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Media Advocacy on Health Hazards of CPEC's Coal Power Project: The Sustainable Development Goal#3 is under threat

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Abstract

In the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the United Nations members committed to improving all individuals' well-being and prioritizing health as a key development aspect. However, the proposed construction of a 300MW coal power plant at Gwadar, a crucial location in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), raises concerns about its impact on human lives and the environment. This project could hinder Pakistan's progress in achieving Sustainable Development Goal #3. Although the power plant aims to address Pakistan's energy scarcity, debates highlight the potential adverse effects on human health and climate due to carbon emissions from coal. This study explores how the media contributes to raising awareness of the health risks associated with the CPEC. It suggests that media coverage may employ diversionary framing by emphasizing the economic benefits of the CPEC while diverting attention from the health consequences for the general population.

Keywords: CPEC, Health Hazards, Economic Development, SDGs, Diversionary Framing.

Introduction

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is part of the Silk Road Economic Belt initiative launched in 2015, aiming to enhance regional connectivity. The CPEC comprises 62 billion dollar projects on Pakistan's energy, infrastructure and other development projects (Kouser, Subhan, & Abedullah, 2020). The CPEC projects will bring economic stability to Pakistan. On the other hand, three-quarters of the newly planned energy will be generated from coal, which would enhance health and environmental threats. Pakistan is ranked as the 7th most vulnerable country in terms of climate.

In most developing countries, media coverage emphasized the benefits of the mega infrastructural and economic development projects in terms of job creation and economic gains. At the same time, the adverse health impact remains generally unreported. The 300MW coal power plant in Gwadar will considerably

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increase emissions, biodiversity loss, and general pollution. At the same time, Pakistan's media coverage tends to emphasize its economic benefits and to downplay and ignore its health costs.

While CPEC includes health sector projects expected to affect human health positively, this paper focuses exclusively on non-health sectors where health impacts are indirect consequences of the development. Health hazards associated with development projects can be categorized into four main groups: infectious diseases (e.g., malaria, diarrhea, respiratory infections), non-communicable diseases (e.g., poisoning, pollution, dust-related illnesses), malnutrition (resulting from reduced availability of subsistence foods), and injuries (e.g., traffic accidents, occupational injuries).

Media advocacy is an approach that uses mass media to raise awareness and promote change on a particular issue. In the case of CPEC's coal power project, media advocacy has been used to highlight the health hazards associated with coal-fired power plants and to call for action to mitigate these impacts.

One example of media advocacy on this issue is a report published by the Pakistan Medical Association (PMA) in 2017, which called for a moratorium on constructing coal-fired power plants in Pakistan until appropriate environmental and health safeguards could be implemented. The report highlighted the health risks of coal-fired power plants, including respiratory illnesses, cardiovascular disease, and cancer. It argued that these risks were not adequately addressed in the environmental impact assessments conducted for the CPEC projects.

The report received significant media coverage in Pakistan, with many news outlets reporting on the health hazards of coal-fired power plants and the need for stronger environmental and health regulations. This media advocacy helped raise public awareness of the issue and pressure the government and other stakeholders to take action.

Sustainable Development Goal #3 focuses on promoting universal access to good health and well-being, which involves reducing the global maternal mortality ratio, preventing avoidable deaths among newborns and children under five, and combating infectious diseases. The health hazards associated with CPEC's coal power project pose a significant threat to achieving SDG#3 in Pakistan.

Air pollution is already a major public health issue in Pakistan, with estimates suggesting that it causes over 128,000 premature deaths each year. The construction of coal-fired power plants under CPEC will likely exacerbate this problem, leading to premature deaths and illnesses.

In addition to the direct health impacts, the health hazards of CPEC's coal power project also have indirect implications for other aspects of SDG#3, such as access to healthcare. The health impacts of air pollution may lead to increased demand for healthcare services, putting additional strain on already overburdened healthcare systems in Pakistan.

The media landscape of Pakistan presents a complex and dynamic communication environment. With a population of over 200 million, Pakistan has a diverse media sector that includes television, radio, print publications, and a growing digital sphere. The country has a mix of state-owned and private media outlets, each with its editorial stance and audience reach. While the media sector has witnessed significant growth and liberalization in recent years, it also faces challenges such as censorship, limited press freedom, and concerns about journalistic ethics. Television shapes public opinion, with numerous news channels catering to diverse linguistic and regional audiences. Social media platforms have also gained immense popularity, providing a space for citizen journalism, political discourse, and digital activism. The media landscape in Pakistan plays a crucial role in shaping public discourse, reflecting social, cultural, and political dynamics while influencing public opinion and the democratic process.

In 2021, Tavakolifat, Omar, Lemma, And Samkir conducted a study on Media attention and its impact on corporate commitment to climate change action. The study's findings suggested that the media could use its function of agenda-setting and issue-framing to promote corporate response to climate change issues (Tavakolifar, Omar, Lemma, & Samkin, 2021).

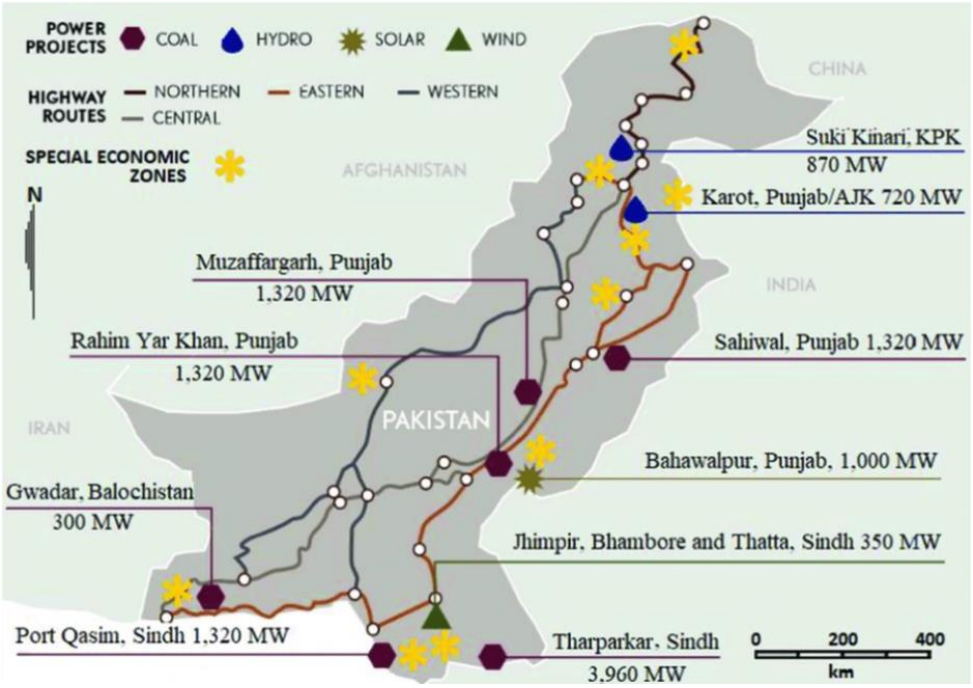
Martin and Osghan, in their research paper titled: Disciplining the Workforce: The News Media Frame a General Motors Plant Closing, claimed that the news frame supports the narrative of the need for more jobs under economic development while entirely ignoring alternative discourse (Martin & Oshagan, 1997).

In 2014, a study in the Calgary Herald, Storyline in the Sands: News, Narrative, and Ideology, was conducted by Gunster and Sourette. The researchers concluded that Herald neglected the environmental impact of extracting natural resources and encouraged it as a key element for economic growth and the country's prosperity (Gunster & Saurette, 2014).

Waheed, Fischer, and Khan conducted a study of Climate Change Policy Coherence across Policies, Plans, and Strategies in Pakistan—Implications for the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor Plan in 2021. The researchers highlighted how the Government of Pakistan in CPEC neglected the climate change impact of

energy power plants while establishing energy policies (Waheed, Fischer, & Khan, 2021).

Fig:1 The primary projects under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) include significant initiatives in Pakistan's energy, infrastructure, and other areas of development. (Farooqui & Aftab, 2018)



As shown in Figure 1, most of the energy power projects in CPEC are based on coal, which has severe environmental and social impacts. Around 7000 trucks per day are anticipated to pass through Northern Pakistan as part of CPEC, causing up to 36.5 million tons of carbon dioxide to be emitted (Qazilbash, 2015).

Scope of Research

Without compromising the importance of research, its scope is restricted to the study of those areas that directly and significantly impact the UN SDG-3. The importance of installing power projects has increased in Pakistan due to acute electricity shortfall nationwide. However, the hazards of coal power projects on health and the environment cannot be overlooked.

Problem Statement

Health problems are not directly proportional to economic growth until a concrete public policy reduces greenhouse gas emissions. Currently, Pakistan is suffering from great health and climate challenges. The coal plants release ash and carbon dioxide with the most efficient technology, and keeping the emission low will not be possible. The human population living near or far from coal power plants may end up facing chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), asthma, lung cancer, and respiratory infection. There is much research that shows the relationship between increasing human morbidity and mortality due to air pollution (United Nations Environment Programme Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, 2013) The construction of the Gwadar plant is projected to lead to substantial emission escalation, biodiversity degradation, and general pollution. Regrettably, the media highlights its economic benefits while neglecting the potential health consequences.

Study Objectives

1. To analyze the framing of media coverage regarding the CPEC's coal power project, particularly about diverting attention from health consequences to economic benefits.

2. To investigate the potential impact of media advocacy on raising awareness among the general public about the health risks posed by the CPEC's coal power project.

3. To examine the role of media in influencing public opinion and policy discourse regarding the health and environmental implications of the CPEC's coal power project.

4. To identify the gaps and biases in media coverage and highlight the need for a more balanced and comprehensive approach in addressing the health concerns associated with the CPEC's coal power project.

5. To provide recommendations for effective media advocacy strategies that prioritize Sustainable Development Goal #3 and promote the well-being of individuals and communities affected by the CPEC's coal power project.

Research Questions

1. How much do mainstream newspapers, namely Daily Jang and Daily Dawn, cover the CPEC coal power plant at Gwadar?

2. What role do newspapers play in emphasizing the threat to sustainable development goal# 3 due to the CPEC coal power plant at Gwadar?

3. To know which typology of frames among geopolitics, economic growth, national security, health challenges, and internal challenges are most discussed in the newspaper?

Theoretical Perspective

Under the considered judgment of the researcher, diversionary framing theory has been chosen for this study to examine the published content in research on the subjects and published articles in periodicals, newspapers etc.

According to Matthew Houser (Houser, 2016), diversionary reframing can be considered a subset of diagnostic framing. Unlike framing that highlights problems, diversionary reframing aims to portray issues in a manner that intentionally downplays their problematic nature. It emphasizes positive aspects or elements that may reduce the need for immediate action (included in the frame) while minimizing or excluding potentially negative elements that could prompt reactions (left outside the frame).

Many researchers see diversionary reframing as a subcategory of diagnostic framing where media content creators, instead of framing the issue's consequences, interpret the problem in such a way as to oversimplify them intentionally.

In the context of significant development projects, media coverage often utilizes diversionary reframing tactics. These strategies involve accentuating and glorifying the economic gains associated with the projects while diverting the audience's attention away from potential environmental and health hazards (Davidson & Gismondi, 2014).

This rhetorical strategy is used to divert attention away from the environmental and health harm. For example, the spokesperson of the Oil Industry in the United States used a diversionary reframing strategy to change the nature of public debate on offshore oil drilling by highlighting its benefits (Freudenburg,

W.R & Regina Gramling, 1994) This research examines how Daily Dawn opted diversionary reframing to overpower economic benefits of 300 MW Coal Power Project and undermine its health consequences.

Literature Review

Hussain, Khan, and Iqbal, in 2022, conducted a study on Media reporting of the climate change crisis in Pakistan: Identifying corrective strategies. The researchers conducted interviews with journalists working in Pakistan and found that climate issue events lacked drama and sensationalism, due to which they do not fulfill news selection criteria and hence were ignored (Hussain, Khan, & Iqbal, 2022) An online survey conducted 40 nations revealed that mainstream and new media emerged as the predominant sources of information on climate change. This finding further underscores the significance of climate journalism in raising awareness and disseminating knowledge about this critical global issue.

Advertiser Pressure: A Climate Change Content Agenda-Cutting Paradox in Pakistani Media, a study conducted by Khuhro, Adnan, Junejo, and Khan in 2020 revealed that pressure from advertisers impacts all forms of media content in Pakistani media. On content about climate change, however, advertiser pressure is more noticeable because it is a soft news topic and requires more funding (Khuhro, Adnan, Junejo, & Khan, 2020).

In the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism, the researcher stated that news media, especially for climate hazard news in developing nations, are reported to be mostly dependent on information subsidies and authorized government sources, according to general media studies (AEJMC, 2023).

The greenhouse gas emissions from human activities will alter Earth's climate, a matter of almost universal scientific agreement. McMichael, Woodruff, and Hales conducted a study on Climate change and human health: present and future risks. The researchers concluded that providing evidence of the anticipated adverse health impacts would enhance the justification for preventive policies. This, in turn, would also support the prioritization of planned adaptive responses to address the potential negative consequences on health. (McMichael, Woodruff, & Hales, 2006).

Media and Climate Change in Pakistan: Perception of the Journalists in Mainstream Media, a study conducted by Arshad Ali and Sajid Manzoor. To investigate how journalists in Pakistan produce news, the qualitative interviewing technique was used to investigate journalistic viewpoints on climate change and

their objectives when generating climate news in the newsroom. The journalists were asked about reporting processes and elements that helped or irritated them while covering the issue using a standardized open-ended questionnaire. The study's findings show that the journalists believed that inaccurate measurements and information are caused by a lack of resources, outdated technology, and inadequate human competence, making it difficult to report on real climate change. Yet, thankfully, those involved in climate journalism are fully aware of their roles and obligations (Ali & Manzoor, 2021).

In 2023, the researchers Asim Manzoor and Zahid Yousuf conducted a study titled Economic Spheres! Media Framing of CPEC in Pakistan. The purpose of the study is to critically evaluate the arguments made in the editorials and opinion pieces of the English newspaper Dawn. The newspaper texts criticize the dominantly positive discourses about the CPEC, according to the analysis of these materials. The lack of openness is a point of contention for the government and policymakers. CPEC is no longer seen as a game-changer and a solution to all of Pakistan's problems. The journal is pushing for a significant change in the conversation surrounding CPEC as the promises for economic growth are dwindling. The win-win narrative is contested by the arguments in the texts (Manzoor & Yousaf , 2023).

Afsheen Ekhteyar and Tariq Umrani, in their study titled CPEC in Pakistani Print Media: Transitivity Analysis of English Newspapers' Articles stated that CPEC has been portrayed as a topic of economic importance to the country, suggesting a pro-CPEC political ideology in the selected newspapers namely Daily Dawn and The News. The study aims to critically examine the ideological frameworks and discursive devices utilized in Pakistani print media to describe the CPEC economic phenomenon (Ekhteyar & Umrani, 2021).

While China may have started transitioning away from domestic coal-based energy production, evidence suggests that its coal and energy companies are actively involved in constructing infrastructure projects overseas. The various components of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects will lead to significant emissions increases, loss of biodiversity, and environmental pollution. However, media reports on the BRI often focus on its economic advantages while downplaying or neglecting its ecological consequences.

Research Methodology

This study relied upon the qualitative framing analysis method. The researcher analyzed the published CPEC newspaper content for the presence of frames. Mass media researchers use frame analysis to interpret how print and other media present information. Frame analysis serves multiple purposes,

encompassing the definition of the problem, the identification of suitable courses of action, the application of value judgments, and the proposal of potential remedies or solutions. (Goffman, 1974).

Study Population

The study population of this research comprised all Gwadar Coal Power Plant-related content published in Daily Dawn from November 2019 till January 2020. The months were selected based on the inaugural date of the 300MW Coal Power P project. The date of inauguration was November 4, 2019. The 300 MW Coal Power Plant in Gwadar was ceremoniously inaugurated by the Minister for Planning Development and Reform, Khusro Bakhtyar, and the Vice Chairman of the National Development and Reform Commission, Ning Jizhe, during their visit to the region. (Business Recorder, 2022).

Analyses and Discussion

Table 1: The Frequency of mainstream newspapers covering the CPEC coal power plant at Gwadar from November 2019 till January 2020.

NEWSPAPERS	CONTENT PUBLISHED ON THE GAWADAR COAL POWER PROJECT FREQUENCY (F)
Daily Dawn Karachi	12
Daily Jang Karachi	16

The data represents the frequency of content published on the Gwadar Coal Power Project in two newspapers - Daily Dawn Karachi and Daily Jang Karachi.

The frequency of content published on the Gwadar Coal Power Project in Daily Dawn Karachi is 12, while in Daily Jang Karachi, it is 16. This means that Daily Jang Karachi has published more content on this project than Daily Dawn Karachi.

Table 2: The Frequency of mainstream newspapers covering the CPEC coal power plant at Gwadar with emphasis on SDGs goal# 3 from November 2019 to January 2020

NEWSPAPERS	CONTENT PUBLISHED ON GAWADAR COAL POWER PROJECT WITH EMPHASIZE ON SDGs GOAL# 3 FREQUENCY (F)
Daily Dawn Karachi	01
Daily Jang Karachi	00

The data represents the frequency of content published on the Gwadar Coal Power Project, emphasizing SDGs Goal# 3 in two newspapers - Daily Dawn Karachi and Daily Jang Karachi. The frequency of content published on the Gwadar Coal Power Project with an emphasis on SDGs Goal# 3 in Daily Dawn Karachi is 01, while in Daily Jang Karachi, it is 00. This means that only Daily Dawn Karachi has published content on the Gwadar Coal Power Project with an emphasis on SDGs Goal# 3, while Daily Jang Karachi has not published any content on this aspect of the project.

SDGs Goal# 3 focuses on good health and well-being and emphasizes the need for access to affordable healthcare, reduction in the incidence of disease, and increased public health awareness. It's possible that the Daily Dawn Karachi published content on the Gwadar Coal Power Project emphasizing this goal because they perceive that the project could impact public health or well-being.

This data suggests limited Gwadar Coal Power Project coverage, emphasizing SDG Goal# 3 in these two newspapers.

Table 3: The frequency distribution of covered CPEC coal power plants at Gwadar themes from November 2019 to January 2020.

THEMES/ FRAMES	NEWSPAPERS		TOTAL
	Daily Dawn	Daily Jang	
Geopolitics	02	01	03
Economic growth	05	08	13
National security	02	03	05
Health challenges	01	00	01
Internal challenges	01	02	03
Others	01	02	03

The data represents the themes or frames covered in two newspapers - Daily Dawn and Daily Jang- and the total number of articles for each theme/frame.

Both newspapers seem to have focused primarily on economic growth, with 13 articles covering this theme. This suggests that both newspapers see the Gwadar Coal Power Project as having significant implications for economic development in the region.

Other themes or frames covered by both newspapers include geopolitics, national security, and internal challenges. However, the number of articles on these themes is relatively small compared to economic growth.

Regarding differences between the two newspapers, Daily Dawn has published more articles on geopolitics, national security, and health challenges. Daily Jang has published more articles on economic growth and internal challenges. These differences may reflect the editorial priorities of each newspaper. It's also worth noting that a few articles are categorized as "Others," which could represent various themes or frames not captured in the other categories.

Conclusion

This study of CPEC media coverage demonstrates that most mainstream media coverage was economic gains. Consequently, national infrastructure development, job creation, and the health cost of large-scale development projects largely go undetected. National security and economic success are stories that the media finds newsworthy, as may be seen from the discoveries that have received a lot of media attention Considering CPEC's various aspects, including its

geopolitical repercussions, as well as its internal and external obstacles. Although there is only one frame, health challenges have been largely ignored in the coverage since the beginning of this project. Media advocacy has played an important role in raising awareness of the health hazards of CPEC's coal power project and calling for action to mitigate these impacts. However, more must be done to address this issue and ensure the project does not compromise SDG#3.

There is a requirement for additional qualitative research to explore whether the media deliberately utilizes diversionary reframing or if framing geopolitical and economic development issues is an unconscious reflex for journalists when covering mega-projects in developing countries. The media has transformed the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) into a discussion of economic interests, geostrategic advantages, and national security. However, the media has neglected to inform its audience about the environmental degradation associated with the implementation of CPEC. This omission is particularly noteworthy, considering Pakistan's vulnerability to the effects of climate change.

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