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Balancing Centralization And Decentralization: The Mediating Role of the National Economic Council in Pakistan's Economic Governance

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Abstract

This study focuses on how the National Economic Commission (NEC) handles the intricate relationship between province autonomy and centralized economic planning in Pakistan's federal structure following the 18th Amendment. The research used a qualitative methodology to examine constitutional provisions, NEC policy documents, and illustrative case studies, including intergovernmental coordination during natural catastrophes and the National Finance Commission (NFC) Awards. The results show that although the NEC is constitutionally positioned to advance cooperative federalism, political fragmentation, conflicting institutional mandates, and a lack of technical expertise restrict its efficacy. However, it continues to be an essential platform for intergovernmental economic discourse. In order for the NEC to carry out its mediating function in Pakistan's changing economic governance framework, the paper makes the case that specific institutional reforms—such as binding arbitration procedures and capacity building—are necessary.

Keywords: Economic Governance, Cooperative Federalism, National Economic Council (NEC), Intergovernmental Coordination, Institutional Reform

Introduction

The federal framework of Pakistan exists as a system where central governmental power competes with local provincial independence. Throughout history Pakistan experienced periods when military control dominated while democratic federal control replaced it intermittently (Waseem 2010). The 2010 18th Constitutional Amendment delivered a transformative change by shifting decentralized powers to provinces particularly in institutions responsible for education and health and local development (Malik, 2011; Baloch, 2014). Under the Article 156 of the 1973 Constitution the National Economic Council (NEC) gained new significance as the designated body to mediate between national economic goals and provincial priorities (Government of Pakistan, 2010). The National Economic Council under Prime Minister Leadership stands composed of federal and provincial representatives to complete economic condition assessments and develop policy frameworks (National Assembly of Pakistan 2010). Both the constitutional relevance of NEC stands strong but academics



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have yet to thoroughly investigate how the body operates in practice (Shah 2012 and Ahmed & Amjad 2016). Academic literature mainly studies federal-provincial fiscal transfers through the National Finance Commission and evaluates federal economic planning yet insufficient research exists on how the NEC operates as a mediator between the economic goals of different levels of government (Cheema, 2017; Raza & Bari, 2021). This research bridges the studied gap by evaluating NEC as an establishment which unites national debt servicing requirements and macroeconomic stability goals with provincial resource management needs to promote development equity (IMF, 2021; Ministry of Finance, 2022; World Bank, 2020; Planning Commission, 2018) (Raza & Bari, 2021; Cheema, 2017; Ahmed & Amjad, 2016; Shah, 2012). This research examines the NEC's execution within decentralization through qualitative assessment of NEC records and constitutional elements together with studies including NFC prizes and relief economy coordination processes. The study states both positive and negative aspects about the NEC since it demonstrates cooperative federalism potential through its structure but also suffers from fragmented institutions and overlapping tasks and technical capability deficiencies (Khan & Qadeer, 2019). The institution requires major reform through binding arbitration systems combined with increased expert contributors to increase its mediation capabilities. Enhancing understanding of the NEC's mediation ability serves as a foundation for developing better multi-level economic governance in Pakistan's divided yet decentralized federal system.

Research Methodology & Theoretical Framework

The research design of this study uses interpretivist approaches to understand how the National Economic Council of Pakistan mediates economic governance in the country. The research combines document examination with case studies along with thematic studies in addition to expert statements to generate an insightful comprehension of NEC operations in federal-provincial coordination. The analysis of key legal and policy documents starting with Article 156 of the Constitution and including NEC reports and National Finance Commission (NFC) Award documents and budget speeches as well as federal development frameworks like Vision 2025 determines the NEC's evolving mandate together with its facing challenges. This study examines the 7th NFC Award (2009–2010) and post-2014 flood coordination through case analysis because they demonstrate NEC engagement in federal-provincial financial deployment and disaster relief coordination. The analysis relies on Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic approach for its coding and interpretation process which reveals three main themes about macroeconomic centralization and provincial equity and institutional resistance. Supplementary insights for the study come from expert opinions obtained from institutions like PIDE and PILDAT and academic literature. The research approach validates how the NEC functions as a constitutional forum and a politically debated space within the development of Pakistan's federal system. This research relies on Decentralization Theory through Oates' (1972) Theorem that fiscal decentralization facilitates efficiency through public service adaptation to local tastes. The trade-off between efficiency and equity exists according to Oates (1999) because decentralization benefits responsiveness but can widen inter-regional inequalities through improper institutional management. The balance between efficiency and equity presents



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serious issues in Pakistan's recent political environment because federal control of the economy needs to be maintained despite provincial self-governance (Shah, 2012; Ahmad & Brosio, 2009). The study employs Institutional Mediation concept to evaluate how hybrid agencies such as the National Economic Council (NEC) manage operational processes within federations that display institutional fragmentation. Institutions strive to harmonize opposing policy goals by creating discourse platforms for regulatory integration and settlement according to Hooghe & Marks (2003) and Benz & Broschek (2013). The NEC functions as an environment that unites political-economic national mandates such as fiscal discipline and infrastructure coordination with provincial hopes to exercise control and ensure equitable development across the country. The analytical structure provides understanding of how the NEC functions as an intermediary in Pakistan's developing federal system through its operational and functional performance.

Literature Review

The discussion about centralized versus decentralized economic control determines federal institutional design particularly within developing nations including Pakistan. According to Oates' work (1972, 1999) fiscal federalism supports decentralized policies as a solution to enhance the efficiency and service delivery responsiveness of public systems. The principle points out that weak or politicized redistributive tools create increased territorial disparities. According to Shah (2007) and Ahmad & Brosio (2009) the decentralization of taxation needs proper institutional mechanisms to establish alignment between units to avoid economic fragmentation. The 18th Constitutional Amendment (2010) became a historic recognition by Pakistan's government as it granted key powers to its provinces (Waseem, 2012; Nizamani, 2014). The changes brought focus on the importance of platforms such as the National Economic Council (NEC) to perform federal and regional priority mediation. The practical capabilities of NEC to develop economic policies jointly with provinces remain poorly documented per Article 156 of the Constitution (Khan & Ahmad, 2013; Akram, 2019). Keefer and Khemani (2005) maintain that institutional design and political will determine the success levels of intergovernmental coordination within fragmented federations. The Type II Multi-Level Governance system defined by Hooghe and Marks (2003) describes Pakistan's situation where governance entities function flexibly to connect different levels of authority. Benz and Broschek (2013) agree with the scholarly view that asymmetric federations need hybrid institutions such as NEC to handle disputes across policies. Research data shows varying effects on fiscal arrangements of Pakistan since implementing the 18th Amendment. Scholars Qadir (2016) and Imran & Afzal (2020) identify implementation inconsistencies in the 7th NFC Award due to the missing binding oversight mechanism at NEC. According to Hussain (2017) and Mehmood & Ali (2021) the decisions made by NEC reveal elite consensus instead of actual inter-provincial bargaining which damages trust between provinces. The NEC demonstrates slow-moving behavior according to analysis in policy reports. The Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE 2021) identifies NEC meetings occur infrequently while the Vision 2025 along with other approved plans receive insufficient follow-up. Federal ministries dominate control over key development schemes in the Public Sector Development



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Program (PSDP) reservations while skipping provincial planning needs (World Bank, 2017; UNDP, 2016). The coordination efforts of the NEC show both positive and negative results within disaster response management. The NEC-moderated federal-provincial discussions during the 2014 floods remained inadequate which led to parallel disaster relief initiatives and resources being wasted (IFRC, 2015; NDMA, 2016). According to research by Raza, Farooq & Awan (2018) and Shah & Farooq (2019) the advisory rather than mandatory nature of NEC stands as the central factor behind its weak performance as a central planning body. The authors Cheema, Khan & Myerson (2010) and Weiss (2013) along with others highlight how institutional change should improve cooperative federalism. Promoters of PILDAT (2022) join other think tanks in urging NEC to achieve its goals by enhancing its technical expertise and by formalizing arbitration procedures while requiring their recommendations to be legally binding. Literature shows the NEC contains constitutional promise as a mediator by design yet points out substantial differences exist between the concept and the way it operates in practice. Research must go deeper to understand how the NEC manages central-provincial conflicts within Pakistan's economic governance following devolution.

Historical and Institutional Context

The economic roadmap in Pakistan varies between implementing single national plans and splitting resources across provinces since it depends on military rule versus democratic policy changes. Economic planning centered at a national level became the main controlling factor during the first few decades post-independence. From 1958 to 1969 Ayub Khan in addition to Pervez Musharraf maintained executive control over economic development by enforcing Five-Year Plans and using federal planning commissions (Zaidi, 2005; Husain, 1999). During these periods centralized institutions used their power to control resource mobilization and allocation which led to vertical federalism and marginalization of provincial contribution (Cheema, 2005). The 1973 Constitution established a federal system but central government control through administrative bypasses and martial law rules prevented its true implementation according to Waseem (2012). Proof of a substantial powers transfer occurred through the 18th Constitutional Amendment in 2010 which relocated health care and education control and social welfare responsibilities from the central government to provincial authorities (Nizamani, 2014; Shah, 2012). Through this amendment the federal framework changed while creating an essential need for better coordination between different levels of government which led to the National Economic Council (NEC) gaining increased significance. The National Economic Council obtained its founding roots from Article 156 of the 1973 Constitution yet it received new vital significance after the Amendment. After having different roles in the past, the NEC now serves as an important advisory body directly established by the Constitution to provide recommendations about financial policies and economic plans to both federal and provincial governments (Constitution of Pakistan, Article 156). Under the leadership of the Prime Minister as chair the NEC now brings together all four Chief Ministers together with designated government ministers to support a dual approach between national economic oversight and provincial self-governance (Khan & Ahmad, 2013). The NEC now fulfills three essential responsibilities consisting of (i)



providing macroeconomic direction and policy alignment and (ii) functioning as a settlement body for fiscal conflicts between federal and provincial governments and (iii) establishing correct national resource allocations. The performance of these mandatory regulations receives conflicting evaluations. The NEC cannot fulfill its constitutional responsibilities effectively because it experiences sporadic meeting schedules and lacks the necessary enforcement capabilities and shows limited participation in planning efforts (PILDAT 2022 and PIDE 2021). The NEC faces added difficulty in federal-provincial mediation because it shares responsibilities with other organizations such as the CCI and NFC despite their different duties regarding financial resources and intergovernmental management (Weiss, 2013; Cheema & Bari, 2015). Under the present fiscal framework after the 18th Amendment the NEC needs to handle financial centerization alongside decentralization of administrative structures.

The NEC as a Mediator

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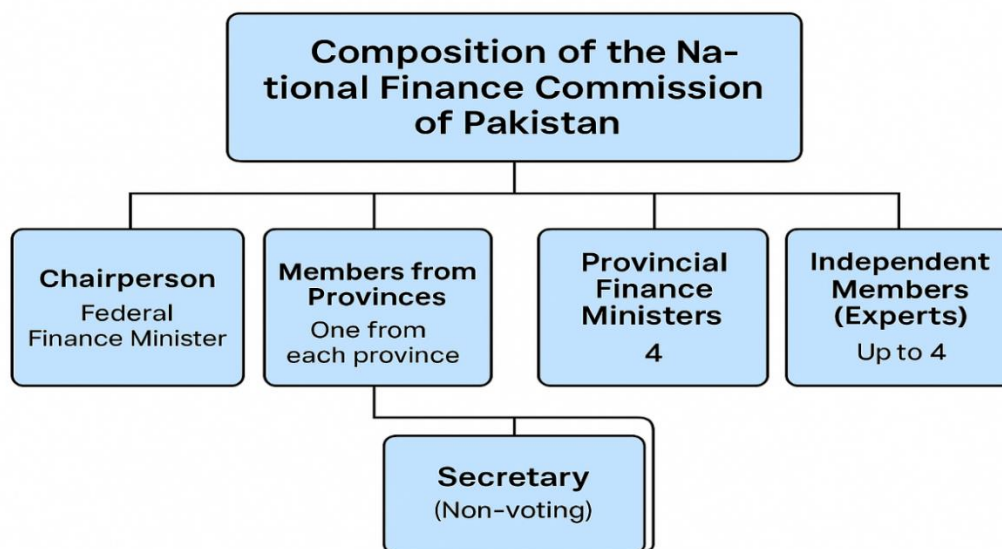


Figure: 1 made by the Author

The National Economic Council (NEC) receives its legal establishment through Article 156 of the Constitution of Pakistan which establishes it as the primary organization for nationwide economic coordination. The Constitutional requirement demands the Prime Minister to lead the NEC as its chair with provincial Chief Ministers and selected members who must produce development plans for the federation using optimal resources while reviewing national economic conditions (Constitution of Pakistan, 1973, Article 156). Through the 18th Constitutional Amendment which passed in 2010 Pakistan executed the transfer of a wide set of Concurrent List features to provincial



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jurisdictions (PILDAT, 2010). The amendment confirmed the need for cooperative federalism by elevating the NEC to become a primary consultative body and planning forum. The NEC must now send yearly reports directly to the legislative body of the nation which enhances their transparency to the public. Despite constitutional amendments that strengthened the NEC its main advisory nature together with institutional overlap and insufficient technical resources and binding implementation tools (Ahmed 2019) remains challenging for the organization. The rise in provincial autonomy brings pressure for NEC to serve as a collective decision forum but weak institutions combined with political differences reduce its operational success (Planning Commission of Pakistan, 2022). The partnership between Article 156 and the 18th Amendment works to support economic collaboration between different governments but current implementation limits highlight the requirement for institutional changes along with stronger enforcement mechanisms to make the NEC operational.

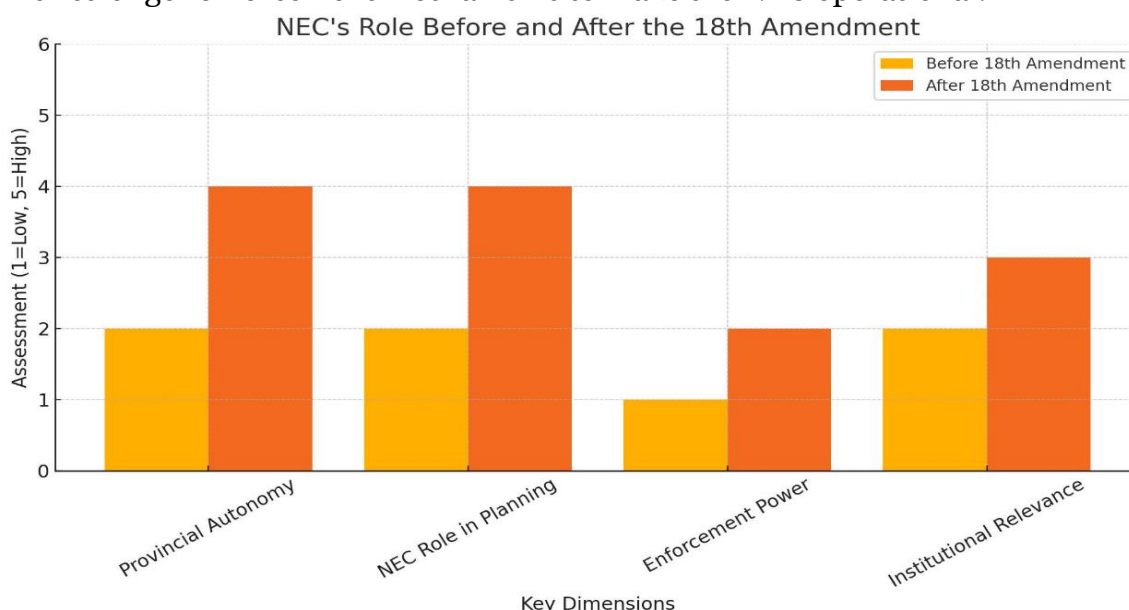


Chart: 1 Source: Adapted from Shah, A. (2012). *The 18th Constitutional Amendment: Glue or Solvent for Nation Building and Citizenship in Pakistan?*

The bar chart shows how the National Economic Council (NEC) evolved in its role before and after the 18th Amendment through four essential indicators which include Provincial Autonomy and NEC Role in Planning and Enforcement Power and Institutional Relevance. All measurement categories show substantial progress following the adoption of the 18th Amendment according to the data. The 18th Amendment led to significant changes in the scores for Provincial Autonomy and NEC's Role in Planning since both metrics improved from 2 to 4 points. Warnings about persistent execution challenges came through the minor upgrade of the Enforcement Power dimension from 1 to 2. The governance role of NEC within the structure received a slight increase during this period because its Institutional Relevance score rose from 2 to 3. The 18th Amendment created positive improvements for the NEC's ability to function properly as a coordinating economic body but these effects did not manifest consistently throughout the organization.

The Seventh NFC Award: A Test of Fiscal Federalism



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Table 1: Share of Provinces in the Divisible Pool (Website of the Cabinet Division)

S.No	Financial Year	% Share
1	2006-2007	41.50
2	2007-2008	42.50
3	2008-2009	43.75
4	2009-2010	45.00
5	2010-2011	56.00
6	2011-2012 Onwards	57.50

In 2010 NFC Award (7th NFC), multiple indicators serve as the basis for horizontal Provincial distribution for the first time ever. Multiple indicators along with their assigned weights exist within the NFC Award 2010 (7th NFC) according to the following conditions:

Table 2: 7 nth NFC indicators of provincial distribution (Website of the Cabinet Division)

S.No	Indicator	% weight
1	Population	82.00
2	Poverty/backwardness	10.30
3	Revenue Collection/ generation	5.00
4	Inverse population density	2.70
	Total	100%

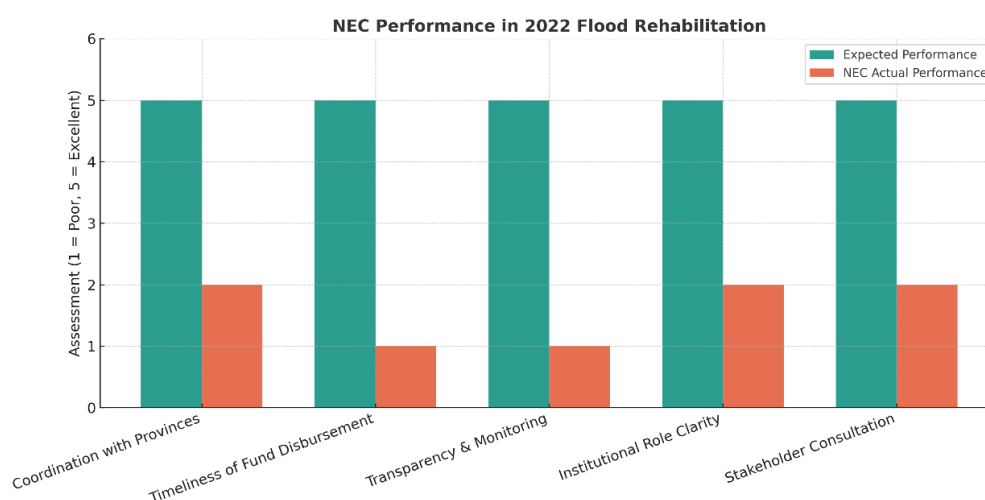


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The administration faced resistance to reform initiatives because they would decrease its portion using past population distribution methods. The smaller provinces made equity the main focus because they felt neglected in the past (Cheema & Bari, 2015). The historic agreement mainly emerged from political discussions beyond the NEC although it marked a historical achievement. The Council performed a ceremonial function because it finalized decisions which parties already settled politically outside the framework of the Council (Rana, 2011).

Post-2022 Flood Rehabilitation and the Role of NEC

The numerous floods which occurred in 2022 required extensive collaboration between federal and provincial authorities. The successful coordination between governments became essential because about one-third of national territory floodwaters submerged major areas and multiple millions required relocation. The NEC served as the organization tasked to distribute federal funding in synchronization with provincial recovery programs (UNDP, 2022). The NEC discussed a unified framework yet distribution delays combined with bureaucratic problems slowed down the process according to Government of Pakistan (2023). Sindh along with Balochistan protested weak consultation from the federal government as authorities provided support at a sluggish rate (Dawn, 2023). The three entities including the NEC and National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) and provincial disaster management authorities faced challenges due to duplicating responsibilities. The initial coordination roles of the NEC became ineffective because the organization did not have sufficient regulatory power to establish schedules or track progress and maintain openness in its activities (Weiss, 2013). The NEC exhibits organizational flaws which hinder its capacity to handle urgent situations requiring immediate coordinated efforts from different government bodies.



Source: Adapted from Shah, A. (2022). *Post-18th Amendment Governance and the NEC's Efficacy in Crisis Response: A Case Study of the 2022 Floods in Pakistan*. Policy Brief, Institute of Public Policy, Lahore.

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The research demonstrates that NEC attracts both constitutional power through inclusiveness and symbolic value yet experiences operations and political independence shortcomings to perform as an effective mediating entity. The effectiveness of the NEC is limited by political disputes alongside multiple levels of authority and differences in capabilities between the federal and provincial governments. The NEC experiences limited real-world use for its ability to resolve national economic interests against provincial growth needs (Shah 2012; Benz and Broschek 2013).

Conclusion

All in all the National Economic Council (NEC) maintains constitutional authority and represents an important symbol for economic planning involvement yet meets practical resistance from structural obstacles. Functioning as a mediating body proves difficult due to political unrest which combines with conflicting administrative authorities and different organizational capacities between federal and provincial sectors. The National Economic Council faces challenges in converting its established goal into practical execution particularly while handling national economic goals with provincial development requirements. The NEC needs structural reforms as well as stronger political commitment because this will increase its ability to independently execute decisions.

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