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BEYOND CASE COUNTS: PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT, INSTITUTIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY, AND PROTECTION OUTCOMES FOR CONFLICT-DISPLACED CHILDREN AT RISK OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN PAKISTAN'S FORMER TRIBAL AREAS

Muhammad Kazim Hashmi[*1], Khadija Waseem Hashmi[2]

[*1]*College of Law, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Government College University Faisalabad*
[2]*Department of Law, Faculty of Shariah and Law, International Islamic University, Islamabad*

[*1]muhammadkazimhashmi72@gmail.com, [2]khadijahashmi759@gmail.com

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Muhammad Kazim Hashmi

Abstract

Performance measurement becomes especially difficult when the institutions being evaluated also shape whether the social problem being measured becomes visible. This study examines that problem through child protection in Pakistan's former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), focusing on conflict-displaced children at risk of sexual violence. It investigates how institutional capacity and accountability shape the reporting, administrative visibility, and response to child protection concerns under conditions of conflict and displacement. Rather than treating recorded child sexual abuse cases as direct measures of underlying prevalence, the study conceptualizes case counts as institutionally mediated observations produced through disclosure, reporting access, detection, documentation, referral, and monitoring. This distinction is consistent with evidence showing that incident-based records may substantially understate sexual violence and with child-protection research emphasizing the importance of institutional monitoring and reporting systems. A mixed-methods design combines quantitative analysis of systematically compiled secondary indicators with qualitative analysis of legislation, policy documents, institutional assessments, administrative and humanitarian reports, and child-protection documentation. Quantitative evidence is used to examine observable variation in protection reporting, conflict and displacement pressures, and institutional conditions where comparable data are available, while qualitative analysis investigates the institutional processes underlying those patterns. The study integrates these evidence streams to distinguish three dimensions frequently conflated in performance assessment: underlying protection risk, administrative visibility, and institutional response. In doing so, it advances a public-administration approach to child protection accountability in which institutional performance is assessed not simply by whether recorded case numbers are low, but by whether institutions can make protection concerns safely visible and translate that visibility into accessible, coordinated, and accountable responses.

1. Introduction

Measuring performance has become a key element of modern public administration, as governments are now under greater pressure to show if public institutions are having a positive impact. However, these performance measures are ambiguous when the actor whose performance is being assessed also helps to determine the observability of the action whose performance is being assessed. The role of performance information has long been acknowledged to be multifaceted, with it being used for evaluation, control, learning, budgeting and accountability; no single indicator can be expected to excel on all these fronts (Behn, 2003; Heinrich, 2002; Moynihan, 2008). This issue is especially relevant to policy areas where the consequences of social ills are non-obvious, and public institutions are inaccessible or where records of outcomes are incomplete, such that apparent measures of outcomes may reflect more on the visibility of public institutions than on social outcomes.

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a very challenging illustration of this measurement problem. The number of cases reported does not necessarily reflect the true prevalence of the underlying phenomenon, since a phenomenon of interest usually has to go through a number of 'gates': disclosure, access to a reporting mechanism, institutional detection, documentation, registration, and inclusion in some administrative or monitoring system before it becomes recorded. Empirical studies of sexual violence clearly illustrate the influence of those processes on observable estimates. The estimation of sexual assault during the war has been shown to be much larger than the direct questioning based upon a list experiment in Sri Lanka (Traunmüller, Kijewski and Freitag 2019). Turner (2019) also warns that focusing on incident reports may be helpful for institutional responses and legal documentation, but may not give a good indication of the prevalence of SGBV.

This separation forms a crucial issue for the evaluation of institutional performance. Better reporting systems, better reach of administration, trained staff, better documentation, and better monitoring can lead to more cases being referred to formal or monitored systems, as more protection concerns come to light. In contrast, low case numbers could indicate low levels of victimization, but could also be due to inaccessible reporting avenues, poor institutional detection, underreporting of cases, social pressure to not report, or insufficient monitoring of cases. Recorded cases can thus not be read outside of institutional procedures by which they are made. Landgren's (2005) protective-environment approach helps clarify this more general understanding as it conceptualises government commitment and capacity, legislation and enforcement, services, monitoring, reporting and oversight as interrelated parts of child protection.

Also the accessibility of institutions is important. Having institutions does not automatically imply that citizens are able to effectively access public services or reporting instruments. Administrative-burden scholarship" shows that the interactions with the state can have learning, compliance and psychological costs that affect the capacity and motivation of citizens to use public programs (Moynihan, Herd, & Harvey, 2015). Within a child-protection context these barriers may be exacerbated by stigma, fear, complexity of procedures, lack of awareness about reporting options, geographic localization, insecurity and uncertainty about institutional reactions. Thus, institutional capacity cannot only be defined as the presence of agencies or rules, but also the ability to make the protection in practice accessible and working.

These challenges are exacerbated in conflict and displacement affected settings. Armed conflict can heighten protection pressures and undermine the administrative systems that are supposed to take care of those protection needs, including services, institutional access, monitoring systems, referral mechanisms, and community-based protections. Displacement may also impact on the relationship between vulnerable people and public institutions through the change of residence, documentation, social networks and access to services. Krause (2015) views sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) as a continuum, and not limited to any specific phase of the conflict. Similarly, the presence of displacement cannot in itself be used

as proof of greater sexual victimisation. There has been an over-estimation of the prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) among displaced people, particularly in cases where people have been forced to flee their homes. This distinction needs to be analyzed to distinguish protection risk from victimization observed, and subsequently, from institutional reporting and response.

An important context to study these relationships is the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan. The area has been plagued by years of insecurity, population displacement and return, administrative changes, and unequal access to government services. Such conditions put heavy demands on the administration of child protection, as effective child protection is not just about legal mandate, but also about institutional presence, capacity to implement, easy reporting, referral, services, inter-agency cooperation, monitoring and accountability. Generally, it is clear that formal policy commitments do not necessarily get translated into effective administrative practice (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984; Grindle, 2004; Andrews, Pritchett, & Woolcock, 2017).

This is thus a child protection issue as well as a public-administration issue in the former FATA context. Geographic differences in recorded CSA cases may in part be due to different administrative visibilities of cases in institutions across location and time. Although a low recorded caseload may reflect low victimisation, it may also be combined with limited access to reporting, weak detection, poor monitoring and/or limited institutional presence. On the other hand, strengthening reporting channels can lead to increased reported cases of protection concerns, as previously unobserved cases are brought to the front of the system. Measuring performance against the numbers of cases alone may therefore generate a potentially misleading relationship between performance and institutional effectiveness.

This is not only about accuracy in measurement but is also about accountability in institutions. Performance information affects the priorities of the organisation, its resource allocation, the evaluation of policies and perceptions of government effectiveness. Rahm (2026) in her analysis of attempts to measure harmful practices has found the challenge of going from measureable outputs to conclusions about outcomes and impacts to be difficult as institutional processes, multiple actors, contextual influences and causal uncertainty intervene. It is difficult, then, to construct an accountability system that would expect a reduction in cases reported as an easy measure of success in child protection.

It is important to note that significant knowledge exists on the subject of conflict-related sexual violence, displacement, child-protection systems, institutional capacity, implementation and public-sector performance. But these literatures have not often been combined in relation to the effects of institutional capacity on both the creation and interpretation of child-protection performance information. The body of research on sexual violence includes a focus on underreporting and measurement challenges, child-protection scholarship focuses on child protection systems and services, the research on conflict and displacement focuses on risk environments that are changing, and research on public administration focuses on capacity, implementation, administrative burden, accountability and performance measurement. Combining these strands enables examination of how institutions react to protection concerns reported, as well as how institutional arrangements shape what protection concerns are reported.

This study bridges this gap by separating three analytically related dimensions, protection risk, administrative visibility and institutional response. Protection risk refers to circumstances that may be hazardous or expose children to risk. Administrative visibility relates to the processes whereby protection concerns can be disclosed, reported, detected, documented and monitored. Institutional response relates to the actions of public and associated protection institutions after a concern has been brought to light, such as registration, referral, provision of services, coordination, follow-up, oversight and accountability. However, institutional

performance cannot be inferred from the number of cases reported and institutional capacity can impact visibility and response.

The study uses a mixed methodology, which consists of a quantitative analysis of a set of systematically collected secondary indicators and a qualitative documentary analysis on the relationships between the indicators. The quantitative component analyzes evidence on protection outcomes, pressure of conflict and displacement, population characteristics, and observable institutional conditions of similar evidence, where source coverage allows defensible comparison. The qualitative component looks at legislative and policy frameworks, institutional assessments, administrative and humanitarian reports, and child-protection documentation and evidence to consider the functioning of reporting, implementation, service provision, coordination, monitoring, and accountability in practice. The two parts are combined in a way that quantitative patterns are understood within the institutional processes as evidenced in the qualitative data rather than as a "self-explanatory" statistical result.

The study has a single overarching research question: What is the influence of institutional capacity and accountability on the visibility and institutional response to protection concerns of conflict-displaced children who are at risk of sexual violence in former tribal areas of Pakistan?

The analysis is organised around three subsidiary questions:

RQ1. To what extent do the observable markers of institutional capacity, reporting and monitoring, service delivery and child protection response differ across the former tribal parts of Pakistan where evidence is comparable?

RQ2. What are the impact of conflict and displacement pressures on institutional access, reporting, referral & coordination, service delivery, and accountability?

RQ3. What are the institutional circumstances that might lead to inaccurate/misleading assessments of child-protection performance based on the number of recorded cases of child sexual abuse?

The study has three major contributions. First, it brings to public administration and performance-measurement scholarship a new way of thinking about administrative visibility as a way of producing performance information, not as a neutral representation of underlying social conditions. Second, it assesses how formal protection responsibilities are interpreted and translated into access to reports, monitoring, referral, coordination, services, and accountability in the context of conflict and displacement, a field of research that is still developing. Third, it helps further child-protection policy through its development of an evaluative approach that differentiates between prevention of harm and the visibility of protection concerns and the quality of institutional response. From this lens, it is important to understand that good performance in child protection is not evident from simply whether recorded cases are going up or down, but whether institutions are able to prevent protection risks, facilitate reporting and detection and turn the needs that are found into accessible, coordinated and accountable responses.

The rest of the paper goes as follows. Section 2 examines the literature on performance measurement, institutional capacity and accountability, child-protection systems, conflict and displacement, and the measurement of sexual violence, and therein the specific research gap to fill. Section 3 builds the conceptual framework of protection risk, administrative visibility, institutional capacity and institutional response. The research design with mixed methods, the data sources, the indicator construction, the strategy of coding documents, and the way quantitative evidence and qualitative data were combined are presented in section four. The empirical results are presented in Section 5 and implications for performance measurement and institutional accountability are discussed in Section 6. Implications for public administration, child-protection policy, limitations and conclusion are discussed in Section 7, 8 and 9 respectively.

2. Literature Review

Literature relevant to this study can be found across a number of fields which are typically studied separately, including public-sector performance measurement, institutional capacity

and policy implementation, child-protection systems, conflict and displacement and the measurement of sexual violence. When reading together, these literatures share a common analytical issue. Observable protection outcomes are not generated in a vacuum, but depend on the ability of public and related actors to identify, report, engage with, track and react to protection issues. The review thus first examines the wider literature on performance and institutional capacity in public administration before turning to the literature on child protection and sexual violence, which will be used to identify the gap filled by this study.

2.1 Performance Measurement and the Problem of Administrative Visibility

Performance measurement is a key feature of public administration because governments need information to assess their programmes, make decisions about resources, hold their service providers to account, learn from their implementation and improve services. But performance indicators have no meaning beyond the institutional needs of their use. Behn (2003) recognizes several different managerial uses for performance measurement and states that there is no one correct measure for each of these uses. Heinrich (2002) also highlights the importance of considering whether the information about outcomes is a valid measure of governmental effectiveness, and Moynihan (2008) shows how performance information is made meaningful in the course of organisational and institutional processes, and not just as a neutral input to government.

This is especially critical where outcomes as observed are in part products of an administrative process. Public institutions do not just reflect on social situations, but they also shape them in various ways by who is eligible and who is not, by what is reportable and what is not, by monitoring processes and by record keeping, classification, and provision of services. As a result, an indicator can at the same time capture the phenomenon of substantive interest and the ability of institutions to identify and record the phenomenon. When this distinction is not recognized, performance measurement can incentivize low visibility as opposed to good administration.

This is particularly the case for outcomes that require citizens to reach out to public institutions. Administrative-burden research finds that citizens face learning, compliance, and psychological costs when interacting with government programs and services that can either facilitate or impede their interactions with government and their ability to engage in public programs and services (Moynihan, Herd, & Harvey, 2015). These costs are not necessarily distributed equally. People who are insecure, socially stigmatized, lack access to information and are geographically isolated or distrust the public authorities may experience higher barriers to making their needs 'administratively visible.' In such environments, not being on the administrative roll does not necessarily mean that the person does not require care.

This insight contributes to the traditional performance-measurement problem. It is not just whether an indicator is capturing institutional output or outcome, but whether institutional capacity influences whether the outcome is captured in the indicator system at all. In reviewing efforts to assess harmful practices, Rahm (2026) points to the growing complexity of going from observable outcomes to claims about outcomes and impacts when multiple actors, contextual factors, causal mechanisms and time delays are involved. Therefore, data on performance in terms of "hidden harms" must be interpreted with caution: reported good numbers could be a result of good prevention, poor detection, poor reporting or a combination of these.

This intermediate process is what the concept of administrative visibility recognizes as part of this study. It means the degree of observability of an underlying protection concern to institutions by disclosure, reporting, detection, documentation, registration or monitoring. Administrative visibility is not considered equal to institutional performance. Instead, it is a linkage between the social conditions and the information for assessing the performance of institutions.

2.2 Institutional Capacity, Implementation, and Accountability

There is a good amount of literature in governance and public-administration research that distinguishes formal institutional arrangements from effective implementation. State capacity issues are not just about the presence of organisations or formal powers, but the effective delivery of public organisations and the functions that they are assigned. The concept of governance used here refers to the state's ability to make and enforce rules and provide services (Fukuyama, 2013); in addition, the ability of institutions to perform effectively in terms of limited administrative resources is also recognized as important (Grindle, 2004). Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock (2017) also differentiate between formal institutional structures and real capability, and explain why organisations can have seemingly the right institutional structures, but still not have the capacity to function.

Implementation scholarship offers a complementary view. Pressman and Wildavsky (1984) illustrate the way in which policy goals are altered, postponed or undermined as they pass through successive levels of administrative processes. Coordination among social welfare agencies, police, health services, courts, community players, and nongovernmental organizations is particularly pertinent to child protection and the effectiveness of child protection response. The formal assignment of responsibility thus does not imply that a working protection process is in place.

There is another aspect to institutional accountability. Performance information can only contribute to accountability if institutions are able to produce information which is usable to identify accountability, responsibilities can be assigned and monitoring mechanisms are able to tell if the duties have been carried out. This means that accountability relies on institutional action as well as information capacity. The state may have formal protection obligations, but lack an effective mechanism for assessing whether such obligations are being fulfilled in a situation where reporting systems are disjointed, case information incomplete, responsibilities overlapping, and follow-up weak.

This distinction is crucial in decentralised administration or in less uniform administrative structures. There can be significant subnational variation in implementation and service delivery alongside a national legislation or change in policy. This issue is directly addressed in UNICEF's systems strengthening approach, which puts a high priority on vertical coordination at national, subnational, district and community level as well as horizontal coordination between services and agencies. Therefore institutional capacity should be measured based on operational dimensions, such as personnel, services, coordination, information systems, monitoring and accountability, and not only on the basis of a formal institution.

2.3 Child-Protection Systems and Institutional Response

The focus of child-protection scholarship has gradually gone beyond single interventions to systems approaches. Landgren (2005) proposes a framework for protection in which effective protection is achieved by interacting factors, which include government commitment and capacity, legislation and enforcement, services, monitoring, reporting and oversight. An institutional approach is especially helpful for institutional analysis as it acknowledges that the effectiveness of protection outcomes is not only a function of a single agency and/or legal regime, but of a wider administrative context.

Monitoring and reporting is located at a special place in this system. There are a few deficiencies in relying on reported abuse as a way of measuring protection, in Landgren's opinion, and also that protecting the overall protective environment is crucial. Current UNICEF frameworks also view child-protection system strengthening as a process of system maturity, coordination, information systems, quality assurance, accountability and sustainable service delivery and not necessarily about variations in numbers of reported cases. Monitoring guidance from UNICEF includes questions on whether subnational data is routinely and reliably available at central level, data quality,

use of data in policy and services, whether staff are trained in safe data management and whether oversight supports accountability.

This systems thinking is especially applicable to Pakistan. UNICEF's child-protection programming in the country has focused on building the capacity of the government, the community and family to prevent and respond to violence, exploitation and neglect, and not on using reported cases to measure the performance of the system. Hence the difference between system presence and system functionality is of crucial importance. A child-protection unit can have a formal presence, but be without staff, reporting systems, referral systems, information-management systems, or services needed to respond effectively.

Therefore, institutional response must be separated from reporting capacity for analytical purposes. Reporting capacity handles the question of whether or not a protection concern can enter the institutional system. Response capacity relates to the post-entry processes and includes registration, referral, investigation (where applicable), linkage to services, monitoring and follow-up and oversight. This might create a danger of giving a false impression that two of these are necessary to make institutions more responsive to protection concerns, as institutions may be better at assessing protection needs yet not necessarily more effective in responding to them.

2.4 Conflict, Displacement, and Protection Risk

Armed conflict can impact on child protection in a number of ways. Violence can cause harm to children directly as well as impacts on family dynamics, community systems of safeguarding, public services, access to administration and institutional capacity. Conflict can also result in displacement, disruption of livelihoods and schooling, changes in household arrangements and burden on receiving communities and public institutions. Thus, literature on gender, conflict and development has highlighted that vulnerability is not only a result of armed conflict, but is the result of violence and the broader institutional and socioeconomic conditions (Bouta, Frerks, & Bannon, 2005).

This argument is developed by Krause (2015) with the idea of the continuum of violence which connects conflict, flight and encampment. This is not a binary understanding of violence in armed conflict, and violence in displacement; rather, it emphasizes that vulnerabilities and social relations can sustain and/or change from one stage of displacement to another. This is helpful for child protection as institutional responsibilities also do not stop when the exposure to the conflict reduces, but continue throughout the displacement, return and reintegration process.

Concurrently, the literature cautions against displacing as a determinate cause of sexual violence. Refugee and displaced populations are often assumed to be at increased risk of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) because the displacement itself is linked to social disruption (Turner 2019). He adds that available evidence is frequently derived from incidence reports which are valuable for documentation, but do not provide information on population prevalence. The analytical implication is important: displacement can be a condition which reasonably may have an impact on protection risks and institutional access, but the fact that displacement was recorded does not in itself suggest that sexual victimization took place.

This is especially relevant to the current study. Conflict and displacement can work both sides of the institutional process. They can raise protection requirements, while at the same time lowering the ability of institutions to identify and respond to protection requirements. A decline in reported cases during periods of high insecurity might thus be due to a decrease in victimization, a decrease in the ease of reporting, a decrease in institutional monitoring, or some combination of the three processes. The link between external pressures and outcomes becomes theoretically unclear, therefore, without taking the question of institutional visibility into account.

2.5 Measuring Sexual Violence and the Problem of Underreporting

Difficulties in measurement are particularly pronounced in research on sexual violence. Victimisation is recorded in various ways

(administrative records, police statistics, health-service records, humanitarian incidents, media monitoring, population surveys) which capture different subsets of victimisation and should not be regarded as interchangeable. The literature on conflict-related sexual violence has consistently shown that information from institutional reporting systems inevitably underestimates the true extent of the victimisation, as many survivors of sexual violence never come to the attention of institutions responsible for reporting cases. Furthermore, methodological studies show that estimates derived from law enforcement or health-facility data typically only reflect cases that were reported and those who sought medical attention in conflict areas.

Especially important evidence is provided by Traunmüller, Kijewski and Freitag (2019). They found that indirect questioning (using a list experiment) suggested a far higher level of victimisation than direct questioning, in relation to the sensitivity of the issue of wartime sexual violence in Sri Lanka. They show that the nature of the observed reporting may depend on the reporting mechanism even if the phenomenon being measured does not. It is relevant to administrative performance measures, as changes in reporting access or disclosure may affect the recorded outcomes without affecting the prevalence.

Scholarship on conflict-related sexual-violence also shows that the dynamics of violence are not solely a function of the intensity of conflict. Cohen and Nordås (2014) provided systematic cross-conflict measurement of reported sexual violence through the Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict (SVA) dataset and subsequent studies have shown how the organizational and armed group characteristics affect the patterns of violence. The general message is that exposure to conflict does not automatically result in similar trends in sexual violence; institutional, organisational, political and social processes have a role to play.

Underreporting can thus not be simply assumed away as a technical inconvenience. It is substantively related to stigma, fear, trust in institutions, accessibility, recording practices, and access to services. Both of these mean that reporting itself is information which relates to institutional and social conditions. The key methodological requirement for analysis is to refrain from using recorded cases as direct measures of prevalence, and to state clearly what the researcher can observe through the process of the recorded source.

2.6 Pakistan's Former Tribal Areas as an Institutional Setting

The former FATA is a unique institutional context as a result of ongoing conflict and displacement along with significant shifts in territorial governance and public administration. The historical differential state presence and the subsequent incorporation of the former tribal areas into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) makes it impossible to take formal institutional arrangements, administrative reach and service capacity for granted as geographically or temporally uniform.

Child protection information is accessible that emphasises the need to consider institutional procedures as well as formal procedures. Weaknesses in reporting, referral, monitoring, information management, coordination and service provision are identified in the UNICEF mapping and assessment of the child-protection system in the former FATA. This evidence is particularly interesting in the context of the region, and highlights the difference between the presence of institutions and the functionality of institutions. It also reveals the importance of understanding the protection results that are reported in the context of the administrative setting where cases come to light.

The available CSA reporting in Pakistan further extinguishes this issue. Monitoring organisations like Sahil yield important evidence on the cases that come to light via media and other reporting pathways, but are not population based prevalence estimates. Their main analytical contribution in this study is thus in the fact that they report on what can be observed in the reporting of abuse and not the actual geographical level of abuse. To do otherwise would be to break down the victimisation/visibility dichotomy shown in the broader measurement literature to be essential.

The former tribal areas thus provide more than a geographically bounded case of child vulnerability. They create a space of institutional processes where conflict pressures, displacement, administrative transitions, reporting, services and accountability intersect. This renders them especially salient to the public-administration issues of how states can develop their capacity, how policy commitments can be accomplished in challenging contexts, and how institutional performance can be assessed when administrative data are incomplete.

2.7 Research Gap and Contribution

There are three gaps in the literature. Even though underreporting of sexual violence has been well documented in the research literature, and child protection, it is regarded primarily as a constraint on prevalence estimation. Its implications for public sector performance measurement have received less attention: variation in reporting capacity may be part of the variation in cases reported, institutionally.

Second, institutional-capacity and child-protection scholarship recognizes the importance of legislation, services, monitoring, coordination, reporting and accountability, but these dimensions are not always analytically distinguished from the outcomes used to assess their impact. This results in a potential danger of circular assessment because institutions are assessed in terms of indicators which require the institutions analysed to be capable of producing.

Third, research on conflict and displacement offers a significant amount of evidence regarding protection risks but has limited linkages to the research on public administration and performance information and implementation. On one hand, the literature warns against inferring any increased prevalence of sexual violence from displacement itself, and, on the other, it shows that conflict and displacement can impact the availability of institutions and how sexual harms are reported.

This study aims to fill these gaps through a combined approach of performance measurement, institutional capacity, child-protection systems, and conflict-displacement research. It's key is that it sees protection risk, administrative visibility, and institutional response as distinct yet interrelated aspects of child-protection performance. This distinction allows recorded cases to be important evidence, but without being given an inferential meaning they are not supported by. It also refocuses institutional responsibility from merely being about whether there are too many or too few cases to addressing whether public institutions can prevent harm, support safe reporting and detection, and respond to the identified need for protection in effective and accountable ways.

The outcome offers a new perspective on child protection as both a public-administration issue and a human-rights and social-policy issue. It links measurement to the processes of state capacity, implementation, information systems, service delivery, coordination and accountability—how formal protection commitments turn into observable administrative action.

3. Conceptual Framework

As indicated in the literature review above, the issue of data availability is not the major one in assessing child-protection performance, but the nature of the link between institutions and data that can make their performance visible. In situations of conflict, displacement, social stigma and differential administrative access, recorded cases are only those protection concerns that are identified through specific reporting and monitoring mechanisms. The conceptual framework thus distinguishes between protection risk, administrative visibility, institutional capacity and institutional response. These are analytically linked dimensions and should not be viewed as alternative indicators of child protection.

3.1 Protection Risk

By protection risk we mean those characteristics that could make children more vulnerable or exposed to sexual violence, but not necessarily that victimisation is present. Children's protection contexts may be impacted by conflict and displacement including disrupted households, education, livelihoods, community networks, public services, and access to state institutions.

Studies on violence in conflict and displacement environments, therefore, highlight that vulnerabilities are not just a result of a single contextual factor, but instead of the interplay of social and institutional factors (Krause, 2015; Poretti, 2020).

This distinction matters especially in the case of displacement. While displacement may have a negative impact on children's access to familiar institutions, services, documentation, community networks, and reporting procedures, it is not in and of itself a sign of sexual victimization. Turner (2019) warns that conclusions on prevalence cannot be made from incident-based evidence and that assumptions of increased SGBV are not necessarily correct when it comes to displacement. It is thus argued that, in the current framework, conflict and displacement are not areas of sexual violence per se, but rather contextual pressures that can have an impact on protection needs and the functioning of institutions.

Protection risk is hence dissociated from the outcomes of protection recorded. This makes it possible to evaluate the institutional setting of this group of vulnerable children without drawing premature conclusions about the actual level of CSA in the former tribal regions.

3.2 Administrative Visibility

Administrative visibility is the way by which a protection concern is made visible in a system that is monitored or reported institutionally. An incident may not be known or sought out through disclosures, reports, detections, documents, registrations or otherwise through an organization that has a duty to monitor and/or respond to child protection concerns.

This is a key aspect of the study as recorded cases do not represent underlying prevalence. For example, evidence on sexual-violence measurement shows that disclosure and measurement processes can have significant impacts on what is observable. As an illustration, Traunmüller, Kijewski and Freitag (2019) found markedly different rates of sexual assaults by indirect versus direct questioning during the war. In general, UNICEF defines violence against children as particularly underreported and that many children might not be able or willing to report violence.

This is also the case with administrative data. UNICEF's review of administrative data on violence against children shows that there are six areas that impact data quality and usefulness: data collection and reporting, quality assurance, information flows, monitoring and evaluation, coordination and data use. Therefore, administrative records can be a rich source of information about cases brought to specific institutions, but their meaning needs to be understood in light of the filters that led to those cases being brought.

Administrative visibility per se is not regarded as evidence of institutional success or failure. However, while more visibility could signal higher levels of underlying harm, it could also be due to more access to reporting, improved monitoring, extended reach of institutions, more systematic documentation, or more willingness to report. Low levels of visibility, on the other hand, can reflect less underlying damage, but can also occur where reporting and detection are not robust. Protection conditions and recorded case information are thus linked in the concept through an analysis.

3.3 Institutional Capacity

Institutional capacity is the hands-on capacity of public and related institutions to carry out their child-protection roles. The framework separates out functional capacity and formal institutional presence. The presence of legislation, an agency, a designated office, a reporting mechanism, etc., do not necessarily mean that the protection system has the capacity to function effectively in terms of personnel, resources, coordination, information systems, services and/or implementation.

This separation aligns with the public-administration literature, which highlights the distinction between formal institutional design and state capability (Grindle, 2004; Fukuyama, 2013; Andrews, Pritchett, & Woolcock, 2017). It is especially applicable to child protection where the various tasks are often split between a number of institutions such as social welfare, police, health services, justice institutions, education authorities,

local administration and nongovernmental organisations. Good protection will therefore rely to some extent on whether these actors can turn formal obligations into concerted administration.
Institutional capacity is clustered in five dimensions that were established based on the literature on public-administration and child-protection: institutional and administrative capacity; reporting and information capacity; service and referral capacity; coordination and implementation capacity; and monitoring and accountability capacity. These dimensions are relevant to systems approaches to child protection. For instance, UNICEF's existing framework for strengthening systems also includes the following elements as key components of a functioning child-protection system: policy and legislation; governance and coordination; services; oversight; human and financial resources; participation; and data and evidence.
The framework thus does not rely on the formal rules to build institutional capacity. The documentary analysis, rather, looks at evidence to answer the question whether institutional settings have an operational nature that allows for implementation.

3.4. Reporting and Information Capacity

Reporting and information capacity is distinguished from the overall institutional capacity because it has a unique tie to the number of cases reported. It is about the availability and accessibility of reporting options, institutional detection, case registration, information management, monitoring arrangements, data flows and the capacity to preserve and utilise protection information.
This distinction is important for performance measure. Better reporting and monitoring can lead to more cases being reported, as issues that may have been previously unknown or unrecorded in protection systems are now reported. This means that an apparent rise in cases reported after the reporting system has been enhanced should not be assumed to represent a worsening in child protection. Likewise, limited access and information reporting are likely to prevent low recorded numbers from being the basis for effective prevention.
The importance of this distinction is recognized in international child-protection measurement practice. UNICEF considers administrative data systems as a material part of the maturity of a child-protection system, and considers both the quality of the data produced and the use of information for planning, policy development, service improvement and monitoring. Violence against children is also significantly under-recognised and underreported, while UNICEF also states that reliable child-protection data are needed for planning, budgeting, policy implementation and assessment.
Reporting capacity is therefore not only viewed as a mechanism to record an existing prevalence but also as a part of the institutional process that generates observable protection information.

3.5 Institutional Response and Accountability

Institutional response refers to what actions occur following the identification of a protection concern. These processes include registration, referral to appropriate services, case management, investigation, as required, access to health and/or legal, psychosocial and/or protection services, coordination among the responsible institutions, follow-up, monitoring and oversight.
The separation between response and visibility becomes essential due to the ability of the institutions to execute different at different phases of the protection process. Case identification can be improved in a system without that system having the capacity to deliver services. Or services may be in place but not available due to low level of reporting and referral. So there is no way to assess institutional performance by looking at case numbers and institutional presence only.
Accountability refers to the extent to which institutional responsibilities are clearly established, tracked and open to review in such a way that implementation problems become visible. This involves systems to monitor cases, track referrals, monitor service provision and to use information to enhance policy and administration. Systems-based child-protection approaches also highlight how coordinated

services, minimum standards, oversight, governance, and evidence are mutually reinforcing aspects, and not separate interventions.

This understanding also relates child protection to enhanced public sector performance management. The key accountability question is not one of numbers of cases recorded, but one of whether an institution can identify and respond to protection needs, record what has occurred and learn from and improve the organisation based on the information.

3.6 Conflict and Displacement as Pressures on Protection Systems

The two concepts of conflict and displacement have a dual position in the framework. They can impact on the circumstances in which children face protection risks, but also can put pressure on institutions that are tasked with preventing, detecting and responding to protection risks.

Conflict may hamper mobility, interrupt services, diminish administrative control, affect staffing and flow of information, and make coordination between institutions difficult. Displacement may disrupt families' access to existing service networks, change jurisdictions, add extra burden to public services, and hinder referral and case follow-up. These processes also imply that external pressures may affect the protection needs as well as the visibility and salience of those needs for the institutions.

It is therefore not assumed that there is a linear relationship between conflict, displacement and recorded cases. An uptick in protection needs during a more insecure time may not be reflected in reporting. Population return or improved administrative access, conversely, could lead to greater reporting of concerns for protection on the grounds that reporting systems become more accessible. The framework therefore refrains from interpreting changes in reported cases without taking into account the contexts in which reporting took place.

This is particularly relevant in the former tribal areas where conflict, displacement, return, administrative change and formal public institutions have been intricately intertwined. The issue of concern is not, therefore, whether or not these pressures were present, but how the protection system worked in the presence of these pressures.

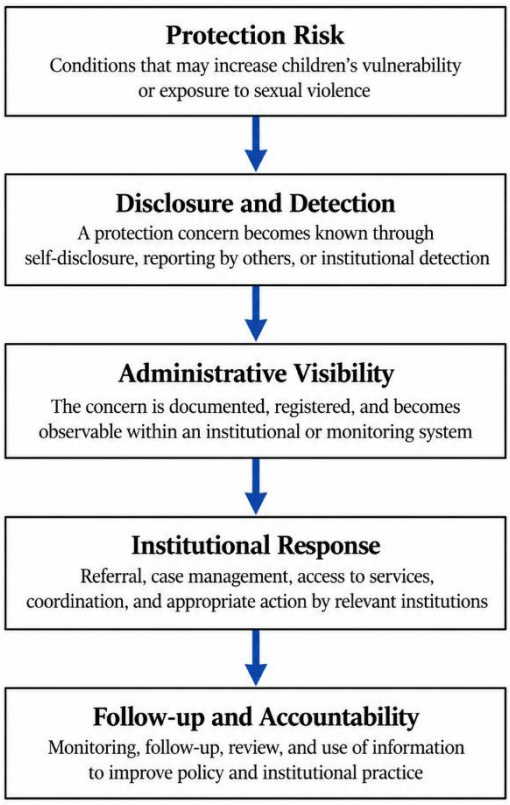
3.7 Integrated Analytical Framework

The framework integrates these components into a overall protection process as stages and conditions. The protection risks occur in social, security, household and institutional settings. The disclosure, reporting, detection, documentation and monitoring then make some protection concerns visible. When they are seen, they are referred to a series of institutional response, services, coordination, follow-up and accountability. The institutional capacity is shaping the visibility of concerns as well as what happens when they become visible.

This process may be impacted by conflict and displacement on several levels. They are able to change the level of protection and limit institutional access at the same time as holding the institution accountable for services demanded. Case numbers are thus a product of several processes that interact with each other, and not a plain measure of harm.

Figure 1 summarizes the framework.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework for Institutional Child-Protection Performance



Institutional capacity is manifested in reporting and information systems, administrative capacity, services and referral arrangements, coordination and implementation, monitoring and oversight throughout the process. Conflict and displacement acts as a contextual pressure that may impact protection risks and the functioning of institutions.

These components are also recognized to be interconnected, with feedback occurring between them. More monitoring can reveal quite gaps in implementation. Better services could help to increase institutional trust and affect future reporting. The increased visibility of cases may create demand for resources, or perhaps for changing policy, and accountability mechanisms may impact how administration is handled in the future. Performance information is not thus solely a product of the administration of child protection; it may also affect future institutional behaviour.

This framework serves as the underpinning for the mixed-methods analysis of the study. Where there are sources that provide valid comparison, observable patterns in conflict, displacement, reported issues of protection, and other relevant indicators are described, using published quantitative evidence. Reporting access, administrative capacity and referral and services, coordination, monitoring and accountability are then discussed in relation to the institutional mechanisms behind the foregoing patterns, through documentary evidence. The aim is not to draw conclusions about the level of prevalence from the partial administrative information, but to assess what can be said from the information available about the way in which the protection system works.

3.8 Analytical Propositions

The study is completely based on secondary quantitative evidence and documentary analysis,

and there is no attempt to make experimental or quasi-experimental causal identification, so the use of analytical propositions rather than causal hypotheses is appropriate.

P1. There should be better reporting and monitoring systems in place as this will improve administrative visibility of protection concerns, without necessarily increasing prevalence.

P2. Mechanisms for referral, provision of services, coordination, monitoring, follow-up, and accountability should be more robust to represent greater institutional capacity.

P3. In situations of conflict and displacement, protection needs and institutional operation may be in a state of tension at the same time, and numbers of recorded cases may be hard to interpret without considering their institutional context.

P4. Using case counts from records reported to CSA is not enough to measure the effectiveness of child-protection work as the number of cases that are reported is partly a function of access to reporting, detection and documentation of cases, and monitoring.

These are not statements to be statistically evaluated with a newly gathered dataset, but are organizing expectations. They help direct and inform the choices, comparisons and synthesis of the published quantitative evidence and qualitative documentary material that is examined in the following sections. This allows the study to assess the performance of institutions while not offering prevalence data that is not available or causal estimates that are not supported.

4. Data and Methods

This study uses a secondary, mixed-methods approach to explore the influence of institutional capacity, reporting structures, accountability, conflict, and displacement on observable outcomes of child protection in the erstwhile tribal regions of Pakistan. The design used is suitable for the research problem since a single source does not offer a comprehensive measure of the prevalence of child sexual abuse and the performance of the protection system. The research does not create an artificial data set based on incomparable observations, but rather combines quantitative data with a systematic qualitative analysis of the documentary evidence.

The scale and extent of observable phenomena is established using quantitative evidence where such information is available, and documentary evidence is used to examine the institutional processes through which protection concerns become apparent and a response is given. Within such integration, no reported cases are used as estimates of underlying prevalence, and triangulation is possible.

4.1 Research Design

This study employs a convergent secondary mixed-methods approach whereby quantitative and qualitative evidence are used to respond to different aspects of the same research problem. Quantitative elements are based on reported figures of child protection cases, conflict and displacement, demographic situations, and institutional activity from published statistics if sufficiently clear geographical scope and definition is available. Qualitative analysis involves structured documentary analysis of legislation, policy documents, institutional assessments, humanitarian reports, child-protection monitoring reports, and scholarly literature.

The two components are not interchangeable, but complementary. Published numerical evidence are revealed showing observable patterns and documentary analysis identifies the administrative mechanisms that may help explain observable patterns. This distinction is significant because the disclosure, reporting access, detection, documentation and monitoring of observed CSA cases rely on it. The design thus does not attempt to account for the unobserved prevalence of crime based on the recorded cases, or to interpret changes in the number of recorded cases as evidence of changes in victimization.

The study is mainly explanatory/interpretive and not causal. Does not state that conflict, displacement, or capacity of institutions leads to a particular change in prevalence of CSA. Rather, it determines if the evidence from various independent sources suggests consistent links between external pressures, institutional

frameworks, administrative visibility, and protection responses.

4.2 Case and Geographic Scope

The empirical study is the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan, which were merged with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa by the Twenty-Fifth Constitutional Amendment Act, 2018. The principal geographic frame is composed of Bajaur, Khyber, Kurram, Mohmand, North Waziristan, Orakzai, and South Waziristan, based on the geographic classification used by the various sources. The administrative structure of the post-merger period needs special care as institutional documents prior to and after 2018 may be using different terminology for areas and administrative setups.

The reason for choosing the former FATA is that they are a theoretically meaningful case but not a statistically representative sample of Pakistan. The area has been characterized by the exposure to prolonged conflict, significant displacement and return, historically limited administrative access and a significant formal governance transition. Such traits render it especially well suited to understanding the role public institutions play when there is a need for protection and an administrative burden.

The research does not make an assumption that all seven districts have the same documentary or statistical coverage. Only disaggregated evidence is compared at district level if there is evidence from a source to support this. Provincial/FATA-wide or national evidence is not artificially assigned at the district level. Likewise, observations made about different geographic structures or for different reporting periods are not considered directly comparable in the absence of evidence that shows how they correspond.

4.3 Documentary Evidence and Source Selection

Qualitative evidence base is a mix of scholarly and institutional documents that have been chosen for relevance to the conceptual dimensions of the study. Academic work on public sector performance measurement, administrative capacity, policy implementation, administrative burden, child-protection systems, conflict related sexual violence, displacement, underreporting and measurement is incorporated into the academic corpus. Legislation and policy documents, government and statutory child rights documentation, UNICEF assessments and programmatic documentation, humanitarian and displacement documentation, child protection monitoring reports.

Sources that contain direct evidence on one or more of the following are given particular weight: the former FATA and the institutional framework for child protection in Pakistan. UNICEF's child-protection system mapping and assessment is particularly critical as it explores protection issues as well as institutional arrangements for public child-protection service delivery in the former FATA. The assessment records, among other issues, the lack of a formal referral system for cases of sexual and physical violence at the time of assessment, the lack of a dedicated health-sector management information system for all cases of sexual and physical violence, and the weaknesses of formal coordination and follow up of cases. These observations are not estimates of prevalence of CSA, but are institutional evidence.

The subsequent developments are put into perspective by more recent, national evidence assuming that the national context applies to the merged districts equally. The National Commission on the Rights of Child's State of Children in Pakistan 2024 offers a modern evidence-based report based on systemic factors impacting the rights of children, and UNICEF materials capture ongoing work to improve child-protection systems, services, and case-management arrangements.

Sources are kept if they meet three requirements: They must be relevant to the material and conceptually related to at least one element of the conceptual framework; they must be methodologically and institutionally transparent enough to determine what the evidence is; and they must be locatable with respect to time and place. It is not enough that the sources report on the same topic for them to be considered equivalent. The use of primary documents from institutions or monitoring types is given preference to theoretical and methodological

interpretations from peer-reviewed research for claims regarding specific administrative arrangements or reported conditions.

4.4 Quantitative Secondary Evidence

The quantitative element is strictly dependent on quantitative information already prepared by identifiable external sources. For this study, no survey, administrative, interview or synthetic district-level dataset is created. Thus, quantitative evidence is descriptive and comparative, and is kept at the level of aggregation of the original source.

Reported child-abuse and CSA statistics are analyzed based on the way they are collected. For instance, Sahil's Cruel Numbers series gives an in-depth analysis of reported cases of child abuse in Pakistan. The report for 2022 was created by daily monitoring of 81 national and regional newspapers, and other editions of the report explain that it was not intended "to provide an estimate of the prevalence of the condition in the population" but rather of reported cases. In 2023, 4213 cases of child abuse were reported in the monitored newspapers, with the report differentiating between CSA and other forms of child abuse, with only 3 per cent of total reported cases from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. These figures do not represent estimates of the number or proportion of children who are abused, but are used as evidence of observed reporting and geographic visibility.

Quantitative evidence related to conflict is only used as a proxy for the security environment and not as a proxy for sexual violence. Likewise, displacement figures are seen as proof of population displacement and institutional pressure. The study does not merge different populations of people being displaced and maintains the population definitions, reporting periods, and geographic classifications found in the displacement information provided by the International Organization for Migration's Displacement Tracking Matrix. Monitored displaced populations, returnees, migrants, assessment rounds and geographic availability, all these are distinguished from one another within the IOM's Pakistan platform, highlighting the need to keep source specific definitions.

Population data, where necessary to put scale into perspective, are taken from official census data and not used to create rates unless the numerator and denominator refer to reasonably comparable populations, geographic units and periods. Percentages and absolute rates are reproduced only if the denominators and definitions can be determined from the source data.

This method intentionally places a greater emphasis on the actual validity of the measure than on the degree of sophistication of the statistics. Due to the differences in the sources (in coverage, time period, reporting mechanism and unit of analysis), the study does not aggregate them into a regression-ready data set unless there are other means to establish comparability. In this way, no inferential coefficient is considered a sign of an institutional effect and no statistical significance test is applied to make up for the incompatible source structures.

4.5 Qualitative Analytical Framework

Documentary evidence is analyzed using a systematic framework based on the conceptual model and developed by interacting with the document. It is not only to summarize documents but to realize evidence on the institutional mechanisms whereby protection concerns come to light and are addressed.

The documentary synthesis is divided into seven analytical categories:

1. protection risks of conflict, displacement, insecurity and disruption;
2. institutional and administrative capacity;
3. reporting, detection, documentation and information management;
4. arrangements to refer and access protection services;
5. interagency and intergovernmental coordination;
6. implementation, monitoring, follow-up and accountability; and
7. Administrative barriers (institutional access, documented social or procedural barriers).

Evidence in each category is analyzed for convergence and divergence, in terms of time, and in terms of geographic scope. The difference between formal institutional arrangements and documented implementation is highlighted in particular. Formal authority, such as a law that sets up a protection responsibility, is evidence of formal authority, but not on its own evidence of whether or not the responsibility is fulfilled effectively. Documentary information on referral, case management, monitoring or service delivery, on the other hand, only gives information on operational capacity and would not constitute population-level coverage unless it is shown to be so.

A distinction is also made between statements made by the original source, and interpretations made in this study. Claims that are related to institutional weaknesses are referenced to the assessment/report in question and general conclusions are drawn on the basis of convergent evidence or explicitly stated as analytical interpretation.

4.6 Mixed-Methods Integration and Triangulation

Integration takes place at the level of interpretation. Quantitative evidence is used to support what is observed to be reported, and qualitative evidence is used to explore institutional circumstances in which the observations are made. Both parts are not considered superior. Rather, it is the combination of these that is used to determine whether different types of evidence support each other, add to each other, or show apparent conflicts that need to be explained.

For instance, a small number of incidents reported in a specific geographic context is not considered as strong evidence of good institutional performance. Before interpreting the observed count, documentary evidence is explored to provide information on reporting access, institutional presence, referral mechanisms, information systems, and service availability. On the other hand, where there is evidence of both a growth in reporting or monitoring capacity, an increase in the number of reported cases is not necessarily considered institutional deterioration.

Triangulation is especially significant as the national child-protection evidence remains to highlight issues with co-ordinated case-management and referral arrangements, as well as a lack of official data. UNICEF highlights the lack of an integrated public child-protection case-management and referral system, as well as the lack of official data on child exploitation. The apparent disagreement between administrative, monitoring and documentary evidence can in itself be analytically informative because of such limitations.

The integrated analysis thus asks three questions about each observable pattern: What does the source actually measure; how was the observation reported and/or institutionalized; and what other evidence is there to support the institutional response? This procedure brings into practice the paper's main distinction between protection risk, administrative visibility and institutional response.

4.7 Source Quality, Comparability, and Missing Evidence

Source quality is evaluated according to the use of each source. Theoretical and methodological evidence is provided through peer-reviewed studies, while government and statutory materials provide formal policy and institutional arrangements, UN and humanitarian assessments provide evidence of implementation and operational conditions, and monitoring reports provide systematic evidence of cases that become visible through specified reporting channels.

Cross-source comparison has three safeguards. First, where harmonisation would alter the meaning of the difference in terminology, it is maintained. Child abuse, CSA, sexual violence, conflict related sexual violence, displacement, return and child protection cases are not considered interchangeable terms. Second, only geographic observations are compared if territorial correspondence is justifiable. Third, no information reported does not mean that the value is confirmed as zero.

The last safeguard is particularly important. If no service, case, referral mechanism or institutional activity is located in a source, this does not prove the absence of that service, case, referral

mechanism or institutional activity unless the source explicitly makes that claim. Therefore, in the absence of any evidence, the answer is considered to be unknown, and not a negative observation.

The study also acknowledges time constraints. For instance, the assessment of the UNICEF FATA system reflects the institutional context at the time of the assessment and does not necessarily provide a picture of the current protection system. Consequently, if there is evidence of later institutional development, that is used; historical assessments are included for the purpose of understanding the institutional baseline and trajectory.

4.8 Ethical Considerations

No direct contact with children, survivors, public officials or other human participants is involved in the study. It is based entirely on scholarly, institutional, administrative, humanitarian, and monitoring documents that have been published before. As such, the research does not provide any new personally identifiable information or attempt to elicit accounts of anyone's sexual violence experience.

However, the ethical aspects are still relevant as it is dealing with the topic of sexual violence and children. The analysis does not sensationalize the presentation of the information on the cases, does not attempt to identify the victims of crime, nor to make inferences about individual experiences from the aggregate data on the cases. Case counts are only published at the level required by the research question, and are interpreted recognizing the potential for underreporting and reporting system variability.

The terminology used throughout the study also differentiates risk from victimisation, and reported from prevalence. It is an ethical and methodological necessity to not define populations affected by conflict or displacement as victims of sexual violence based on contextual vulnerability alone.

4.9 Methodological Limitations

There are several drawbacks to the design. Most significantly, secondary evidence does not allow for determining the true prevalence of CSA in the former tribal areas. Reporting systems only document cases that are visible through certain channels and they cannot be combined easily due to differences in reporting systems. The lack of a newly created individual or district-level dataset is also a constraint on being able to estimate statistical relationships between institutional capacity and/or conflict and/or displacement, and/or protection outcomes.

There are other challenges associated with documentary evidence. The institutional reports are not necessarily comprehensive, since they may have different purposes, methodology, time coverage and geographic scope, and formal policy documents may outline what is planned, not what is implemented. Humanitarian/monitoring reports, on the other hand, need not necessarily represent a complete picture of all institutional activity, and can highlight areas of concern for humanitarian and monitoring operations. These limitations are compensated for by source differentiation and triangulation and not by uniformity of reliability.

The study therefore does not draw causal conclusions that institutional capacity, conflict or displacement causes a specific amount of CSA. Its empirical work is distinct: it focuses on the interactions between various types of evidence and their role in the institutional making of child-protection information, and it explores how the systems of child protection can turn evidence of issues into response and accountability. This less inferential approach is in keeping with the main thrust of the study and does not place precision on evidence that it cannot uphold.

4.10 Analytical Transparency

A separation of the source-reported evidence and the study's interpretation is maintained for analytical transparency. The original definitions and geographic and temporal extent of numerical observations are maintained. The documentary claims are "owned" by the source and no attempt is made to combine evidence from multiple reporting systems simply to create a bigger quantitative sample.

The strategy also allows the study to be repeatable without taking ownership of a "ground truth" data

set. Evidence base is clearly identifiable published material and analytical categories for synthesising the material are clearly stated. This establishes a traceable link between the conceptual framework, evidence examined, and conclusions reached and provides an audit trail.

The methodology, as a whole, offers a knowingly conservative foundation for the assessment of child-protection performance in a context in which the most easily visible result (recorded cases) is one of the most hard to interpret. The study does not simply consider data constraints as methodological issues of secondary importance, but as integral parts of the substantive analysis of administrative visibility, institutional capacity and accountability.

5. Findings

The synthesis, combining qualitative and quantitative data, shows a dynamic in the evidence that is consistent: cases reported in the registers can not be read in isolation of the institutional processes by which they are rendered visible. Documentary evidence reveals that reporting, referral, staffing, coordination, information management and follow-up were significant historical limitations in the former FATA and further evidence shows that these are still being institutionalized in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. In contrast, published quantitative evidence shows that the distribution of child abuse reports is geographically heterogeneous but fails to provide evidence for geographical differences in prevalence. The results collectively point to the key analytical separation of protection risk, administrative visibility and institutional response.

5.1 Recorded Cases as Measures of Visibility rather than Prevalence

The first finding relates to the interpretation of the number of cases that have been reported. Numerous pieces of evidence reported in the country are available for cases that are visible; however, evidence from the reporting systems available do not allow direct estimates of underlying CSA prevalence. For instance, Sahil's Cruel Numbers 2023 has been collated after 81 newspapers from all across the country and regions were monitored on a daily basis. It had 4,213 reported cases of child-abuse in Pakistan including CSA, missing children and child marriage. The majority of reported cases, 75 percent, were from Punjab while 3 percent cases were reported from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

These geographic variations are large, but they do not have a simple interpretation as differences in victimization. When an incident becomes publicly reportable, it is captured in newspaper-based monitoring and consequently will make it to monitored media. It therefore mirrors a number of processes at once: disclosure, institutional contact, access to the media, reporting and documentation. This is in line with the broader measurement literature reviewed above, where estimates of sexual violence are shown to vary significantly depending on the reporting or elicitation mechanism used.

The relatively small proportion of nationally monitored cases in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is analytically significant for this reason (unclear meaning). It may partially be the result of underlying differences in harm, but also be a result of difference in reporting access, institutional visibility, media attention or other processes that lead to inclusion or exclusion of an incident in the observable record. These mechanisms cannot be separated quantitatively based on the evidence. The results therefore lend weight to the study's premise that the number of cases reported should be regarded as an indicator of the amount of observation or reporting, but not as a direct measure of prevalence.

Table 1. Selected Published Evidence on Child-Protection Visibility and Institutional Conditions

Evidence	Published observation	Analytical interpretation
Sahil, Cruel Numbers 2023	4,213 reported child-abuse cases identified through monitoring of 81 national and regional newspapers	Measures cases becoming visible through monitored reporting channels, not population prevalence

Geographic distribution	75% of reported cases were from Punjab and 3% from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	Demonstrates geographic variation in observed reporting but does not establish corresponding variation in underlying abuse
UNICEF FATA child-protection system assessment	Weaknesses documented in referral arrangements, staffing, information management, and coordination	Indicates institutional constraints potentially affecting both administrative visibility and response
UNICEF Pakistan child-protection evidence	Continuing limitations in coordinated case management, referral arrangements, and official child-protection data	Indicates that information-system and implementation limitations remain relevant to interpretation of reported outcomes

5.2 Institutional Presence Did Not Necessarily Constitute Functional Capacity

A common theme in the documentary evidence is the difference between formal institutional responsibility and capacity to operate. UNICEF Mapping and Assessment found a number of organizations at central and agency level whose responsibilities with regard to child protection in the former FATA overlap. It also discovered, however, that organisations providing relevant services did not always think of their activity as a part of a package integrated child-protection service.

This was particularly evident in the organizational role of the Social Sector Department. It was granted a wide mandate that covered children's welfare and protection; however, the assessment revealed that it did not have specific mechanisms for identification, assessment, referral and follow-up and was not sufficiently provided with human resources for child protection. Formal responsibility thus went hand in hand with constraints in implementation.

This discovery aligns with the institutional form and functional capability dichotomy used in the public-administration literature (Grindle, 2004; Andrews, Pritchett, and Woolcock, 2017). The main institutional issues were not just whether public institutions had protection related responsibilities in the former FATA, but whether they had operational arrangements to operationalise these responsibilities into coordinated protection practice.

The evidence thus indicates that institutional presence, on its own, is not a good measure of capacity. The assessment should be more defensible based on evidence regarding personnel, operational procedures, referral mechanisms, information systems, services, coordination, and follow-up.

5.3 Reporting and Information Systems Constituted a Distinct Capacity Constraint

Reporting and information capacity is a very prominent institutional aspect. There was a need for service-delivery mechanisms tailored to the identification, assessment, referral and follow up of FATA; limitations in information management were identified during the assessment. It is important that these weaknesses not only limit the provision of services, but also that they impact what is then reported in the administrative records.

The importance of information capacity is not limited to the FATA assessment of the past. The Pakistan child-protection overview by UNICEF highlights the need for more official data on types of child exploitation, as well as the connection between system strengthening and the establishment of coordinated child-protection case-management and referral mechanisms. This lack of information can thus not simply be an external research restriction, but a problem that lies within the functioning of the protection system itself.

This finding helps to define the notion of administrative visibility that was developed in Section 3. The work of reporting and information systems functions as institutional filters between the level of protection concerns and the reported case statistics. Some protection issues may not even be documented when the systems are not available, not available in an integrated way, or poorly integrated. Reporting and documentation of cases increases may occur without an increase in victimization when improvements arise.

The impact on performance measurement is profound. Reporting capacity is an institutional outcome, and should be measured as such rather than as a means to an end for the other indicators.

5.4 Referral, Coordination, and Case Management Revealed Implementation Gaps

The second is a theme of moving from identification to response. The UNICEF FATA assessment revealed that the child-protection policy framework was lacking in terms of integrated case referral and management, and paid little attention to strengthening coordination systems. It also highlighted the lack of mechanisms for identification, assessment, referral and follow up.

The results indicate that the performance of a protection system can not only be measured at the reporting but also at any other point. Even if a protection concern is apparent, effective response is dependent upon whether or not institutions are able to pass the case from one to another, link children to relevant services, coordinate their responsibilities and keep up follow-up.

The difference is particularly significant as child protection is institutionally inter-dependent. Several agencies, such as social-welfare authorities, police, health providers, justice institutions, educational actors, local administration, and civil-society organizations, can have only part of the capacity needed to respond to a case. The problem of fragmentation thus stems not only from the lack of formal mandates in individual institutions, but also from the fact that even when they do, there is an implementation problem.

Some more recent evidence reveals institutional development, but also confirms the ongoing significance of this issue. Coordinated case management and referral remain a key system strengthening priority in UNICEF's current child-protection materials in Pakistan. There are also examples from operational child-protection units in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where cases are referred to services through a variety of referral systems: via the Child Protection Helpline 1121, police, service providers and the media, highlighting that modern methods of case identification rely on a range of institutional opportunities.

The longitudinal implication must be taken with a pinch of salt, however. The historical FATA evaluation and the current provincial evidence are not comparable in terms of the institutions being evaluated and at the same geographical levels. They thus exhibit institutional changes and sustained policy focus, but cannot on their own confirm the extent of improvement in each of the previous FATA districts.

5.5 Conflict and Displacement Increased Institutional Complexity

For conflict and displacement, it is better to think of them as pressures on the protection environment than as direct measures of sexual victimization. Child protection in emergencies and armed conflict was explicitly covered in the UNICEF FATA assessment substantive scope, underscoring the importance of insecurity to the institutional context in which protection services functioned.

The mechanism is explained in the wider literature. Conflict can change children's protection systems and limit access to institutions, and displacement can break previously established connections between children and services and institutions. Krause (2015) highlights the need to see continuity between conflict, flight, and displacement as a key issue in understanding vulnerability, while Turner (2019) warns against assuming that displacement status has a direct correlation with prevalence of sexual violence.

The evidence thus lends itself to a double interpretation. Demands on protection institutions can grow in times of conflict and when people are displaced, and they can be more challenging to see and respond to. In this context,

fluctuations in numbers of reported cases are particularly confusing. The drop in reported cases in times of insecurity might be due to lower victimisation rates, lower access to reporting, weaker monitoring, population movements or a combination of these.

This translates into public administration as a need to bring external pressure into account for interpretation of performance and not just as another risk indicator. Displaced and insecure institutions might need more administrative resources just to maintain access, documentation, referral and follow-up.

5.6 Accountability Depends on Information and Follow-Through

The evidence also shows that there is a close relationship between information systems and accountability. Accountability is more than a formal passing of the buck. Institutions must be able to prove that a concern was raised, the concern was passed on to, the response was, and follow-up, if required, was undertaken. Poor information management and disparate referral consequently limits service provision and ability to hold institutions accountable to service delivery.

This discovery is directly related to the research in public-sector performance management. Only when the processes that produce the performance information are reasonably dependable, and the information can be linked to institutional accountability, can it be used as information for accountability. In child protection, a system in which the volume of cases reported is recorded without tracking referrals, service provision and case follow-up is a partial picture of performance.

Institutions in Pakistan today bear witness to this link. The Commission's state of children in Pakistan 2024 is a product of its statutorily mandated monitoring function and explicitly utilises disaggregated data and analytical evidence to assess the realisation of children's rights. While this national monitoring is an important development towards accountability, national reporting is no substitute for regular operational information at the level at which protection services are provided.

Hence, accountability should be measured all along the protection pathway—visibility, referral, response, follow-up and institutional learning. Case counts provide information about only one part of that pathway.

5.7 Integrated Mixed-Methods Findings

The combination of quantitative and documentary evidence results in four key findings. Published case statistics show evidence of administrative and public visibility, but cannot show underlying CSA prevalence. Large spatial variations in monitoring data are thus to be interpreted as differences in observed reporting, unless other prevalence evidence suggests otherwise.

Second, the formal presence of institutions in the former FATA is not a good indicator of institutional capacity. Despite the presence of organizations with a formal protection mandate, historical gaps in staffing and operational mechanisms, referral, coordination, information management and follow-up have been identified via documentary evidence.

Thirdly: Reporting capacity and response capacity are analytically separable. Improved reporting can lead to improved case visibility but does not necessarily lead to improved referral or services. On the other hand, where children are unable to use services for reporting and referral, they are unable to use available services as effective protection measures. This distinction is what makes recorded cases insufficient to represent system performance.

Fourthly, conflict and displacement make performance interpretation more rather than less complicated. They might change protection requirements, as well as institutional access and reporting, service needs, and case processing. High or low levels of cases, therefore, are not necessarily good indicators of institutional success.

Table 2. Integrated Findings by Analytical Dimension

Analytical dimension	Evidence synthesized	Principal finding	Performance implication
Protection risk	Conflict and displacement literature and institutional assessments	External pressures affect the protection environment but do not establish CSA prevalence	Risk indicators should not be treated as measures of victimization
Administrative visibility	Sahil reporting data and sexual-violence measurement literature	Recorded cases depend on disclosure, detection, documentation, and reporting channels	Case counts indicate observable reporting rather than underlying prevalence
Institutional capacity	FATA child-protection system assessment and governance literature	Formal institutional mandates can coexist with operational capacity gaps	Institutional presence alone is insufficient as a measure of performance
Reporting and information	UNICEF child-protection and monitoring evidence	Information-system capacity affects which protection concerns become institutionally visible	Reporting capacity should be assessed as a distinct dimension of institutional performance
Referral and services	FATA system assessment and contemporary child-protection evidence	Identification of a protection concern does not guarantee coordinated referral or service provision	Response indicators should extend beyond case registration
Coordination	Institutional assessments	Fragmentation across responsible organizations can interrupt implementation	Coordination should be assessed as a substantive dimension of institutional capacity
Accountability	Child-protection monitoring and public-administration literature	Accountability depends on traceable information concerning institutional action and follow-up	Performance assessment should connect reporting with response and follow-up

The total evidence thus confirms the main argument of the paper, as well as modifying it. The crux of the issue is not that the number of cases is irrelevant. They are essential to record cases that come to light and can help in planning, advocating, providing services, and holding people to account. The problem is when they are given an inferential meaning that they cannot maintain. A defensible child-protection performance framework should take into account reported cases, as well as evidence of access and coverage to reporting, institutional capability, service response, coordination and monitoring, and contextual pressures.

This discovery provides a way to consider something other than a simple dichotomy of "more cases" versus "fewer cases." The pertinent performance question is whether institutions are able to diminish risks to protection while at the same time ensuring that protection concerns are

visibly known and responded to effectively, when they are seen. That distinction is the basis for the discussion in the following section.

6. Discussion

The findings show that while the lack of data is certainly a constraint on assessment of child-protection performance in Pakistan's former tribal areas, the processes of institutionalization of child-protection concerns are also a challenge in that assessment. Reported cases are the result of disclosure, detection, documentation, reporting and monitoring processes within a broader institutional setting, across evidence. This makes traditional understandings of the performance difficult because, while prevalence of abuse may not be increasing, the number of cases appearing in a system may. The results thus confirm the importance of clarifying the concepts of protection risk, adminstrative visibility and institutional response when evaluating child-protection institutions.

6.1 Rethinking Case Counts as Performance Indicators

The first implication is on the interpretation of reported CSA cases. There is a tendency to think that a lower number of cases reported is a sign of better protection, while a higher number of cases reported is a sign of worse protection, based on conventional performance logic. The results demonstrate why such an interpretation can be false. A recorded case only comes about when an incident comes to light via one or more reporting channels. Case numbers can thus differ in the absence of any change in underlying victimisation owing to differences in disclosure, institutional access, detection, documentation, monitoring and/or media visibility.

This is in line with the general literature on performance measurement. Behn (2003) believes that there should be a linkage between the uses to which performance measures are put and the specific purposes they are to serve, and Heinrich (2002) illustrates the challenges of applying outcome indicators to measure government performance. These concerns are especially significant in the context of child protection as the phenomenon to be measured may, in part, depend on the institution that is being evaluated to become part of the observable record.

The results are also in line with the evidence derived from sexual-violence measurement. Traunmüller, Kijewski and Freitag (2019) show that the disclosure-sensitive measurement techniques can yield estimates that are quite distinct from those obtained from direct reporting. Turner (2019) also makes the distinction between documented incidents and prevalence and warns against making population-level inferences based on reporting systems as they will only identify what is observable.

Not that the number of cases is not to be counted. Reported cases are crucial for case management, planning for resources, institutional monitoring, advocacy, and accountability. Instead, they should be precisely defined. They suggest the extent of cases being reported through specific reporting systems and the number of cases being seen in the absence of prevalence data. However, their use as measures of institutional performance must be supplemented by other data on reporting capacity and institutional response.

6.2 Administrative Visibility as a Dimension of Public-Sector Performance

The use of administrative visibility to child-protection performance is a key finding from this study. Administrative visibility comprises the processes by which social needs become visible to public institutions. It is an "in-between" space between a social issue and a social institutional response to the social issue.

This is an extended view of the traditional understanding of performance analysis as information production is an integral part of the performance. A robust child protection system is not just one which is able to respond effectively to known cases of child protection concerns, it also should include accessible and safe mechanisms for the identification of protection concerns. Adopted dimensions of institutional capacity are consequently systems for reporting, professional detection, case registration, information management and monitoring.

There is an important consequence of this interpretation. Institution which standardises its reporting could initially generate worse conventional statistics because more cases are brought to light. On the other hand, an institution whose reporting procedures are not accessible may report considerably fewer cases and result in significant protection needs going unaddressed. If the former is deemed weaker because it records more cases, then that would provide a perverse performance incentive.

This however should not be done without qualification and is not a goal in itself: administrative visibility. When it comes to child protection, reporting should be safe, confidential, accessible and linked to effective response. More and more documentation, with fewer referrals or services, might lead to more burden for children and families without more protection. Thus measurement of visibility should be considered in combination with response capacity and not as an objective in itself.

6.3 Institutional Capacity Is Functional Rather Than Formal

The results also confirm the distinction between the presence and capacity of institutions. However, in the past, the formal mandates and formal organisations in the former FATA existed alongside gaps in staffing, referral, information management, coordination and follow-up. Thus, the presence of laws, policies, departments or designated responsibilities does not imply institutional capacity.

This discovery is aligned with the wider literature on governance. Grindle (2004) highlights the importance of viable institutional performance in contexts where capacities are limited, and Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock (2017) differentiate between the forms of organizations and the capability to do public work. The lessons from the former FATA highlight the importance of this distinction: formal institutions established in an environment which is hard to administer do not necessarily imply the operational systems needed for effective child protection.

Therefore, institutional capacity needs to be disaggregated for performance assessment. There are the dimensions of staffing and administrative presence, reporting and information systems, referral and service capacity, and coordination, monitoring and accountability. This method is more accurate in determining the institutional strengths and weaknesses compared to a simple composite assessment of a "strong" or "weak" protection system.

6.4 Reporting Capacity and Response Capacity Should Be Evaluated Separately

A clear implication from the results is that capacity for identification and capacity for responding need to be separated. These functions are similar but different.

Reporting capacity is the question about whether there is the ability to see protection concerns. Response capacity has to do with what institutions do post-identification. One dimension may be quite good, and the other quite bad. Better helplines, community reporting, professional detection or monitoring can help to boost the number of cases identified, but referral networks and specialist services remain limited. Services also can be formally available, but have relatively few cases referred to them because reporting processes are not readily available.

The differences are a key to understanding why the number of reported cases alone cannot be an indicator of the performance of protection systems. Beyond registration there should be a meaningful performance framework following the institutional pathway. Some of the questions to consider are: do reported concerns get assessed? do appropriate referrals happen? is service accessible? are there responsible institutions coordinating? are there follow-ups and is information used for learning in the institution?

This interpretation follows the idea of child-protection systems approaches that sees the four elements (reporting, services, coordination and information systems, and oversight) of system functioning as distinct, yet interdependent (Landgren, 2005). It also shows the importance of strengthening information systems without strengthening response mechanisms would give an incomplete institutional reform.

6.5 Conflict and Displacement Complicate Institutional Performance

The results also provide further evidence that conflict and displacement can be considered pressures on protection environments as well as administrative systems. This is not equivalent to regarding conflict incidents or populations of displaced people as direct evidence of sexual violence.

Conflict can put more strain on public institutions, at the same time that it undermines their functioning. Displacement can result in the modification of service needs, cut populations off from existing referral and reporting systems, make referral and follow-up more difficult, and put extra strain on receiving institutions. The resulting connection between contextual pressure and observed protection cases is thus possibly mediated by institutions and non-linear.

The interpretation provides a method of reconciling seemingly contradictory possibilities. Increased insecurity can occur, but there may be fewer records if the access to record the data deteriorates. Increased reporting could possibly be a result of improved security or population return, which could be associated with an increase in institutional access. In the same way, strengthening public institutions after administrative transition may also bring to light "new" protection concerns.

These possibilities are not to be equated with causal patterns in the former tribal areas as it is not possible to identify with the help of the secondary evidence available. Instead, they show why there is a need for contextual evidence when interpreting the performance indicators. It is important to bear in mind Turner's (2019) advice that we should not presume a direct link between displacement and sexual-violence prevalence.

6.6 From Output Accountability to Protection-System Accountability

The results indicate that accountability needs to shift from the reported cases to assessing the effectiveness of the protection pathway. Traditional output-oriented accountability may tell little about accessibility, service quality, coordination, follow-up, or prevention and can only tell how many cases went into a system.

A protection-system approach, on the other hand, asks the question of what happens if institutions have a responsibility, will it be reflected in the work of administration? Relevant performance dimensions include accessibility of mechanisms for reporting, quality of documentation of cases, timeliness and appropriateness of referral, availability of services, interagency co-ordination, continuity of follow up, quality information systems and institutional use of information for improvement.

It's also a different way of looking at what success at the institution means. Not necessarily the system reporting the lowest cases would indicate success. In the short term, institutional strengthening can help to boost reported cases, as it helps to make them visible. In the longer term, effective prevention can help to reduce underlying levels of harm, but in order to know if that is the case, prevalence evidence would need to be able to differentiate between true decreases and changes in reporting.

Accountability systems need to be structured, therefore, so as not to encourage the underreporting or underrecording of incidents. If the success of the organization is thought to be directly tied to the number of cases, there may be little incentive for institutions to increase the number of cases detected or reported. A multidimensional framework, however, pays tribute to the ability to make protection-related issues visible in safety and the ability to act well once the issues have been identified.

6.7 Implications for Performance-Management Theory

The study holds implications not just for child protection. It detects a larger set of public sector performance issues where the outcome that is used to assess the performance of the assessed institution is influenced by that same institution. The same challenges are encountered in other areas including domestic violence, reporting of corruption, workplace harassment, discrimination, violations of regulations, public

health monitoring and complaints against public services.

Such settings can lead to the recorded incidence including at least two types of information: information about the phenomenon itself and information about the ability of the institutions or reporting system to capture it. Failure to consider the second part of this means the risk of misidentifying institutional improvement as deterioration.

Administrative visibility is thus a new idea that can supplement existing performance-management methods, in that it focuses on the creation of performance information. Instead of asking just the question whether an indicator is an output or an outcome, researchers and administrators should ask what is the process through which an observation came to the administrative system, what populations and events are not in that system, and what changes in institutional capacity affect the likelihood of an observation being made. This doesn't rule out performance measurement. Needs a more precisely defined measurement architecture. Case numbers can be supplemented by measures of accessibility of reporting systems, attendance of services, completion of referrals, quality of responses, institutional coverage, monitoring systems and, if available, independently measured prevalence. This way, there is a more convincing way of separating out the social changes from the institutional changes.

6.8 Interpretation of the Analytical Propositions

The integrated findings lend varying degrees of credence to the analytical propositions that are created in Section 3. The evidence is most supportive of P4: recorded CSA cases on their own do not provide a measure of the effectiveness of protection – institutional or monitoring mechanisms only capture those cases that come to light through specific pathways.

This is also reflected in documentary evidence as P2. Functional capacity of protection depends on referral arrangements, provision of services, information management, coordination, monitoring, follow-up and not just on formal institutional mandates, as indicated by institutional assessments.

Assistance for P1 is mainly at conceptual and process level. The evidence indicates that the reporting and monitoring system can shape the processes by which cases come to light, but available secondary data do not allow quantifying the extent to which a specific investment in capacity leads to more cases being reported. It should therefore not be seen as a quantified empirical effect of the proposition.

P3 is similar in terms of the kind of support provided. Conflict and displacement is clearly part of the institutional environment and can put additional demands and administrative issues on the reporting of CSA and the institutional response in particular former FATA districts, but due to the evidence it is not possible to make causal estimates on how they affect reporting of CSA and institutional response.

These differences are significant as they allow theoretical plausibility not to be confused with statistical confirmation. The contribution of the analysis is rather to show how the evidence hangs together and where available evidence is inadequate to draw more powerful conclusions.

6.9 Overall Interpretation

As a whole, the results do not point to an outcome-driven understanding of child-protection performance. Recorded cases are in between the underlying harm and institutional response. They are socially revealed, institutionally identified, officially recorded, and, in part, also reported in reporting systems. Their significance is thus contextually dependent, depending on the institutional context in which they are created.

What this means is that for Pakistan's former tribal areas, this distinction is very significant, with conflict, displacement, administrative transition, and historically weak institutional capacities further compounded by significant lack of available protection data. The correct answer to these limitations is not to make assumptions about prevalence from incomplete case counts, or not measure at all. To develop a performance system that acknowledges the legitimate role of various types of evidence.

The overall takeaway is therefore that child-protection performance should be assessed, and

that the assessment should be done through three interrelated aspects: conditions that influence protection risk; institutional capacity to make protection concerns safely visible; effectiveness and accountability of the response to identified protection concerns. This gives a more defensible rationale for policy and administrative reform than the case counts alone.

7. Policy implications for Public Administration and Child-Protection policy.

The results of the research have implications which go beyond the interpretation of child sexual abuse statistics. They refer to a more general problem in public administration: institutions can only be assessed by indicators whose observed values are partly a function of the ability of the institutions themselves to identify, document and report the underlying problem. This involves shifting from a narrow focus on recorded numbers of cases to a performance framework where prevention, administrative visibility, institutional response and accountability are related but distinct aspects of child protection in Pakistan's former tribal areas.

7.1 Redesigning Child-Protection Performance Measurement

The first implication has to do with the design of performance indicators. Recorded CSA cases should continue to be monitored as child protection cases as they offer valuable insights into cases that enter the reporting system. They should not, however, be seen as single measures of prevalence or institutional effectiveness. Case numbers in a district are not necessarily an indicator of a safer or stronger administration and a rise in the number of cases is not necessarily an indicator of falling performance.

An alternative measurement approach would involve an amalgamation of indicators. Reporting indicators may include, but are not limited to, indicators for the accessibility and coverage of reporting mechanisms, process indicators may include indicators for registration, assessment, and referral, service indicators may include indicators for whether identified children receive appropriate supports, coordination indicators may include indicators for interagency functioning, and accountability indicators may include indicators for follow-up, monitoring, and review. Prevalence indicators could then give a measure of underlying victimisation if methodologically reliable population-level evidence becomes available.

This multi-dimensional approach would diminish the chances of providing a reward for low administrative visibility. It would also better reflect the real functions expected of a child-protection system in the way it measures performance.

7.2 Treating Reporting Capacity as Institutional Infrastructure

Reporting mechanisms should be viewed as an integral part of a public-service infrastructure, not just as a means to provide statistics. If a need is systematically unavailable to a protection system, that system won't be able to respond to it. Capacity for reporting, therefore, must be paid attention to accessibility, institutional reach, professional detection, case registration, information management and safe referral pathways.

This is especially relevant to the former tribal areas where historically, children and families may have differential access to public institutions as a result of administrative unevenness, conflict, displacement and geographic barriers. Increasing formal institutional capacity without increased accessibility by the population to such institutions can result in institutional presence without accessibility.

Reporting capacity should be monitored separately to reporting numbers of cases. Administrative issues are whether the reporting system is geographically available, administrative awareness of the reporting and referral system, case registration, transfer of information between institutions, and linkage of children entering the system to services.

7.4 Building Interagency and Multilevel Administrative Capacity

If institutions are unable to act appropriately once a concern is raised, then good reporting is not so beneficial. Thus, policy reform needs to be focused on increasing the overall reporting-to-response continuum, not separate institutional parts.

This should involve well-defined routes for identification, assessment, referral, provision of services, follow-up and case closure. It is important that there are clear responsibilities between social-welfare authorities, police, health services, justice institutions, education authorities, local administration and relevant civil-society providers to reduce the number of cases becoming lost between organisations.

This is all the more significant for FATA, which is the subject of this study, in view of the historical institutional evidence reviewed. Issues of weakness in referral, coordination, information management and follow-up were interrelated and not individual gaps. Reform must therefore not take for granted that improvement in one organization will result in improvement across the protection system.

7.4 Building Interagency and Multilevel Administrative Capacity

Child protection is a coordination problem, as no one is normally in a position to have all the power, knowledge and services that might be needed to prevent and respond to child protection issues. Good governance thus involves horizontal coordination within sectors as well as vertical coordination between different levels of government.

This is particularly pertinent with regard to the post-merger governance context. Provincial institutional arrangements can be extended to the former tribal areas, which opens opportunities for increased standardization, however, administrative capacity at the district level and linkages between service delivery and provincial policy, monitoring, and resource allocation are key to successful implementation.

Coordination must thus be seen as a measurable institutional activity. Committees or formal coordination mechanisms are limited evidence of performance without operational data on referrals, communication, responsibility, and follow-up. The performance systems should be directed at whether or not coordination helps cases to progress through the protection pathway.

7.5 Developing Integrated Child-Protection Information Systems

The results reveal that a key relationship between service delivery and accountability is information capacity. Information systems are fragmented making it challenging to ascertain the number of concerns raised, what measures were taken after referral, if services were provided, and if cases are followed up appropriately. They also limit the capacity of policy makers to see "gaps" in geographic or institutional areas.

Therefore, strengthening systems of information on children's protection should be regarded as an administrative reform priority. The information architecture should at a minimum provide for consistent case registration, referral tracking, service documentation, follow-up and aggregate monitoring and provide for appropriate safeguards for children's confidentiality and privacy.

Standardisation is also critical. Aggregate and compare protection information collected by institutions should be done with consistent definitions and reporting procedures. Not all agencies need to collect the same information, but the fundamental concepts and case pathways should be sufficiently interoperable to facilitate institutional coordination and policy analysis.

Better information systems should not just be used for producing more statistics. Their usefulness is that they are related to staffing, services, allocations of resources, prevention, and institutional performance and accountability.

7.6 Incorporating Conflict and Displacement into Administrative Planning

Conflict and displacement should be addressed as contextual pressures on the population and institutions for child-protection planning. A protection system that is primarily set up to handle relatively stable administrative settings can be very vulnerable during insecurity or population movement to keep reporting, referral and service continuity going.

The planning of protection functions at the administrative level must thus take into account the need for protection functions to be maintained in situations where access is lost,

populations are shifting from one jurisdiction to another or the need for protection is changing rapidly. This also involves the continuity of reporting procedures, transfer of referrals (if possible), coordination between sending and receiving areas, information about the case maintained, and mechanisms for follow-up.

Meanwhile, measures of conflict and displacement cannot be used instead of evidence of sexual victimisation. The policy value is to identify settings where protection institutions might be required to do more, or be operating differently, and where further monitoring or resources might be needed.

7.7 Strengthening Accountability through Process and Outcome Indicators

Monitoring and accountability systems should be in place after registration. Reporting of counts offers limited assistance in whether public institutions performed their protection function. A more robust framework would look at: Was the case assessed? Was the referral completed? Was appropriate service available and accessed? Is there follow-up? Is there any corrective action as a result of institutional failures?

It is a mixture of output and process measures. Some indicators which may be considered include percentage of registered cases assessed, percentage of cases referred, time elapsed from identification to referral, continuity of case management, availability of appropriate services, completed follow up, and documented follow-up on unresolved cases. These indicators should be put in place only where administrative systems can provide these indicators reliably and ethically.

Careful design of the performance targets is also necessary. Targets which simply reward only those institutions that minimise recorded cases, could lead to the creation of undesirable incentives and could deter detection/reporting. However, the perspective of accountability must also allow for the possibility of better institutional visibility and better performance, at least during the early stages of developing reporting systems.

7.8 Using Performance Information for Organizational Learning

Performance data should be used to inform learning and for external accountability. Moynihan (2008) highlights that the availability of performance information does not ensure that it will be used effectively; it depends on the organisational arrangements that make it possible or not to use information to improve learning and reform. For child protection, this includes reporting and case-management data informing decisions regarding services, training, staffing, coordination and prevention.

A periodic review of cases by administration might consider the points at which cases are "entering" the protection system, where referrals are not successful, which service is experiencing a capacity issue, where follow-up efforts are weakest, and whether there are specific populations or regions that seem to be underrepresented in reporting processes. This analysis could be used to differentiate a low service demand from a low institutional accessibility.

This learning attitude is particularly important in transitioning settings at an administrative level. Finally, performance measurement can be used in a diagnostic way to help government identify where the institutional processes need to be strengthened, rather than just ranking districts or agencies based on their performance.

7.9 Proposed Multidimensional Performance Framework

This study suggests a multi-dimensional approach to assessing child protection institutions, based on the findings. There is no overall composite score required in the framework. Rather, it structures the performance information around complementary domains.

Table 3. Proposed Framework for Child-Protection Performance Measurement

Performance domain	What should be assessed	Illustrative indicators
Prevention and protection environment	Capacity to reduce and manage protection risks	Prevention activities; institutional coverage; continuity of protection functions
Administrative visibility	Ability of protection concerns to enter the system safely	Reporting access; case identification; registration coverage; functioning reporting channels
Information capacity	Ability to produce and use reliable protection information	Completeness of records; referral tracking; information flows; data-quality procedures
Institutional response	Action following identification of protection concerns	Assessment; referral completion; access to relevant services; case management
Coordination	Functioning relationships among responsible institutions	Referral protocols; interagency communication; continuity across services
Accountability	Ability to determine whether institutional responsibilities were fulfilled	Follow-up; case review; monitoring; oversight; corrective action
System learning	Use of evidence to improve administration	Performance review; identification of service gaps; adaptation of policy and resources

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The framework is not intended to be used as a validated measurement instrument. It is a policy-oriented synthesis of the conceptual framework and empirical results of this study. It is intended to illustrate the way in which performance measurement can be shifted away from recorded case numbers towards being more feasible on an administrative level.

7.10 Broader Public-Administration Implications

The argument is developed in the context of child protection but it is broader than that. Governments often rely on incidents or complaints recorded, violations or service contacts to assess performance. However, in policy areas where activity is hard to detect or difficult to access institutionally, rising observed cases may reflect the improvement of detection, rather than worsening of the situation.

Improved levels of reporting protections may lead to more corruption complaints; enhanced institutional trust may lead to more reports of workplace harassment; accessible reporting may lead to more recorded domestic violence; and increased inspection capacity may lead to more reported violations of regulation. In each case, better institutional capabilities will initially result in poorer outcomes statistics.

The general lesson, then, is that public-sector performance systems should make a distinction between changes in the underlying conditions and changes in the observability of institutions. If there is partial control of the institution over the recording of an event, then systems of measurement should include detection, accessibility, reporting, response, and follow through indicators. This enables performance data to reflect institutional capacity and not an institution to be penalised for becoming better at identifying the issues that they need to address.

If this concept is applied to former tribal areas of Pakistan, it will alter the accountability of child-protection cases from a binary notion of 'increase or decrease' of cases to a more substantive understanding of meaningful progress in child protection. The more appropriate policy question is whether or not institutions are becoming more capable of preventing the onset of protection risks, making concerns visible without compromising the safety of the individual, responding effectively, holding people to account, and learning from information their systems produce.

8. Limitations

The scope of this study has a number of limitations which should be taken into consideration in interpreting the results. Most importantly, it does not attempt to estimate prevalence of child sexual abuse in the former tribal areas of Pakistan or to claim causal effects of institutional capacity or conflict or displacement. Rather, its contribution is focused on looking at the dynamics of the interaction between protection risks, administrative visibility and institutional response as expressed in available evidence.

8.1 Reported Cases & Underreporting

The case statistics available reflect only the level of incidents that are detected through specific reporting and monitoring mechanisms, and do not reflect the true extent of the problem of CSA. Stigma, fear, access to institutions, awareness of reporting systems and trust in authorities can all have an impact on disclosure. Studies on sexual violence also indicate that the estimates of observed sexual violence can be very different depending on how sexual violence is reported and measured (Traunmüller, Kijewski, & Freitag, 2019). Thus, variations in the number of cases reported across geographical areas are interpreted as variations in the extent of reporting rather than in actual differences in victimisation.

8.2 Secondary Evidence and Comparability

The study does not involve an original survey, interview dataset or standardized administrative dataset, but rather published secondary data. There are variations in geographic scope and reporting methods as well as time periods and definitions. Hence, the observations at the national, provincial, former-FATA wide and district level are kept at their respective geographic levels, without being artificially aggregated. Also, missing information is identified from those that have been confirmed to be zero.

8.3 Temporal and Institutional Change

Since then, the former FATA have experienced significant institutional changes, especially after they got merged with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2018. Historical institutional assessments can still be of value for understanding barriers to implementation before, but are not necessarily valid for the present. Where possible, the analysis differentiates historical evidence from the more recent institutional structures.

8.4 Documentary Evidence

Sources were prepared by government, international-organization, NGO and academic sources for various purposes and hence offer varying types of evidence. Formal policy documents might focus on the institutional arrangements to be put in place, while operational assessments might focus on gaps in implementation. The study overcomes this limitation by differentiating and triangulating sources, although there are limitations in how far everyday institutional practice can be captured through documentary evidence.

8.5 Causal and Measurement limitations

The analysis does not aim at demonstrating causal effects, but at identification of institutional relationships and mechanisms. It does not suggest that if there is conflict or displacement, that results in a specific rate of CSA or that improvements in institutional capacity lead to a measurable increase in reported cases of CSA. Capacity is also multidimensional and no evidence yet exists for the construction of a validated district-level capacity index. The performance framework in this study, then, must be interpreted as a framework for analysis, and not as a validated measurement scale.

8.6 Scope and Future Research

The results are context-specific to the child-protection performance of the former tribal areas in Pakistan and are not necessarily transferable to other parts of or policy contexts. Future studies might add further evidence using structured district-level administrative data, studies based on population prevalence, longitudinal analysis of reporting/referral results, and in-depth interviews with key institutional actors. This study could also provide a framework to test the multidimensional performance model in this research.

The boundaries or restrictions do not detract from the main study analysis: that recorded cases by themselves cannot determine the prevalence of CSA, nor can they determine the effectiveness of child-protection institutions. This needs to be complemented by additional pieces of information about access to reporting, institutional capacity, service response, coordination and accountability.

9. Conclusion

This study explored the relationship between institutional capacity and institutional accountability in relation to the visibility and response to child protection concerns related to conflict displaced children at risk of sexual violence in Pakistan's former tribal areas. A core theme of the book is that the facts of cases of child sexual abuse (CSA) reported to the police are inseparable from processes of case making. Disclosure, reporting access, detection, documentation, referral, information management and monitoring all impact what will end up in the observable record. Case numbers do, however, indicate the extent of protection concerns that have been reported and on their own do not provide a good indicator of the prevalence of child abuse in a population or the effectiveness of child protection institutions.

It combines public-administration scholarship with child-protection and conflict, displacement, and sexual-violence research, and highlights three dimensions in the assessment of performance, which are often intertwined: protection risk, administrative visibility, and institutional response. This distinction is especially relevant in the context of conflict, as it is possible to see external pressures simultaneously demanding more from protection systems and limiting their capacity to see, record and act upon those demands.

The evidence from the former tribal areas of Pakistan also points to the need for making a distinction between the presence of formal institutions and their capacity to function. Historical evaluations reveal shortcomings in reporting, information management, referral, coordination, staffing and follow-up, demonstrating that having formal responsibilities does not always mean that these are well implemented. The constraints faced at the same time are also worth to interpret historically as many of the institutional developments have taken place.

It is therefore suggested that a wider perspective on child-protection performance measurement is required. Reported cases should be evaluated with respect to reporting accessibility, information capacity, referral and service delivery, interagency co-ordination, follow-up, monitoring and accountability. This is so that the likely fallacy that fewer recorded cases are a sign of greater protection is not assumed. Improved reporting and detection of significant harm can lead to an increase in reported incidents, as part of a system's ability to detect and report significant harm also improves.

This argument is more general than just public administration. Institutional capacity issues are similar to the measurement problems when they influence whether the social condition that is being measured is observable. Complaints, violations, reports and incidents detected can be an indicator of problems and the capacity of institutions to uncover them. It is therefore important that performance systems consider not just outcomes but the administrative processes that lead to outcomes that are measurable.

A key and eventual indication of success of child protection in Pakistan's former tribal areas is to shift the focus from the numbers of cases that are recorded. The more significant questions are: can the children safely access protection mechanisms; can the institutions identify and record child

protection issues; do reported needs lead to appropriate and coordinated responses; and does information feed into the improvement of institutional practice? Considering all these functions together offers a more valid starting point for assessing child-protection performance and for establishing institutions that can protect children in times of administrative and social fragility.

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