

PRIVATIZATION OF PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS IN PUNJAB: IMPLICATIONS FOR SERVICE DELIVERY, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND EQUITY

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Abstract

This research explores consequences of privatization of public institutions in Punjab, Pakistan with respect to service delivery, accountability and citizen welfare. While privatization has been advocated to improve efficiency and access, lessen fiscal pressures, and enhance service delivery, its impacts in practice are ambiguous and contentious. From a governance perspective, this research focuses on four sectors in which Punjab has been a pioneer in privatization and public-private partnership (PPP) models: education, healthcare, utilities, and transport. Research suggests that the outcomes of the privatization of public institutions have been mixed. Programs like the Punjab Education Foundation made it possible for over 2.6 million students to access education, and the outsourcing of Basic Health Units increased the utilization and availability of medicines. The Lahore Waste Management Company, for example, gained from the use of AI for route optimization, and other transport interventions like the Metrobus and Orange Line trains shortened travel times and reduced congestion. While these estimates are commendable, the outcomes of privatization have deepened inequities, increased the rural-urban divide, increased out-of-pocket expenditures in health care, and transport availability relied heavily on government subsidies. There are accountability issues due to the lack government oversight, transparency in audits, and regulatory control over privatized institutions. From the results, it can be seen that privatization in Punjab has often favored the urban elite, while the disadvantaged still struggle with access and the cost. It is necessary to form governance arrangements that are strong enough to ensure equity, fiscal sustainability, and active citizen governance. Suggested policies call for greater regulation and protective social equity, along with 'privatization right' safeguards to ensure that the development nan accountability nexuses system in Punjab is responsive and sustainable.

INTRODUCTION

Privatization has remained one of the most debated topics in governance in Pakistan since the early 90s.

The process was framed under international financial institutions such as the IMF and the World

Bank and was part of the structural adjustment programs and was premised on the notion that divestment of state-owned enterprises would alleviate the fiscal burden, enhance efficiency, and improve service delivery (Sadiq and Qureshi, 2018). The Government of Pakistan 2016s showed that between 1991 and 2015 over 160 state owned entities were privatized, generating net revenues covering the fiscal deficit of over PKR 648 billion. "Privatization" in Pakistan has gone more far-reaching than the industrial and financial sectors to include public services like waste management, healthcare, education, and transport. The assumption has been that these services could be provided more efficiently by the private sector and that public sector bureaucratic sclerotic inefficiencies could be avoided (Hood,1991). The outcome of these changes has been controversial, to say the least. Amid the abundance of scholarly work on the topic, the most pertinent debate which cries for attention is on the governance and social justice dimensions of these policies.

Punjab is the most populous province and economically the most important region of Pakistan and is also the first to embrace privatization and public-private partnership (PPP) models. Home to almost 110 million residents, the province represents over 50 percent of the country's total population and economic output (Punjab Bureau of Statistics, 2022). The large scale of the province's administrative apparatus makes it an important laboratory for testing governance reforms, as each change in public policy has a direct impact on the lives of millions of people. The provision of privatization in Punjab has been in full sight in the provision of some of the more critical services.

For example, the Punjab Education Foundation (PEF), which is implemented as a sociological case study by the World Bank, currently finances over 2.6 million students in over 7,500 partner schools. This is one of the largest Public Private Partnerships for Education (PPPs) in South Asia (World Bank, 2020). In health care, even by 2019, over 120 Basic Health Units (BHUs) had been contracted out, some under the PPP model, which Ahmad and Batool (2017) report as showing some improvement in service use but ongoing inequities in access and gaps in evaluation and monitoring. Other urban

infrastructure such as the Lahore Waste Management Company subcontracting for solid waste collection, and the collection and the Lahore Metro Bus and the Orange Line projects, which exemplify mixed public private transport arrangements (Cheema et al., 2006). These projects demonstrate the increasing tendency of the provincial government to relieve fiscal stress while also meeting growing expectations for responsive service delivery. But there is also the paradox of privatization in Punjab: some services have improved, yet there is much failure to access, afford, and be held accountable.

From all evidences, privatization has been practices in many areas, however, impact of privatization in Punjab is the economically least documented, a gap in the literature. Scholarship in Pakistan has been focused primarily at macroeconomic variables, the underlying politics, and the productivity of certain sectors (Sadiq & Qureshi, 2018). Evaluating the impact of privatization on the delivery of public services and accountability is fundamental, especially in a society 'centered' about citizens. In public discourse, there is a notion that privatization leads to better outcomes, which is quite often the case, however, this notion is being attacked on the grounds of sloppily managed contracts, opaque procurement, and unequal service delivery (Nishtar, 2010). There is a fundamental disconnect in research and policy planning on the subject of Punjab and the privatization because there is almost no thorough empirical work being done.

This analysis attempts to assess the extent to which Punjab privatization thrives in improving service delivery and accountability. It aims to provide an outcome assessment based on evidence and analysis in the major sectors of education, healthcare, utilities, and transport. More specifically, the study examines the effects of privatization on the quality, accessibility, and affordability of services for the general population; accountability mechanisms available to the citizenry to hold private providers responsive; and perceptions of citizens on the effectiveness of privatized services vis-à-vis state-run services.

Research Questions

1. How has privatization influenced the quality and accessibility of public services in Punjab?

2. What accountability challenges exist in privatized institutions compared to government-managed ones?
3. How do citizens and stakeholders perceive the effectiveness of privatized services?
4. What governance reforms are necessary to ensure accountability in future privatization initiatives?

Exploring these questions helps this research address an important aspect of the literature on governance reforms in Pakistan. It addresses not only the efficiency aspect of privatization but also the elements of social equity and accountability. Moreover, the case of Punjab province offers a much wider lesson for other developing areas facing similar governance challenges. The paper asserts that privatization in the province of Punjab offers both opportunities and challenges. It can improve the level of services provided, but only if there are well-defined regulatory control, adequate institutional structures, and active public supervision.

Global North and Global South Debates: Efficiency vs. Equity in Privatization

The tension between efficiency and equity has defined the global debate on privatization. The Global North adopted privatization during the 1980s as part of broader neoliberal reforms championed by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. These reforms aimed at diminishing the role of the state in the economy, claiming that private firms are more efficient because of competition, profit motivation, and streamlined organization structures (Megginson & Netter, 2001). Research in the Global North indicates that privatization is associated with an increase in financial performance, at least in the short-term, in some industries, such as telecommunications, airlines, and utilities (Bortolotti & Milella, 2008). The initial years of privatization of British Telecom and British Airways are characterized by improved consumer satisfaction and lower costs (Clifton, & Díaz-Fuentes, 2006).

Nevertheless, it has been argued that the Global North's productivity increases were not self-sustaining and were often unevenly distributed. The practice of welfare in the European context has meant that the consequences of privatization would leave some people exposed to the greatest risks in the

provision of health, housing and education (Hall, 2015). This raises important normative issues: Do public goods have to accommodate market order's priorities, or do they have to be provided universally regardless of the order of economic profit? The Global North's case has therefore exemplified the tension between profit and equity in the market, and it has set the parameters of the discussions that are prevalent in the Global South.

Privatization in the Global South sparked significant external pressure rather than internal sociopolitical demands. From Stiglitz's 2002 analysis, the International Monetary Fund along with the World Bank's Structural Adjustment Programs from the 1980s to the 1990s positioned developing countries to divest public enterprises for loans and debt alleviation. In the Global South, unlike the Northern Hemisphere, privatization was demanded rather than driven ideologically, resulting in mosaic outcomes. In sub-Saharan Africa for example, privatization of utilities led to the increased rates of tariffs and lowered availability for the poorer population (Bayliss 2003). In Latin America there was also improvement seen in the telecommunication industry, yet dissatisfaction from the public and inequitable distribution led to nationalistic policies in nations such as Bolivia and Argentina (Post and Murillo 2019). Thus, the public focus in the Global South proves that reforms which aim for solely efficiency and overlook the essential aspects of equity, accountability, and trust, remain insubstantial.

Privatization in Developing Countries

Privatization in developing economies continues to yield intricate, often conflicting results, indicating tensions between efficiency, equity, and fiscal relief. While several governments, initiated privatization to alleviate budgetary constraints, foreign investment, and service enhancement, results are patchy across sectors and regions. In contrast, increasing investment and ensuring fiscal stability remain as some of the strongest arguments to privatization. The World Bank (2021) reported that in 2020, infrastructure privatization and public-private-partnership projects in lower and middle-income countries captured US\$76.2 billion of private investment even amid the economic downturns

associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Investing in infrastructure financing in emerging economies showed the importance of private sector investment since this amount captured nearly 50 percent of total financing in that domain. The case of Brazil and India, showed that privatization of airports, telecommunications and energy utilities attracted billions of foreign direct investments (FDI) that enhanced infrastructure capacity and service quality (Alon & Elia, 2021). In the case of Latin America, partial privatization of utilities was reported to enhance productivity by 7-10% in comparison to fully state-owned enterprises (de Araujo & Sutherland, 2022).

On the contrary, the efficiency benefits and the relieve on finance are often countered by the impact on equity and affordability. The evidence from the African water utilities shows that following the privatization, the tariffs associated with water increased by 15-30%, which, along with the lack of universal access, disproportionately affected the poor (Mumssen, Saltiel, & Kingdom, 2020). Alam and Raza (2021) on the other hand, demonstrated that the privatization of electricity distribution in some regions of India and Pakistan led to an increase in collection efficiency of over 20%, which was able to improve in some districts. However, this was associated with price increases and lack of reliable service in the rural areas, this in turn, suggests that while the governments are able to improve the revenue collection, the service delivery outcomes depend on the regulatory frameworks and the institutional capacity.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the unequal effectiveness of a particular sector was acutely demonstrated by private and public hospitals in Latin America. As noted by Boschert and Caballero (2021), the private sector hospitals and clinics had better resources and facilities than the public sector hospitals. However, the private sector was only available to the rich, leaving the poor to rely on the broken, overused public facilities. Mackintosh, Banda, and Wamae (2021) found that more than 70% of private healthcare facilities in Africa and Asia are in the urban areas, which worsens the uneven distribution of public healthcare facilities. The deterioration of public services because

of privatization and a lack of public services in rural areas is a growing concern.

Contested results are also available on the impact of privatization in the education sector. In India, Pakistan, and Nigeria, the public education systems have been extremely underdeveloped and low-fee private schools have emerged and expanded with gained prominence. However, the low-fee private schools have been demonstrated by evidence to have high household expenses and therefore high relative income fees. Day Ashley and Wales (2020) demonstrated that parents in the lowest income group in South Asia spent as much as 15% of their income in the 5th tier, underlining the unsustainability and growing inequality that exists in society. Thus, while there have been increased enrollment rates, variability with regard to teachers held and accountability of the students has been documented.

Evidence suggests private actors were often better economically off, but less connected with the socially vulnerable. For instance, health insurance schemes linked with private providers in Latin America and South Asia, disregarded the informal sector workers and the economically active but unemployed, leaving millions without coverage during a pandemic (Bossert & Caballero, 2021). In the same spirit, privatized utilities struggled with the enforcement of social protection measures like payment demurrage, settling during the lockdown, or service continuity, while the state-owned utilities were more likely than the privatized ones, to adopt temporary relief policies.

These situations show how privatization in developing countries is far from a universal policy. The framework of the developing country and the privatization of its services determine, with its regulator, the service offered. While the privatization of a country certainly attracts foreign investment, the expenditure on positive policymaking on the social framework is a burden that cannot be overlooked. Lack of measures aimed at protecting the vulnerable groups in the society, privatization runs the risk of increasing inequality, where competent service can be offered to the wealthy, while the poor and marginalized would continue struggling.

Studies on Pakistan's Privatization: Banking, Utilities, Education, and Healthcare

The experience of privatization in Pakistan highlights the issues of efficiency and equity which are characteristic of many developing nations. Since the early 1990s, privatization policies have resulted in the full or partial sale of more than 160 state-owned enterprises in Pakistan, including banking, utilities, telecommunications, education and healthcare. While some most notably telecommunications and banking are turned to as success stories, the more neglect sectors, such as energy and education, have more turbulent and unclear results.

The banking industry emerged as one of the first success stories of privatization. Recent statistics indicate that by 2020, private banks were leading the financial structure of Pakistan, possessing over 80% of the banking assets (State Bank of Pakistan, 2021). Formerly fiscally lagging government banks like Habib Bank Limited (HBL) and United Bank Limited (UBL) have now transformed and hold statuses as the most profitable banks in the South Asian region. Evidence presented by Iqbal and Hussain (2021) indicates that privatization of banks resulted in an increase in the level of foreign investment in Islam finance, investment of private equity, and foreign direct investment. However, the gains are still within the east. Borrowers in rural and small businesses still have a challenge of limited access to credit. The financial inclusion gender gap is also stark, with only 18% of women and 51% of men owning a bank account (World Bank, 2022) highlighting the inequities that investment has not addressed.

The case of K-Electric, privatized in 2005, remains hotly debated. From one perspective, operational losses decreased and investments on power infrastructure soared, with the firm reporting US\$3.4 billion in investment since privatization (K-Electric, 2021). From the other, the chronic complaints of consumers, blaming the firm for weak accountability and intermittent power supply, testify to the unequal dividends of privatization. In Punjab, the electricity distribution companies are still state-operated, and research suggests attempts at privatization are resisted due to the anxiety of governance gaps, tariff increases and the K-Block framework (Khan & Javaid, 2022). Another example

is the case of privatization of the Pakistan Telecommunication Company Limited (PTCL) to Etisalat which brought in foreign investment and new network horizons, yet ongoing disputes on payment obligations and employee reductions testify to unresolved governance and labor issues (Haque & Kamal, 2021).

In Punjab province, education privatization and sponsorship by public and private partners (PPPs) has grown to be overwhelmingly significant. The Punjab Education Foundation (PEF) subsidizes over 2.6 million students enrolled in low-fee private educational institutions (world bank, 2020). According to stakeholders of the PEF, the cost borne by public facilities to PEF schools ascertains public schooling and the outcomes achieved in the process are at par. Despite such claims, more rigorous scrutiny has revealed gaps in the PEF. Malik and Bari (2021) express difficulties with the line of reasoning that calls public schools the lowest quality schools which children have access to, the teacher lacks appropriate certification, and the barriers to education that children from poor families are facing. Evidence also suggests that while PEF improves enrollment, the equity gaps within the urban and rural contexts of the learning environment are sorely neglected.

The privatization of health care pursued in Pakistan, and specifically the outsourcing of Basic Health Units (BHUs) in Punjab as part of the PPP model, has produced mixed results. Khan, Mehmood and Saeed (2021) note that PPP-run BHUs have a greater patient turnover than their public counterparts due to enhanced staffing and drug availability. Nonetheless, the absence of accountability, poor urban and rural balance within the coverage, and dominance of unregulated arrangements has been a fabric of the system. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the weaknesses associated with a high degree of outsourcing. Private hospitals, despite being better equipped, were of no assistance to low-income groups and left them with no option other than over-burdened public facilities (Siddiqi and Mahmood, 2021).

In Pakistan, privatization is perceived as a dynamic issue with important achievements, but numerous persistent structural problems. The privatization of banking and telecommunications, formerly

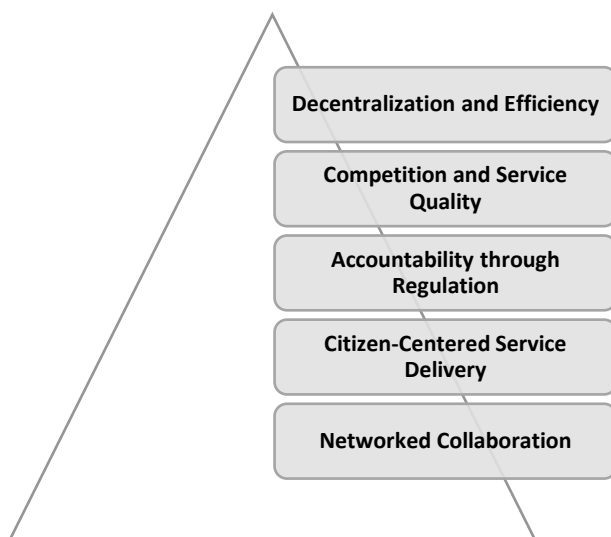
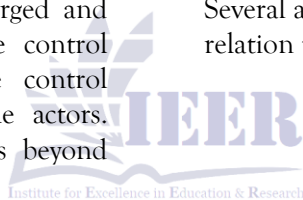
dominated by public monopolies, show how privatization improves efficiency and boosts investment. Education and healthcare, on the other hand, have demonstrated governance failings, inequities, and a stark lack of accountability. Most scholarship available is centered on financial performance and, as such, the more governance-related and citizen-focused aspects remain underexplored. This is particularly true of Punjab, which is a laboratory for the implementation of PPP models across several sectors. All of this suggests that the analysis of privatization and governance in Punjab is essential for an understanding of the nexus governance of public service delivery in Pakistan, and the reform context.

Governance Theory and Privatization

Privatization and its service delivery, accountability, and equity implications are best understood within the context of governance theory. With the global changes to the public sector that took place in the 1980s and 1990s, governance theory emerged and began to shift the focus from the state control exercised through a hierarchy, to state control exercised through networks with multiple actors. Within this framework, privatization goes beyond

transference of ownership from the public to the private side; there is also a reconfiguration of the relationship, roles, responsibilities, and accountability boundaries among state, market, and civil society.

Public scholars, administrators, political scientists, and economists who focus on the change of the global position of the state in the context of neoliberal reforms have had a hand in shaping governance theory. As Rhodes (1996), Kooiman (2003), and Pierre & Peter (2005) have noted, the governance model is the model of steering, and not of rowing, where governments define the boundaries and rules, while service delivery is left to the private sector, NGOs, and the community. This is more or less the position of the NPM model on Governance that is more than a decade old now. It is now even more apparent in the recent “good governance” narratives of the World Bank and the UNDP that place accountability, transparency, and participation at the core of reform processes (World Bank, 2021). Several assumptions underpin governance theory in relation to privatization.



Developed by Authors

Governance theorists argue that splitting people’s responsibilities, including to private suppliers, boosts productivity by cutting down bureaucracy and

fostering creativity (Osborne, 2010). Adding competition to a market is believed to boost performance and customer satisfaction in the market

for banking, telecommunications, and other utilities. Governance theory suggests that to avoid losing accountability, government must act as a regulator and not a provider, while private actors only do the performance and equity metric. Governance is described as participatory, with citizens as clients or stakeholders who as a result of their feedback and decisions influence who provides the service (Kjaer, 2011). It is assumed that public, private and civil society actors work together to provide services in a manner that is more effective than control by the state exercised in a bureaucratic manner.

The application of governance theory to privatization reveals both benefits and drawbacks. In Pakistan and many other less developed nations, the justification for privatization has been governance: reduction of fiscal burden, greater efficiency, and more market accountability. For example, the privatization of banks in Pakistan made service delivery and modernization more efficient (Iqbal & Hussain, 2021), which provides an illustration for the efficiency assumption. Also, the aim of public-private partnerships (PPPs) in the health and education sectors in Punjab was to merge the efficiency of the private sector with the control of the public sector, which reflects the governance model of collaboration.

These empirical outcomes make the expectations much more complicated. Governance theory argues that any tenable regulatory framework is sufficient to provide accountability mechanisms. However, the case of K-Electric and telecom privatization in Pakistan shows private interests capture the enforcement mechanisms and regulatory bodies do little more than red tape (Haque & Kamal, 2021). There is a discrepancy between the ideal and the real situation in the field of governance. Veritable governance gaps and weak institutional settings expose the underlying problems.

Citizen's level of service is also affected when gaps in affordability and access exist, as evidenced in the case of privatization of public education in Punjab. PPP low-cost private school rampant access to education and insulated the concern of equity and education (Malik & Bari, 2021).

Moreover, governance theory is centered on the notion that the presence of multiple actors fosters collaboration and, therefore, effectiveness. However,

the case of Punjab's healthcare PPPs shows that participation of NGOs enhanced the utilization of Basic Health Units, yet lack of accountability and the presence of weak monitoring parameters overshadowed their impact (Khan, Mehmood, & Saeed, 2021).

Therefore, privatization in governance framework is viewed as a process with normative foundation, yet weaknesses in institutional capacity, regulatory enforcement, and deep-seated inequities dominate the context.

In governance theory, the intellectual justification, and the policy rationale, is the breaking up of the state issues of governance and market, and the society is multi-layered. All the issues that relate to the public sector in Pakistan and other countries create activity. This has to do with the control, accountability, governance, and efficiency; surplus unequally and accountability, governance, and equity, and privatization.

Case Studies (Punjab Focus)

Punjab, Pakistan's most populous province, has been a testing ground for privatization and public-private partnership (PPP) initiatives in key service delivery sectors. From education and healthcare to utilities and transport, Punjab has pursued hybrid models that combine private sector efficiency with state oversight. However, the results remain uneven, reflecting governance capacity, regulatory frameworks, and socio-economic disparities.

- **Education: Punjab Education Foundation (PEF)**

The Punjab Education Foundation (PEF) is one of the largest public-private partnership (PPP) initiatives in South Asia that aims to increase access to education for less privileged children in low-cost private schools. Founded in 1991, with a restructuring in 2004, the foundation operates flagship programs such as Foundation Assisted Schools (FAS), Education Voucher Scheme (EVS), and New School Program (NSP). As of 2023, PEF finances the education of over 2.8 million students in more than 7,500 partner schools in Punjab (PEF Annual Report, 2023). This model works on the assumption that, through the public payment of per-student grants to private schools, parents are relieved

of some of the financial burdens of schooling, while some pressure is lifted from the overburdened public school system. Evidence shows that PEF-supported schools have made exceptional gains in enrollment. Between 2020 and 2023, PEF enrollment increased by 15–18% per year, more so in peri-urban and low-income areas (Malik & Bari, 2021). As per the Punjab School Education Department (2022), the scheme helped raise the primary level net enrollment rate in Punjab to 73%, relative to the national figure of 68%. This indicates that programs, particularly public-private partnerships such as PEF, have helped improve access to education in areas where public schools are inadequate.

Recent data indicates that Pakistan's overall education crisis is worsening. The number of out-of-school children has increased from around 20 million in 2022 to nearly 27 million by 2024, with projections suggesting the figure may reach 30 million by early 2025 (UNESCO, 2024). While PEF expanded access for 2.6–2.8 million students, these broader systemic reversals suggest that privatization-led expansion may not be sustainable if core public subsidies and universal entitlements are rolled back.

On the other hand, the systemic issues still persist. The 2025 UDISE+ Report indicated that the total enrollment in Punjab's schools fell by 80,000, reaching 5.9 million students in 27,281 schools (UDISE+, 2025; The Times of India). This decline shows the delicate nature of the achievements made by programs such as the PEF, especially with demographic changes, pandemic disruptions, and issues in governance. The Pupil Teacher ratio in Punjab is still better than the national average and stands at 22:1, but issues of quality and training of these teachers is still paramount. Malik, Bari and Muzaffar (2021) found that nearly 40% of the teachers employed by the PEF, were not trained pedagogues, and this raises red flags about the access vis-a-vis outcomes.

More recently, the manner of accountability and monitoring processes in the system have also been sources of concern. PEF has incorporated digital monitoring systems, such as real time enrollment validation and biometric attendance systems for teachers. However, the evidence suggests that weak supervisory control minimizes the efficacy of these devices. The substantial disparities in quality control

were described in the World Bank (2020) Report. Particularly, while PEF schools were at par or surpassed government schools in the exam results, the performance in various districts was inconsistent, with rural and remote areas significantly lagging behind.

Equity is another concern. Whilst PEF has increased the opportunities available to low-income households, a 2022 evaluation by the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE) suggested that access is still focused on semi-urban areas. Rural children, especially girls, are still left behind. Cultural barriers, distance to schools, and poor infrastructure continued to impede progress on inclusion. Moreover, some critics believe that outsourcing education systems compromises the integrity of the system by focusing on efficiency and enrollment rather than education and civic education (Bari & Malik, 2021).

Policy discussions in the province of Punjab have similarly interrogated the long-term financial sustainability of education. In the 2022-2023 fiscal year the province spent, on the PEF, almost 12 billion PKR. But the contradiction between the public subsidies and the fiscal range available has brought into question this model's long-term sustainability (Punjab Finance Department, 2023). In addition, teachers' unions have lambasted this model for the creation of a "two-tiered system," in which teachers working in private schools under the PEF are low paid in comparison to public school teachers. This model reinforces inequality in the teaching profession which is not desirable.

Increased access to education among the underprivileged has been the primary focus of the Punjab Education Foundation. However, it seems to highlight the broader challenges of privatization and PPPs in developing countries. Enrollment levels have significantly increased, but the other challenges of equity, quality, and fiscal sustainability raise doubts as to whether PEF is a sustainable alternative to systematic reforms in the public education system in Punjab.

- **Healthcare: Outsourcing of Basic Health Units (BHUs)**

Punjab's policy of outsourcing Basic Health Units (BHUs) to non-governmental organizations (NGOs)

and private sector enterprises has been one of the most innovative reforms in the health sector in Pakistan. Under the PRSP and subsequently through several public-private partnerships (PPPs) that aimed to meet the underperformance BHUs and rectify staffing deficits, the problem of service underutilization, and the non-availability of medications, this initiative sought to improve the provision of staffing BHUs. This is part of the universal trend in primary health care in low and middle-income countries which is the privatization of management of primary health care to improve efficiency and accountability.

Evidence from various existing evaluations shows increasing trends in BHUs performance. In one study, Khan et al. (2021) found that the patient volumes in the outsourced BHUs exceeded those in the government-run facilities by 25%. The problem of stock-outs of essential medications by more than 30%, and several well-structured patient evaluations indicated that there was more confidence than ever in the availability of care and the treatment that was provided. This model has also been successful at reducing the high levels of absenteeism that medical staff have inflicted on the rural areas of Punjab, through biometric attendance and attendance monitored by NGOs.

The booming trend of outsourcing has not been uniformly beneficial to all. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed some of the more structural weaknesses in the system. An article by Siddiqi and Mahmood (2021) emphasized that while outsourced facilities were better equipped with protective arms and trained personnel, access was still biased against the poor. Patients attending outsourced BHUs had to copay 70% more than in public BHUs owing to some additional hidden charges, informal payments, and referrals to some private diagnostic centers. This empirically raised the question, whether PPP models increase inequity in healthcare delivery.

The most recent evidence adds even more layers of complexity. The Punjab Health Department (2023) stated that the BHUs which had outsourced their services had 12.5 million patient visits in 2022-23, which was a 20% increase from 2019, demonstrating that there was still improvement in the use of these services. But, at the same time, there was the Punjab Assembly (2022) which reported that there were

irregularities involving the management of contracts, poor ratios of performance indicators exercise, disbursement lag to the NGOs which all, in some districts, disrupted the relevant supply of services to people. In the far-flung districts of Rajanpur and Dera Ghazi Khan, people still complained of the absence of staff and the basic medical supplies, pointers that the gains from such privatization were geographically localized in areas that were more easily accessible.

Many forms of accountability are also poorly assessed. Although the government created contracts with a focus on specific targets, some reports from the field indicate that supervision is quite shallow, relying on spot-checks rather than on the continuous monitoring of the target. Civil society groups indicate that the community's role in assessing the performance of the BHUs weakens the ability of the social accountability of the healthcare governance system (Malik & Saeed, 2022).

Equity issues are still paramount. A survey done by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, PBS (2022) indicates that rural households in the Punjab region are still spending more than 55% of their healthcare costs out of pocket and are not protected from impoverishment. Although the efficiency of BHUs which are contracted out is higher, they still do not eliminate the financial burden. Additional obstacles to the above are experienced by women and the disadvantaged because of distance, and other cultural and infrastructural reasons.

A 2024 University of Oxford study published in *The Lancet* found that privatized healthcare systems are strongly associated with reduced staff numbers, weaker hygiene standards, increased treatment costs, and poorer patient outcomes. In Punjab, while outsourced BHUs report a 25% increase in utilization and improved drug availability, these findings raise concerns about whether short-term efficiency gains mask longer-term declines in quality and equity. The continuation of rising out-of-pocket expenditures in rural households suggests this risk is already materializing.

The provincial government has in recent years continued to develop models of partnership with the private sector to deliver healthcare services. In 2023, the Punjab Health Foundation granted new contracts and financial agreements to private

operators to manage over 2000 BHUs and Rural Health Centers RHCs which are some of the provincial facilities, and are paid according to the Punjab Health Foundation (2023) on achievement of performance targets. This is an indication of great enthusiasm to partnership with the private sector on healthcare projects, but the critics warn that the lack of proper control about other private operators may foster a greater imbalance in the country's healthcare system better services for those who can pay and the poor who have little access.

- **Lahore Waste Management Company (LWMC)**

The Lahore Waste Management Company's public-private partnerships have proven to be one of the most ambitious undertakings of the region. Beginning in 2010 with the attempts to mitigate the waste management problems of Lahore, LWMC has been working alongside international brokers with the likes of Turkish contractors in the field of solid refuse collection, disposal, and recycling. Its rapid growth depicts the opportunities and challenges of privatization in the domestic services utility space, as evidenced by the pace of urban growth in Lahore.

LWMC's urban sanitation activities have seemingly expanded in scope and coverage. In 2023, the reported waste disposal of the company exceeded 1.5 million tonnes, 59,670 users of the 1139 helpline were attended to, and 9,182 permits for dumping violations valued at 11.8 million PKR were processed (The News, 2023). In 2024, during the critical Eid-ul-Azha, LWMC attended to 1.58 million tonnes of animal waste and resolved 75,234 complaints, surpassing 2023 records. LWMC's 2024 activities reflected a shift to a citizen-centric operational approach as evidenced by the inclusion of mobile, social and other digital channels for complaint resolution (Pakistan Observer, 2024).

LWMC's efficiency has been improved even more with the use of new technologies. AI route optimization on waste collection vehicles has saved between 150,000-200,000 liters of fuel a month, and has consequently, reduced overall costs and carbon emissions. GPS monitoring of the workforce and vehicles increased visibility and decreased absenteeism. Also, smart bins and digital complaint systems have been used to improve response time in urban neighborhoods (Punjab Urban Unit, 2023).

LWMC, however, still has to face some structural issues. Lahore generates around 5,000 tonnes of municipal solid waste a day, while LWMC can only handle 2,500 tonnes. The rest, almost 50%, is untreated and dumped in open landfills or waterways (The Correspondent, 2023). The lack of capacity has dire environmental consequences, like groundwater pollution, air pollution, and blocked urban flooding. The waste management system has been under pressure ever since the population of the city reached over 13 million.

Accountability and governance deficiencies have not spared LWMC's performance either. An audit in 2020-21 uncovered other financial irregularities amounting to PKR 8.65 billion allocated to certain contractors without due procurement, plus PKR 561.8 million in questionable payments (The Nation, 2024). These issues manifest a deficient state of supervisory accountability and a lack of transparency operational control, reflecting skepticism concerning the global trend of privatization in the absence of adequate governance mechanisms.

To overcome these issues, in December 2024, the city of Punjab set aside PKR 120 billion to promote and launch the Clean Punjab (Suthra Punjab) Campaign for sanitation and hygiene projects throughout the region. The program integrated 21,000 additional waste-tracking machines and control room systems across the provincial command and control superstructures and other autonomous supervisory control and data acquisition (SCADA) management systems (Wikipedia, 2024). The supervision of these sanitation and hygiene projects has, however, been patchy. While Inner Central Lahore has benefitted from extensive service enhancements, the far hinterlands and areas of informal settlements experience unregulated waste disposal and minimal management of landfills.

As of now, citizen engagement continues to impede LWMC's effectiveness. While records indicate improvement in resolving customer complaints, public perception remains ambivalent. Reports disseminated through social media bring to light complaints pertaining to irregularities in house-to-house waste collection within economically weaker sections, and on the potential health hazards of leftover waste during collection. Furthermore, the

workers' unions have decried certain outsourced practices, contending that foreign subcontractors with profit-driven motives neglect the welfare of sanitary workers, many of whom do not have assigned formal contracts, and are devoid of essential protective gear and health insurance (Ali & Javed, 2022).

- **Transport: Lahore Metro Bus & Orange Line**

The Lahore Metro Bus, along with the Orange Line Metro Train, was the first to take advantage of the public-private partnership (PPP) business model. These, along with the rest of the public transportation systems in the Punjab province, are vital to cities that are rapidly expanding as a bid to consolidate the transportation systems. These demonstrate the extremely positive effects that investing in transportation systems can provide to the population of constituents in some of the most congested cities in Pakistan.

The Lahore Metro Bus was the first line of the Metro Bus System to be installed. It was launched in 2013, as a public transportation system, and operates along a 28.7 km corridor which has 27 stations, with other additional units in the system, as well as 66 articulated buses, and an advanced e-ticketing system. It was estimated that by the year 2022, the system managed to carry an astonishing 180,000 passengers a day, and had a peak load of 10,000 passengers in an hour for each direction (JICA, 2022). There bids a heavy and substantial subsidy however, with the advanced Metro Bus. The government is found to be covering the cost of which about PKR 40 in subsidy and in exchange for a PKR 20 ticket that is sold (Asian Development Bank, 2021). This is demonstrated in the fiscal year 2023-2024, where Punjab is reported to have allocated PKR 6 billion, just for the purpose Metro Bus systems in order to show that affordability is a primary attribute.

The feedback of the commuters reveals considerable operational difficulties. There are ongoing passengers claiming the existence of long lines, a lack of tokens, and lack of space on the vehicles, particularly at rush hour. Some reports gathered on informal forums, such as Reddit, show daily complaints: "There are not enough tokens long lines the buses are too small... and there are thefts." This feedback is an indication of the ongoing struggle between what

people need versus what is available and without expanding the number of buses in the fleet, the services will not improve.

According to Malik and Hassan (2022), the time spent commuting on the Metro route was reduced by almost 45% with an approximate addition of 18 billion PKR to the productivity in a year. Also, the number of women using the bus increased drastically due to separate seats, with surveys indicating that daily female passengers constituted almost 25% which is significantly higher than the country's average for public transport (Punjab Transport Department, 2023).

Now financed through a mix of Chinese concessional loans, and federal-provisional allocations, it's no wonder why the OLMT spans a staggering 27 kilometers, achieving 26 stations each roughly 1KM apart (Lahore Development Plan, 2023). The result of this stretch of railway is 496,000 daily riders (China Daily, 2025). In total, ridership increased from 245,000 daily in the early years, and is continuing to rise. It has been shown that OLMT saves 29.5 Billion PKR in user travel time, and has a 1.8% return on investment (World Bank, 2021).

Some of the aforementioned time and cost bolts to the improvement of the quality of the environment. The World Bank has shown an extensive record on the emissions produced when the OLMT was assembled. The Lahore Development Authority (2023) has shown that it's also true that the Punjab province is extremely wealthy. Analytically, OLMT being constructed in Lahore has provided a cultural jolt that has been critiqued from the civil sectors, and the economists also baffled over the province's disintegration from absorbing the repayment. Almost, and over, 6.8 Billion PKR have been recorded to increase annually after the OLMT (State Bank of Pakistan, 2024).

On the operational side, overcrowding is still an issue. More than one of the 5 cars is used during peak periods, resulting in discomfort and even unsafe conditions. Also, the fare subsidies that the province is still responsible for financially cover 60% of the operational costs to keep the train running (International Finance Corporation 2023).

The two case studies of the Lahore Metro Bus and the Orange Line show the potential and the failures of transport privatization under PPPs. They have

enhanced mobility, decreased travel times, and increased social inclusion, particularly for women and the poorer segments of the population. However, their financial self-sufficiency is still an issue due to over-reliance on growing debt and operational constraints, subsidies, and increasing over-reliance on debt-supported obligations. These features make Punjab's transport PPPs both exemplary and paradoxically the most problematic in urban governance.

Findings and Discussion

Privatization in Punjab, especially in education, healthcare, utilities, and transport, shows a puzzling mix of achievements and failures in service proficiency and technology use. On the other hand, issues related to equity, accountability, and financial sustainability surfaced and persisted.

Access to education using Public-Private Partnerships has increased by 2.6 million students (World Bank, 2020) and the pupil-teacher ratio in PEF schools is more favorable than the national average. In healthcare, the use of Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) in the outsourcing of Basic Health Units (BHUs) leads to increased availability of staff and supplies of medicines along with a 25% increase in the utilization of these facilities in comparison to publicly operated units (Khan et al 2021). There are also increased service efficiencies in utilities and urban services, as LWMC illustrated with its AI driven waste collection programs, which saved 150,000-200,000 liters of fuel monthly (Pakistan Observer, 2024). Public transport has also seen improvements with reduced travel times of 45% along with reduced urban traffic congestion (JICA 2022, Lahore Development Authority 2023).

Nonetheless, worries about quality still exist. In PEF schools, teachers' qualifications and their supervision are inadequate, raising doubts about the level of education attained (Alif Ailaan, 2022). During COVID-19, the outsourced healthcare system deepened inequities, with the poorest households paying 70% more than the wealthiest for out-of-pocket expenditures in privately operated BHUs (Siddiqi & Mahmood, 2021). In waste management, the capacity gap remains acute Lahore produces almost 5,000 tonnes of waste each day, while the LWMC can only manage 50% of that (The

Correspondent, 2023). In the same way, users of transport services suffer from inadequate overcrowding, infrastructure, and service strain. So, despite the refinement in the service delivery process, the equity gap, and quality of access remain unsatisfactorily.

The goal of privatization was to improve responsibility; in this case, by passing the work to privately held businesses that would operate on profit. In Punjab, the record is different. In their audits of the LWMC, priests of paying out PKR 8.65 billion to selected contractors was in absence of any clear policies for LWMC payments, along with 561.8 million PKR of payments that are questionable (The Nation, 2021). The same worries about the long-term sustainability of the project, which is still in the process of financing, are also applicable to the Orange Line, which is fortified with spent debt, on account of the more unaccountable awarding of the contract and the terms under which debt is financed (State Bank of Pakistan, 2024).

The absence of accountability is most easily noticed in tracking and follow-up processes. On paper, outsourced contracts have weak enforcement, leaving private contractors free to manipulate avoidable loopholes. In the outsourcing of healthcare, monitoring was inconsistent and supervision remains lacking, especially in remote Basic Health Units (Khan et al. 2021). This creates a paradox where managerial innovations from privatization are negated by a lack of public supervision, as bureaucratic oversight seems to be a major risk of corruption.

The effects on citizens have been paradoxical. On the one hand, privatization made life more convenient to the urban populace: Metro and Orange Line riders, for example, save time and money as compared to informal transport modes, while private schools have also branched out to peri-urban areas. Out-sourced Basic Health Units (BHUs) have also experienced high patient satisfaction in terms of medications and staff (Malik and Hassan 2022).

On the other hand, some aspects of life, like affordability, have been deeply affected. Healthcare and education faced the consequences of out-of-pocket expenses, which discourages the lowest income earners the most. Private transport systems are also heavily subsidized - approximately PKR 40 is

spent for every PKR 20 generated by Metro Bus tickets, leading to the unsustainability dilemma - while vouchers to private schools hide the real cost of uniforms, textbooks, and other charged fees, making the overall education system unaffordable for the lower-class families.

These affordability pressures impact trust in institutions. Citizens want better instrumentalities but remain skeptical about the sustainability of assistance and the political will of the government. Recent corruption scandals in the utilities and transport sectors have exacerbated the erosion of trust especially in the public of the country, when the controversy of fiscal irresponsibility comes to light.

Privatization, especially in the Punjab province, has generated distinctive winners and losers. Urban populations, especially in Lahore, disproportionately benefit from flagship initiatives such as the Metro Bus, the Orange Line, and services provided by the Lahore Waste Management Company. Rural areas, in contrast, are underserved because public-private partnerships are focused on metropolitan areas with high demand and political visibility.

There are also stark differences in social class. The unrestrained urban elite and the middle class enjoy tidy cities, advanced modes of transportation, and dependable schooling. On the other hand, the downtrodden also pay the concealed costs of healthcare and education, as subsidies fail to compensate the underprivileged. The gendered impacts are also ambiguous; there is a rise in the female Metro Bus users, but rural women are still cut off from healthcare and transport. Privatization in Punjab is certainly not the mark of neutrality. The public resources that have been privatized are largely aimed at the urban middle class, while the rural as well as low-income populations are starkly disadvantaged.

By 2025, privatization policies in Punjab have intensified, sparking renewed controversy. The provincial government announced an expansion of public-private partnerships in education and healthcare, with new contracts granted to private operators covering additional Basic Health Units and low-fee schools. However, these moves have faced mounting resistance. Teachers' unions have protested against the withdrawal of free textbooks and the creation of a "two-tier education system,"

while healthcare worker associations criticized the delegation of primary care facilities to private contractors citing poor wages, job insecurity, and exclusion of marginalized patients. Civil society groups and parents have also expressed concern that the reliance on subsidies and donor-backed schemes is fiscally unsustainable and risks collapsing if government support wanes. These 2025 developments demonstrate that privatization is no longer a technocratic issue but a live political controversy, raising questions about accountability, inclusivity, and long-term sustainability.

From the findings, one could say the privatization of Punjab is neither an unmitigated success, nor an unmitigated failure. While efficiency, access, and innovation improved, the cost of accountability, equity, and sustainability was concerning. Modernization improves service delivery, but at the cost of the public's trust and contract transparency. The urban elite have captured the short-term benefits, but the long-term divides between the urban and rural, and the wealthy and poor, have only exacerbated.

Conclusion

The story of privatization in Punjab is both rich in progress and complexity. The privatization of education, healthcare, utilities, and transportation has greatly improved efficiency, access, and technology use in urban areas. Punjab Education Foundation and the outsourcing of Basic Health Units are examples that expanded access to healthcare and education to millions, providing improved patient medicine and satisfaction. The same goes for the public and private partnership that the Lahore Waste Management Company has through AI-driven Waste Collection, and the Metro Bus and Orange Line Mass Transit Projects which advance core infrastructure.

The optimism is limited by the more profound realities. The lack of the private sector in medicine, education, and transportation system, and the rising out of pocket healthcare expenses, education hidden fees, and subsidies shows that the access afforded to low-income and rural citizens is lacking. The remaining accountability and transparency issues which are crippled by audit irregularities, weak monitoring, and obscure contracts also shows that

privatization, in this case, has just shifted the inefficiencies instead of eliminating them. The inclusion of 2024–2025 data underscores that prior gains from PPP models are at risk of reversal. The surge in out-of-school children to 27 million, alongside the rollback of free textbook schemes, undermines earlier enrollment gains made under PEF. Similarly, while outsourced BHUs improved utilization, the Oxford study's global findings align with Punjab's experience of higher patient costs and inequities, suggesting that efficiency gains may be fragile. These contradictions highlight that privatization's benefits in Punjab are uneven, contingent on continuous subsidies, and vulnerable to policy reversals.

The results of privatization in Punjab undoubtedly point to uneven results - increased efficiency and access for urban elites with insufficient gains for marginalized populations. These results highlight that privatization is not a panacea and needs to be situated within a governance context that results in fairness, cover, and Assured longevity. For the case of Punjab, privatization has a future not by deepening its scope, but by more narrowly tailored policies that maximize efficiency while improving accountability and inclusiveness.

Recommendations

A better framework for privatization in Punjab means the adopting a policy approach that focuses on governance. First, strengthening transparency mechanisms is vital. All privatization contracts should be publicly available and independent audits conducted every year to stifle corruption and financial mismanagement.

Second, integrated equity safeguards are a must. In education and healthcare, marginalized households can be targeted through vouchers and subsidies. Using geographic equity audits, the impact of development should be assessed in urban and rural divides.

Third, regulatory capacity needs to be expanded. Independent oversight bodies that free of politicization should be allowed to track PPP project performance targets, and offer punitive measures for poor work.

Fourth, the payment should be sustainable. For example, transport subsidies should eventually

become a cross-subsidy level where fiscally the poor are not overwhelmed and the richer pay relatively even more.

Lastly, civic engagement should be systematized. Trust can be built and accountability improved by participatory community monitoring and grievance procedures.

Punjab can redefine the practice of privatization from a controversial issue to an element of social and economic policy if equity, transparency and fiscal prudence ethics are central to the framework.

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