

Lifeline of Balochistan

Ajmal Kakar | October 11, 2024



Balochistan's economy in general and that of the bordering towns in particular is highly dependent on cross-border trade. This trade, formal and informal, documented and undocumented, serves as the major source of income for inhabitants of bordering districts.

For the residents of these areas, border trade is not just an economic activity; it's a way of life, deeply ingrained in their social and cultural fabric. Despite the high level of trade activity, poverty is widespread, and alternative employment opportunities are scarce, leaving many

with no choice but to engage in this trade, regardless of its legality.

Unfortunately, on the other hand, the government is determined to undermine the lifeline of Balochistan. In every district we surveyed, respondents identified the border as a critical source of livelihood, extending this sentiment to include traders from Quetta City.

For the local population, the border is much more than a mere dividing line; it is the lifeblood of their economy, often referred to as a family legacy, tradition, occupation, the lifeline, the backbone of the local economy, an industry, a business hub, gold, a natural resource, and everything.

A respondent from Turbat stated, “I have been working at this (Abdu) border since I was young; this border work is our family’s legacy for seven generations.” This reflects that for the residents, the border trade is not just a geographical demarcation and economic activity but an inherited tradition, passed down through generations.

Another respondent expressed, “Border provides jobs to everyone in the town. Everyone is busy with border trade. If someone is addicted, innocent or naive, Namazi (someone who prays regularly), owner, laborer, and even if someone is a thief, they’re also engaged in the border trade and related activities.”

It suggests that border work is a universal and unifying force, occupying everyone in the community and playing a pivotal role in the local socio-economic network.

In discussions with the Makran Division Chamber of Commerce, one participant remarked that the border trade is a lifeline, equating it to

a natural resource like any other in Balochistan. “The border is not just gold for us, but gold for all of Pakistan,” they said, underscoring the border’s importance not just to the region, but to the country as a whole.

This view was echoed in Gwadar, where traders and residents similarly described the border as their primary source of livelihood. At the Kontani border in District Gwadar, one respondent declared, “Kontani border is our livelihood. If this border closes, we will be left with nothing.” This stark reality illustrates the dependency on border trade, as people in this region lack other skills or opportunities to sustain themselves.

The member chamber of commerce Gwadar, added “In District Gwadar, we rely on two main resources: the sea and the border. There is no way around. He further stated, “to us border trade is a means of subsistence”.

Likewise, in Punjgur, the border trade is narrated as the economic backbone of the district. One respondent emphasized, “To us, border trade is like the economic backbone of Punjgur, and closing the border is like breaking the economic backbone of the region.

It would have adverse repercussions in terms of joblessness, poverty, hunger, and an increase in criminal activities.” They further emphasized how the border closure had driven some individuals to consider unlawful activities in the past. The border trade, while indispensable to Punjgur’s economy, also raises concerns about its long-term impact, particularly on educated youth, who often

abandon their studies to engage in this uncertain trade.

In District Chaghi, respondents associated the border trade with the vitality of Dalbandin city. One trader explained, “Our market runs when the Zamyad vehicle runs, and when it’s not there, there is a kind of silence that falls over the city.” This statement highlights the ripple-effect of border trade on local economies, as purchasing power and market activity are directly linked with the flow of goods across the border.

Likewise, in Taftan, the border serves a crucial role in connecting Pakistan to the Middle East and Europe via the London Road. One trader there expressed, “Border trade is the only way to earn money for the people of this region.” This cross-border trade provides economic opportunities to countless families in the surrounding districts, all of whom rely heavily on the movement of goods between Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan.

The Chaman border presents a unique perspective, as many residents view it not just as a place of trade but as a continuation of their culture. For them, the border is a dividing line that has separated families and villages. One businessman operating in Spin Boldak lamented, “To us, this border (Durand Line) is just a piece of line, splitting the same families, relatives, towns, and nations.”

He described Chaman as a village where people live, while the border serves as their market. A member of Chaman’s Chamber of Commerce stated the Chaman border is “the hub of business and an international market, just like Dubai.” This comparison highlights the diversity of

trade that occurs at Chaman, which attracts businessmen not only from Afghanistan but also from Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

To sum up, border trade is the lifeline for the people of Balochistan. It is not only a primary source of income but also an occupation, tradition, and economic backbone for local communities. However, the lack of alternative job opportunities, combined with the reliance on this often informal and risky trade, underscores the vulnerability of these border regions.

As one respondent from Quetta noted, “Borders with Iran and Afghanistan are a form of natural resource for the masses of Balochistan, just like other natural resources of the province.” This sentiment encapsulates the region’s deep dependence on border trade, which remains an essential yet unstable pillar of Balochistan’s economy.

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