their harvest stages, employment is mostly available in the operations and maintenance domains. However, two main challenges remain. First, the current employment data under CPEC has become even less transparent. Consequently, it is not clear if the numbers quoted by government officials, ambassadors or political mouthpieces include jobs that the Chinese are getting in Pakistan under CPEC or not (Jacob, 2017). Second, the scope for jobs under maintenance tasks has been limited for Pakistanis and include not very highly skilled jobs like those of security personnel. A set of figures used to cite employment in Pakistan included about 18,000 jobs in the security domain– all to protect Chinese investments and citizens (Jacob, 2017). On the contrary, CPEC projects have sometimes led to instances where the existing sources of livelihood of local communities in Pakistan have become threatened. For example, the fishing community in Gwadar– a natural seaport supporting the income of a number of local fishermen, has been affected by the CPEC developments aimed at transforming Gwadar into a 'Developed Mega Port City' (Suleman, 2019). The construction activities in the area have blocked a long coastline for the indigenous fishing communities, and most of the fishing neighbourhoods have been relocated to the outskirts of Gwadar without prior consultation (Suleman, 2019).

Mere ability to generate jobs is not sufficient to track the socio-economic impact of the employment generating project. The impact that the jobs created have in terms of a decent income and favourable working conditions with labour rights is essential to understand the bigger picture that often gets obscured under cold statistics. CPEC projects do not fare very well in these parameters. Special economic zones under CPEC are regulated under the Special Economic Zones Act, 2012 whose Article 30 makes all labour laws of Pakistan applicable to these zones (Hisam, 2017). The domestic labour laws in Pakistan already suffer from weak implementation, and thus, the workforce involved in the not-so-transparent contractual CPEC projects have little in terms of guaranteed labour rights. Moreover, the majority of the workforce is unskilled and lacks proper education and contractors do not do enough to ensure that safety standards are met in the work sites (Hisam, 2017). As a result, there has been no formal news of work-related accidents during CPEC projects, especially the energy-related ones, because there is no mechanism to report or document such issues (Hisam, 2017). Nevertheless, news about fatal accidents and deaths of low-tiered workers due to electrocution, collapsing of structures, fire, etc., have often made rounds (Hisam, 2017).

The issue of employment is closely related to migration. The push factors in certain Pakistani provinces, including poverty and lack of job opportunities, lead to internal as well as external migration of people. A recent study that explored CPEC's impact on local communities found that CPEC does not affect migration in the short term (Akhtar et al., 2021). Initially, CPEC had generated optimism about its ability to halt the migration of local people and also to provide an enabling environment that would serve as an incentive for migrants to return home (Akhtar et al., 2021). In the longer term, CPEC may positively impact migration in Pakistan, but that will depend on its performance in terms of generating satisfactory employment opportunities that lead to an improvement in local living standards. However, the delay in the completion of CPEC projects continues to put such optimistic speculations in doubt.

Impact of CPEC on political trust

The United Nations Department of Economic Affairs has always held that trust in public institutions and leaders is essential for social and economic progress for any society (UN, 2021). Having an optimum level of political trust

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helps in better cooperation for the implementation of public policies and fosters the growth of peaceful and inclusive societies (UN, 2021). The significance that political trust holds in socio-economic development can be gauged from the words of UN Secretary-General – António Guterres. Mr. Guterres has warned that a “trust deficit” holds power to undermine progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2021). Therefore, political trust is a crucial component to be analysed while studying the socio-economic impact of CPEC on Pakistan.

Many public surveys and opinion polls conducted during the initial years of the CPEC rollout illustrated the high hopes and expectations that people in Pakistan had from these projects. Of late, such surveys have been witnessing an increase in resentment against the government’s conduct in the implementation of CPEC. A substantial section of the Pakistani population fears that they would be deprived of the benefits of CPEC because of a lack of trust in political and government authorities (Saad et al., 2020). A myriad of corruption scandals and other controversies, discrimination in the distribution of resources and non-transparent procedures are the major factors that have led to a growth of political trust deficit in Pakistan. As a result, the government’s CPEC-related actions are not always viewed as those that meet political legitimacy. A 2021 report by AidData showed that Pakistan is the country that has the highest number of BRI infrastructure projects (10 projects worth 5,675 USD 2017 million) plagued with alleged scandals, controversies or violations (Malik et al., 2021: 66). Additionally, Pakistan also topped the list of countries with BRI infrastructure projects (4 projects worth 2,675 USD 2017 million) that contain references to claims of corruption or other financial wrongdoings (Malik et al., 2021: 67). In 2018, the World Bank had cautioned the countries participating in BRI projects against, inter alia, corruption, and this fear seems to have come true in the case of CPEC (Wani, 2020). The active and retired elite of the Pakistan army has allegedly amassed huge wealth by misusing their crucial positions on the CPEC projects that gave them direct access to the project funds (Wani, 2020). The present-day government in Pakistan led by Imran Khan, which is infamously known to be a “puppet of the army establishment”, has done nothing concrete to investigate the corruption charges in the CPEC projects (Wani, 2020).

Such controversies related to corruption and financial wrongdoings have often invited the anger of common people in Pakistan, who are deprived of the fruits of the promises of CPEC. For instance, when Retd. General Asim Saleem Bajwa’s name surfaced in corruption scandals in CPEC projects, and there were protests and a massive uproar on social media. General (Retd.) Bajwa was then the chairman of CPEC Authority– the main government agency that oversees BRI projects in Pakistan (Aamir, 2020). However, despite the protests and public rage, Bajwa had refused to resign from his top post in the CPEC Authority.

Another factor causing a political trust deficit among the citizens of Pakistan is the issue of discrimination in the distribution of CPEC resources. CPEC has often been met with opposition from ethnic groups in the smaller provinces of Pakistan who fear that the bigger province of Punjab would reap all benefits of the projects at the cost of their lands and resources (Shams, 2016). A manifestation of these fears and trust deficit was when the proposed route for the corridor between Gwadar and Kashgar was debated. Pashtun’s opposition political parties blamed the then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Chief Minister of Punjab– Shahbaz Sharif for “rerouting” CPEC to favour communities in Punjab over those in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Custer et al., 2021: 12). It was also alleged that the Sharifs had diverted funds into their political campaigns (Custer et al., 2021: 12). In addition, the CPEC and related discontent among the local communities also stir Baloch anger and insurgency in the region. The marginalised Baloch fear displacement due to CPEC projects and believe that all the economic benefits related to the projects will flow solely to the state (Tekwani, 2020). The CPEC has triggered old apprehensions and given rise to new ones, all causing a decline in political trust in Pakistan.

Finally, the lack of information-sharing regarding CPEC projects has also caused a deterioration of political trust in the country. A lack of transparent functioning of the rollout of projects and usage of funds weakens the faith citizens bestow upon their leaders. The most noteworthy case is that of the Pakistani business community, which remains sceptical about incoming foreign direct investment into Pakistan’s market. They fear that post completion of CPEC, low-priced Chinese goods will flood Pakistan markets and negatively impact the already weak domestic manufacturing industry (Arif, 2018). The dearth of information regarding CPEC projects in the public domain widens the political trust deficit as the local businesses believe their government provides favours to Chinese investment (Arif, 2018). Similarly, there is a widespread feeling of scepticism about the government’s intent behind CPEC projects, especially among people who have felt no tangible benefit of the projects so far.

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Thus, the lack of transparency, widespread corruption and alleged disparity in the distribution of resources in CPEC-related projects erode the political trust in Pakistani society.

Impact of CPEC on gender equality

Gender equality is a major component of the socio-economic environment of any country. In countries that witness the marginalisation of women, adequate economic opportunities are extremely important to empower women and ensure gender equality. Pakistan has consistently fared poorly in global rankings related to gender equality. It ranked 153rd out of 156 countries in the Global Gender Gap Report 2021 (World Economic Forum, 2021). When the CPEC-game-changer buzz was new in Pakistan, there were hopes that it would benefit the women of the country. The UN Women Pakistan had called it an “unprecedented opportunity” to promote Pakistani women’s economic potential and rights (Mukhtar and Ummar, 2016). The promise of large and diverse job creation by the CPEC projects meant that women had a greater number of opportunities in the job market. However, the mere presence of a potentially massive economic opportunity did not mean that women would be the natural beneficiaries in the process. For instance, when Pakistan witnessed a boom in its services sector after the turn of the millennium, it was observed that women and men did not benefit equally (Siegmann and Majid, 2017). While men were favoured over women for jobs in banking and telecommunications, women were hired in casual and low-paying jobs in industries like textiles and garments (Siegmann and Majid, 2017). Therefore, to assume that in the case of CPEC, the creation of employment would naturally translate into women empowerment, and consequently greater gender equality would be a folly.

Since, as mentioned before, employment data regarding CPEC is not very clear or transparent, there are gaps in credible statistics about the composition of women in these jobs. Meanwhile, Chinese media and Pakistani think tanks that have collaborations with China project a rosy picture about the economic benefits that women derive from CPEC. One such source had cited the example of China Power Hub Generation Company (CPHGC) to emphasise the positives of CPEC. It reported that over 30% of the employees at CPHGC are women, including the ones in important positions, and that they face “absolutely no discrimination” (Malik and Tian, 2019). Some argue that Chinese companies under CPEC offer Pakistan blue-collar women a better work environment and health care facilities (Malik and Tian, 2019). Given the nature of sources available in state-controlled Chinese media and their Pakistani partners, one cannot draw a black-or-white conclusion; however, it is also true that Pakistan has not improved much in terms of global rankings that reflect gender equality. The latest report by the World Economic Forum revealed that only 22.6% of the women in Pakistan participate in the labour force and only 4.9% are in managerial positions (World Economic Forum 2021: 38). In addition, there exists a huge gender wage gap in the country, with on average of woman’s income being just 16.3% of a man’s (World Economic Forum, 2021: 38). Moreover, there isn’t sufficient evidence to assume that a positive impact has been uniform in all provinces. For example, consider the case of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa– a province in which the women are socially more constrained, less educated, and economically weaker compared to their counterparts elsewhere in Pakistan (Farooq et al., 2018: 52). There is very little awareness in this province among women regarding the CPEC projects in which they may avail opportunities (Farooq et al., 2018: 56). Also, these women lack language skills, technical and vocational education that can help them derive economic benefits from the CPEC projects (Farooq et al., 2018: 55). Additionally, the education sector has also failed to focus on training the women of this province to prepare themselves in relevant skills required for CPEC-generated jobs (Farooq et al., 2018: 56). Thus, the question of jobs available due to CPEC becomes secondary, given that a majority of women in Pakistan face similar challenges of lack of education and related skills.

A number of reports have held CPEC responsible for increasing the plight of women in Pakistan by causing organised crime, human trafficking, and sexual exploitation. It is alleged that CPEC workers and illegal marriage centres, set up by both Pakistani and Chinese matchmakers, have been luring poor Pakistani women into marriages with Chinese men (EFSAS, 2019). On moving to China in the hope of an economically better life, these brides are said to be treated violently and forced into prostitution by their Chinese husbands (EFSAS, 2019). The Human Rights Watch had asked both Pakistan and China to take action against this issue of bride trafficking and related crimes. While authorities in both countries have become active to counter this menace, Chinese authorities repeatedly deny claims of forced prostitution in their country (EFSAS, 2019).

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Despite the challenges discussed above, it would be unfair to label CPEC as a whole as a bane for the women in Pakistan. A lot of these challenges have roots in the very low level of women empowerment in Pakistani society, and not in CPEC per se. Whatever opportunities may have been introduced by CPEC, the marginalised women in Pakistan found themselves unskilled and unprepared to make the most out of them. However, one does hear some positive stories about women empowering themselves. For example, the news that women are taking up jobs as truck-drivers in the coal-rich Thar Desert, as part of a CPEC project, was welcomed as evidence of breaking of cultural barriers (Financial Express, 2017). It was not only a positive sign in terms of women facing grim employment prospects finding jobs, but also in terms of how females were taking up a job traditionally dominated by males.

Even though many had hoped that CPEC would prove to be a source of empowerment for Pakistani women, the underwhelming performance of the project coupled with the social challenges prevalent in Pakistan have undermined such hopes.

Impact of CPEC on environment

A clean environment is imperative for the healthy and fulfilling life of the citizens of a country. The latest research has also established a link between climate change– which is a consequence of pollution in the environment, and the downfall of living standards of people in the longer run. A study conducted by the World Bank in 2018 projected that by 2050, under the carbon-intensive scenario, changes in average weather conditions would lead to a decline of living standards in Pakistan by 2.9 % (Mani et al., 2018). Further, in the “severe hotspots” of the country, income levels would decrease drastically in the carbon-intensive scenario by 2050 (Mani et al., 2018). Given the present faltering economy of Pakistan, where the living standards are already quite poor, such a decline could prove to be severe. For these and multiple other reasons, a clean environment is an essential component while studying the sustainability of socio-economic development in Pakistan. It is also important in CPEC’s case, as environmental concerns can dampen the potential benefits CPEC aims to offer.

Concerns regarding the impact of CPEC on the environment in Pakistan have been in existence since the project’s announcement in 2015. In March 2015, the Pakistan Environment Protection Agency (Pak-EPA) had rejected the Environment Impact Assessment Report by labelling it as “incomplete”, “insufficient”, and “prepared by amateurs” (Shahid, 2015). This report had warned about the potential negative impacts of CPEC, including irreparable damage to the fragile ecosystems and other repercussions of cutting trees like the melting of glaciers in northern Pakistan that feed Indus– the lifeline of the country’s agro-based economy (Shahid, 2015). Nevertheless, Pakistan had proceeded with the project by assuring the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) that it would work with its Chinese partners to make CPEC “environmentally and economically sustainable” (Shahid, 2015). However, after about seven years, the negative impact of CPEC on the natural environment can be observed in Pakistan. The major environmental concern is related to the energy projects of CPEC. These projects are important for Pakistan as it finds itself in the midst of an energy crisis. However, around three-quarters of this planned energy is known to be generated from traditional coal-fired power plants in the provinces of Sindh, Punjab and Balochistan (Kouser, 2019). These cause a great amount of carbon dioxide emissions which can lead to a number of respiratory problems, acid rains, global warming and other hazards.

Another kind of CPEC project that causes environmental concerns is the road network projects, which mainly aggravate two menaces: deforestation and vehicle trafficking. One can consider just two cases to gauge the number of environmental problems these projects generate. First, consider the case of Abbottabad, Nowshera, Lower Dir, Swabi, Mardan, and Malakand districts, where more than 54,000 trees were chopped down to give way to CPEC road networks in 2017 (Kouser, 2019). Research found that the large-scale deforestation in these districts, which implied a massive reduction in the carbon sink, intensified the high risks of climate change effects in these districts ranging from extreme flooding to severe droughts, thus negatively impacting the tourism industry in these districts (Kouser, 2019). Apart from the tourism industry, such extreme and erratic climatic changes affect every walk of life, including healthcare, agriculture and other sources of livelihood. Second, an example of vehicle trafficking due to massive CPEC road projects is the Karakoram highway (China-Pakistan Friendship Highway), which is expected to carry up to 7,000 trucks per day and release up to 36.5 million tonnes of carbon dioxide in the process (Kouser, 2019).

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The negative environmental impacts of CPEC have started to affect the day-to-day lifestyle of people residing near these projects. In 2020, groups of activists published a compilation of interviews in the form of a book titled 'Belt and Road Through My Village'. The book included an interview of a local residing near the Sahiwal coal-fired power plant– a CPEC project built on 690 hectares of fertile land between Lahore and Karachi (The Print, 2020). Though the power plant claimed to offer more than 3,000 jobs (the job profile and other details were not provided), the interviewee was concerned about the air pollution caused by the plant that was leading to nasal, skin and lung diseases in the vicinity (The Print, 2020). Also, contaminated water released from the plant that was drained into the nearby canal was eventually causing toxicity in cattle and crops (The Print, 2020). Considering the hazardous impact of this plant and several others like it in the nearby areas, one cannot help but wonder about the harmful working conditions inside these plants. 3,000 jobs is a positive figure, but if the working conditions involve long and constant exposure to unhealthy and toxic fumes etc., the "achievement" of CPEC in job creation is again brought into question.

The Pakistani government has taken a few steps to restore the lost forest cover in the country. The most ambitious of these is the '10 billion trees project', launched in 2019, which aims to plant 10 billion trees by 2023 with support from the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) (Khan, 2021). It remains to be seen how successful this project is in compensating for the environmental harms caused by CPEC, but it is already being met with a lot of criticism. Critics have alleged that the '10 billion trees project' is plagued by bureaucratic missteps and a non-transparent budget, and it is further giving rise to new problems like the elimination of grazing areas (Khan, 2021).

Thus, the negative impact of CPEC on the natural environment in Pakistan has outweighed the positives. Furthermore, the prospects for a more environmentally sustainable approach seem bleak given that a commitment to stick to the Paris Agreement– a call that China has often reiterated in the global fora, has no mention in the CPEC long-term plan document (Alam, 2020).

Conclusion

Analysis of CPEC's performance on the four parameters taken demonstrates that the project's socio-economic impact on Pakistan has not been very positive. While there have been certain gains from the project in terms of new opportunities for employment etc., the lack of detailed, transparent information regarding the same restricts conclusive analysis and leaves room for scepticism. In the absence of complete information, one cannot equate the increased availability of jobs with an increase in the living standards of people. Often there also exist mismatches between the type of jobs available and the skillsets of the people seeking jobs. Furthermore, CPEC-related scepticism is worsened by the reports regarding the controversy, scandals, corruption, ethnic bias and crimes that allegedly infest the CPEC projects in Pakistan. All these are closely intertwined with the nature of domestic politics in Pakistan and, therefore, when these incidents tarnish the credibility of CPEC implementation, they cause a political trust deficit in the society. Even those Pakistanis who were optimistic about CPEC doubt the realisation of its promises due to their lack of faith in the government.

CPEC's performance in the sphere of gender parity has also been underwhelming. Even if the numbers regarding employment opportunities are taken at face value, there is no sufficient data to back the claims of non-discriminatory access to these jobs. Moreover, the original scepticism generated due to non-transparency in the job specifications or working conditions details persists in the case of women as well. CPEC-related crimes like bride trafficking and sexual abuse have still not been successfully eliminated from Pakistan. So, multiple challenges that need concrete action remain pending in the case of gender parity, too. On top of that, CPEC-related environmental concerns are only increasing– especially with the global concerns regarding climate change intensifying by the day. The counter-measures to compensate for the environmental costs of CPEC again lack transparency and are not known to be adequately efficient. Thus, CPEC has performed underwhelmingly low in the four parameters taken to gauge its socio-economic impact on Pakistan.

Notes

[1] Data accessed from *Worldometer* on 29 December 2021, <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/pakistan-population/>.

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[2] Ibid.

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