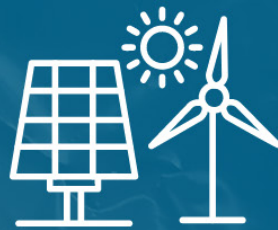


# Media Monitor

**NOVEMBER 2022 - APRIL 2023**



**Policy Research Institute for Equitable  
Development (PRIED)**

## Introduction

Pakistan's energy sector grapples with a growing demand and supply gap, inefficiencies in energy distribution and transmission, rising power tariffs and mounting circular debt. The dire situation makes it extremely important for the mainstream news media to report it accurately, thoroughly and critically. This is, obviously, because of the fact that news media always plays a vital role in shaping public opinion and public discourse which, in turn, influence policy decisions. The question is: Does Pakistani news media do justice to the coverage of the energy sector or does it do this job in a manner that neither informs the public nor leads to a constructive policy debate.

This six-monthly media monitor is meant to answer this important question.

This monitor, which is, a continuation of our previous bi-monthly media monitors aims at analyzing the news media coverage through comprehensive qualitative and quantitative lenses. It delves deep into the extent and nature of the news coverage of energy-related subjects and seeks to shed light on the role news media is playing – or not playing -- in Pakistan's crisis-ridden energy sector.

## Methodology

We selected five prominent newspapers and news websites – DAWN, Business Recorder, Express Tribune, The News and Pakistan Today – for this media monitor and analyzed a total of 700 news stories published by these media outlets between **1<sup>st</sup> November 2022 and 30<sup>th</sup> April 2023** to find out :

1. the segments of energy sector they covered
2. the key players they were about. The segments identified for this analysis include:
  - Coal;
  - Energy & Finance;
  - Gas;
  - Hydro-electricity;
  - Renewable Energy;
  - Solar Energy;
  - Wind Energy.

The five key players and stakeholders identified are:

- Consumers;
- Government;
- Private Developers;
- Regulators;
- Victims of Energy Policies.

When a story mentioned more than one segment or key player, we put it under the category that it mainly revolved around. We also tried to identify the tone of the stories: whether it was negative or positive towards a certain stakeholder.



## Power price dynamics

Electricity prices continued rising between November 2022 and April 2023, causing concern among all kinds of electricity consumers. An often-discussed factor contributing to these price hikes has been capacity payment which directly affects electricity generation cost. This payment forms a part of the financial incentives provided by the government to private power producers. It is meant to ensure that Pakistan has enough electricity generation to meet its rising demand. So, even when that capacity is not fully utilized due to any constraints, the government is bound to pay a certain fixed amount of money to private power producers to keep that capacity intact. It serves a vital purpose: when demand for electricity spikes due to seasonal reasons (that is, during summers) or due to a quick surge in economic activity, we do not have to face blackouts or disruptions in power supply. On the flip side, this cost is added to the electricity bills paid by electricity consumers. This way, these consumers end up paying for electricity that is not even produced let alone used by them.

This explains why capacity payment has come under a sharp news media focus in recent times, sometimes overshadowing all other components of electricity prices. Various taxes and surcharges included by the government in electricity bills and the cost of electricity lost during transmission and distribution (T&D) losses also hurt all types of consumers but news media did not pay much attention to these two factors during the six months period being analyzed here.

The raise in taxes and surcharges included in electricity bills, in fact, has been done to meet a precondition set by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in the first quarter of 2023 to extend a loan to Pakistan. This precondition made it mandatory for the government of Pakistan to increase its tax revenue and it has chosen to do so by such indirect means as collecting additional taxes through electricity bills and petroleum consumption. The biggest problem with these taxes is that they have levied at the same rate for all classes of consumers: those who consume 100 watts of electricity a month pay these taxes at the same as someone consuming several thousand watts each month. The other problem is that a large section of Pakistani population either does not have electricity or does not pay any bills for the electricity it consumes. This entire section, therefore, does not have to pay these taxes.

T&D losses also impact different consumers differently. Firstly, most distribution companies distribute a large part of these losses evenly to all their consumers – even to those who pay their bills regularly. Secondly, these losses are not spread evenly across Pakistan. Their percentage is much higher in some areas than in others. This suggests that bill paying consumers in high loss areas are being charged for higher amounts of electricity they do not use than those living in low loss areas.

Such nuanced understanding of electricity pricing, however, eluded the news media at least during the six months period being analyzed here.

Even though news media gave a lot of coverage to the government's negotiations with IMF, the focus of this coverage was on the populist aspects of these negotiations – such as its impact on inflation – and not on the fine print of the agreement that the negotiations were about. News reports and opinion pieces did appear that criticized the IMF's preconditions but these remained limited to electricity tariff raise and did not venture into the complicated phenomenon of electricity pricing that involves multiple tariff slabs, transmission and

distribution losses, consumer subsidies and taxation. Consequently, the public attention, too, remained focused merely on the inflationary aspect of electricity price hike and various distortions and complexities involved in electricity pricing could not become a part of public and policy discourses.

News media's coverage not just lacked depth and breadth, it also did not exhibit a critical perspective of the government's electricity-related initiatives and projects. The tone of reporting about such initiatives and projects was either laudatory or, at best, it was neutral whenever the government inaugurated a new plan to generate electricity, for instance, through coal in Thar. Without undertaking any critical reporting, news media has failed to perform its most essential function – of holding the power to account and forcing policymakers to be transparent and open about their sayings and doings. The new initiatives and projects, thus, remain unexamined and their flaws, faults and future impacts avoid scrutiny.

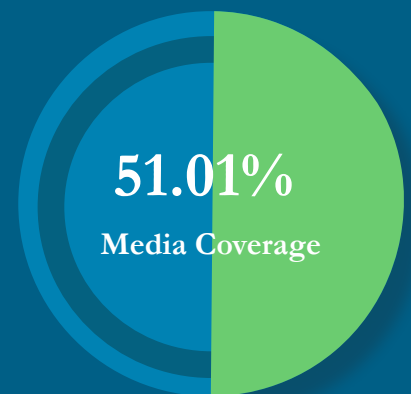
## Behind the headlines

Our analysis suggest a clear trend: The news reports reviewed primarily focus on covering the financial aspect of both key actors and segments involved in the energy sector. **Given below is a description of how these reports covered different segments and key players of energy sector:**



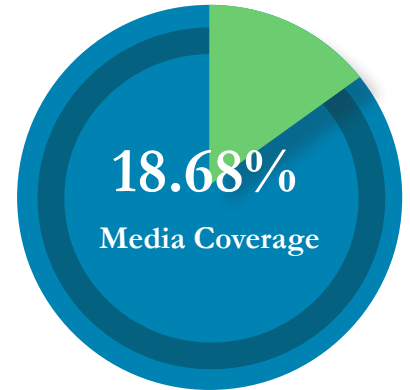
### Energy & finance:

From among the seven categories identified for this analysis, issues and problems related to energy & finance dominated news headlines monitored during the six months period covered by this publication. This segment alone accounts for more than half -- 51 percent to be exact -- of all the monitored news reports mainly because these reports were reflecting rising public concerns over ever-rising energy prices. The coverage of this segmented was 5.78 percent higher in November 2022-April 2023 period than it was in the six months prior to that. As already explained above, these figures are a clear indicator that key players in energy sector are concerned more about energy pricing than they are about its environmental, social and political aspects.



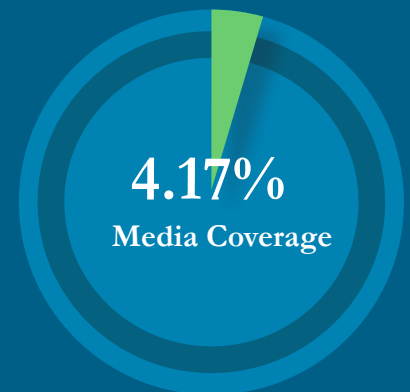


At 18.7 percent, gas segment received the second highest coverage in news media during the period under review although the attention it received was far lower the coverage received by energy & finance segment. The persisting severe gas shortage for both domestic and industrial consumers meant that its limited unavailability would earn a major spotlight in news media. So it did. What is a bit surprising is the fact the period under review includes the winter months of November, December and January when demand for gas spikes but the coverage this segment received between November 2022-April 2023 was indeed slightly (0.06 percent) less that what it was in the six months prior to that. The other important feature of this segment's coverage was the government of Pakistan's failure to procure liquefied natural gas from abroad during the winter months. But, just like in the past, news media did not cover this segment's detrimental environmental impacts and often harmful social consequences.



## Renewable energy

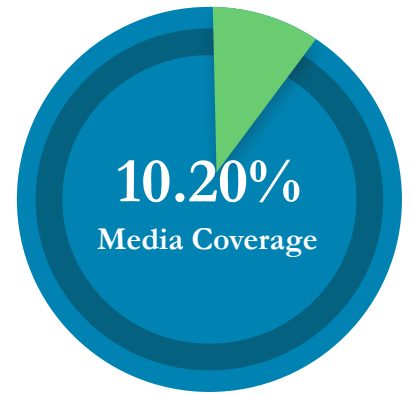
Our review showed that only 10.2 percent of the news analyzed pertained to renewable energy. The monitored contents generally revolved around solar power projects to be set up by the government of Pakistan with possible international collaboration. These contents also included some opinion pieces that advocated the significance of renewable energy, particularly its benefits for consumers. Compared to the previous six months, the coverage of renewable energy-related topics declined slightly -- by 0.61 percent.





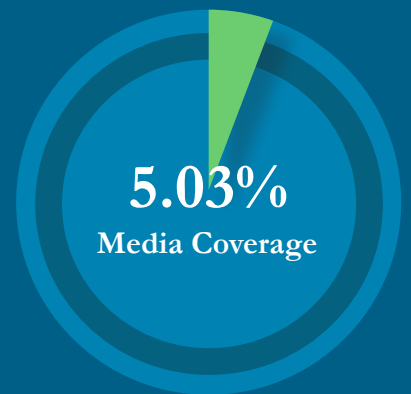
## Coal

At 10.2 percent, coal received as much news coverage as renewable energy did. It went down by 4.75 percent compared to what it was in the six months prior to November 2022-April 2023. Most of the coverage of coal was focus was on the exploitation of coal reserves found in the desert region of Thar though the news media chose to ignore the social and environmental impacts of this exploitation. The news that garnered the most extensive coverage was the commencement of commercial operations and subsequent [inauguration of two Thar coal-fired power plants](#) in Thar in March 2023. Owned by Shanghai Electric and Thal Nova companies, these plants have a cumulative capacity to generate 1,650 megawatts of electricity.



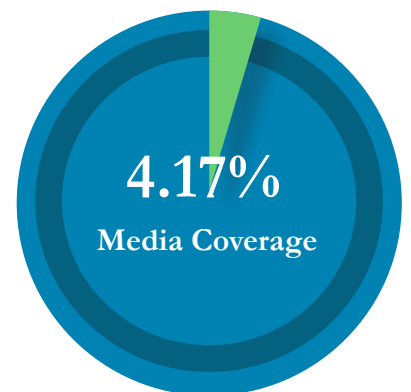
## Hydropower

Hydropower's share in the total news coverage of energy sector was 5.03 percent and most of it consisted of news reports about various hydropower projects, their funding and the setbacks they were facing. This coverage was 3.77 percent higher compared to what it was during the previous six months but, just like the coverage of any other segment, it lacked critical analyses of the social, environmental and political of these hydropower projects.



## Solar

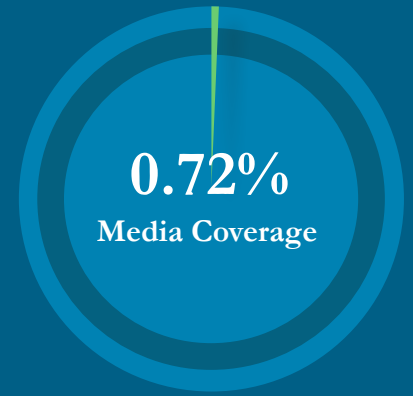
Solar energy garnered 4.17 percent of all the news coverage received by energy sector in November 2022-April 2023 , decreasing by 4.3 percent as compared to the previous six months. This coverage mainly focused on different solar power projects to be set up in the coming months and years as well as on the introduction of policies aimed at promoting solar energy. While almost of all these reports portrayed the segment positively, they mostly lacked critical analyses of the costs and benefits related to solar energy – including their potential contribution to energy prices and energy sustainability.





## Wind

This segment received least news coverage – only 0.72 percent – compared to all other segments of energy sector. It was roughly consistent with this segments in the six months prior to November 2022-April 2023. This suggests that, even though a number of wind power projects have been set up in southern Pakistan, the news media has either little interest in covering or has little information and knowledge about it.



## In the News

- The commencement of commercial operations and subsequent *inauguration of two Thar coal-fired power plants* in March 2023 - the Shanghai Electric and Thal Nova plants – which cumulatively have the capacity to generate 1,650 megawatts of power.
- Prime Minister approved the *transfer of 10 distribution companies to provincial governments* in March 2023. This would give them control over tariffs, subsidies, and load-shedding schedules, while generation and transmission systems would remain under federal control.
- The Petroleum Division created a *gas pipeline augmentation plan* in November 2022.
- Two *hydropower projects in KPK*, funded by the World Bank, are expected to commence this year.
- WAPDA awarded a *Rs. 11.9b contract* for the Mangla Refurbishment Project.
- The Sindh government, supported by the World Bank, announced the decision to *solarise 200,000 housing units* among its renewable energy projects.
- Wind power projects were expected in February to be soon adding *upto 1300 MW of power to the national grid*.



Nature and extent of news coverage received by energy sector’s key actors is described below



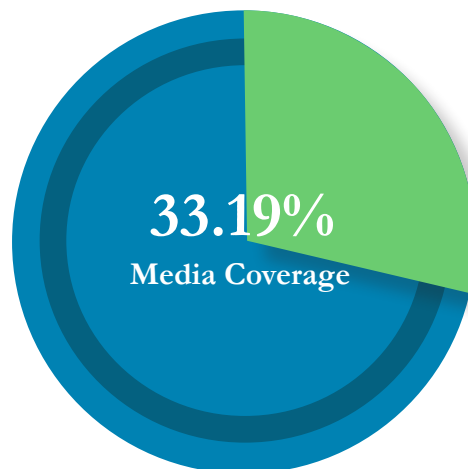
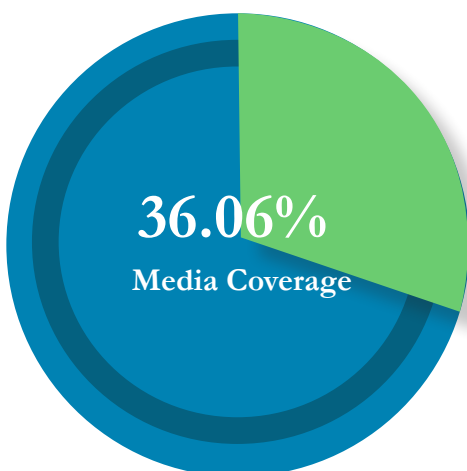
### Consumers

Among the five key energy sector players identified for this analysis, consumers received the highest news coverage -- at 36.1 percent of the total. Compared to the previous six months, their coverage increased by 6.35 percent, mostly because fluctuating supply of electricity, gas and oil and their frequently rising prices continued to make headlines throughout November 2022-April 2023. The biggest flaw in the reporting for this ‘key player’ was that it always talked about financial issues alone and never ventured into probing and discussing the intricate pricing mechanisms in which consumers have absolute no say. Similarly, while the news coverage remained focused on the availability and affordability of energy, it never spoke about the need for equitability – that is, providing equal energy access to all parts of the population living in all parts of Pakistan – and its sustainability, that is, the ability to produce it from sources that are renewed naturally such as wind and solar.



### Government

It is not surprising that the government received a very high coverage -- 33.2 percent – during the six months under review. This is mainly due to the fact that various government institutions and departments play a highly important role in every part of energy sector – from policy planning to financing and from energy procurement to its despatch and distribution. This coverage declined negligibly -- 1.52 percent – during November 2022-April 2023 than what it was during the previous six month. Its biggest flaw, however, was that it included next to no investigative journalism that could probe irregularities, corruption, mismanagement and wastage of resources committed by the government functionaries and entities operating in various sections of energy sector. While covering the government, most journalists also critically analyze the social, political and climatic aspects of its decisions, focusing merely on administrative inefficiencies, financial implications and consumer concerns caused by these decisions.

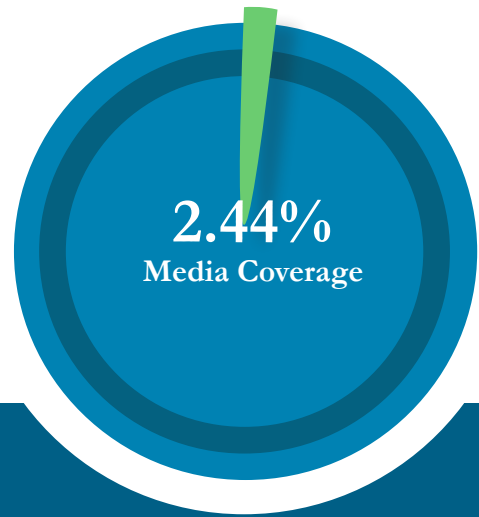
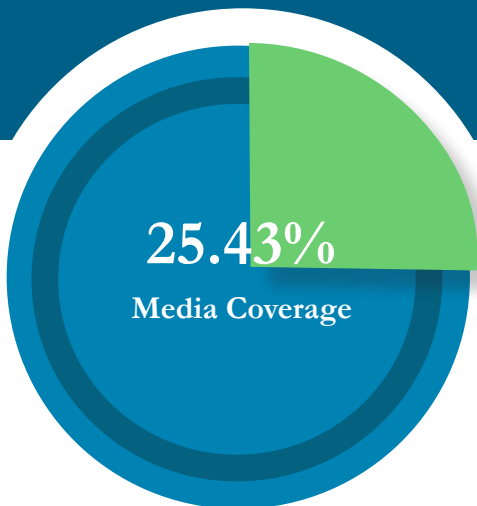






## Private developers

News reports about private developers working in energy sector constituted 25.4 percent of the total news coverage being analyzed here -- 6.02 percent higher than it was during six months prior to November 2022-April 2023. This could be an indicator that the role of private developers is increasing in energy sector as private investment flows into its various segments such as power generation, energy distribution and alternative/renewable energy. The tone of news coverage of this segment, however, remained either laudatory (patting on the back of either the government or the developers for investing in energy projects) or focused on the complaints and concerns of private developers over delays and other government-related problems in their projects.



## Regulators

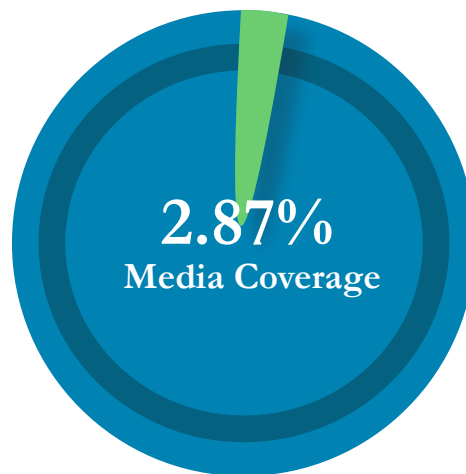
Even though nothing moves in energy sector moves without the consent of its two regulators – Oil and Gas Regulatory Authority (OGRA) and National Electric Power Regulatory Authority (NEPRA) – news media does not cover them as much as it covers other energy-related departments and government institutions. This could be due to the fact that journalists do not have easy access to these regulators and also lack professional skills to understand energy sector regulation and translate into easily readable and informative news contents. These two factors together explain why these regulators have received only 2.4 percent of the whole news media coverage being analyzed here. In the six months preceding November 2022-April 2023, this coverage was only 11.97 percent higher.

Another major problem in news coverage of regulators being analyzed here is its limited scope: it only reported tariff approvals and other financial issues and never probed any consumer complaints or environmental concerns about energy sector projects that these regulatory authorities might have been apprised of.



## Victims of Energy Policies

As is also obvious in our previous media monitors, victims of energy policies managed to receive the lowest news media coverage – at only 2.9 percent of the total -- during the period under review, showing only a 1.11 percent increase compared to the previous six months. The few stories that did appear in the news media about them provided only fleeting glimpses into the numerous issues faced by communities at the receiving end of Pakistan’s energy policies. While news media covered several energy sector initiatives and projects in November 2022-April 2023, it seldom reported about the communities that would be displaced as a result of those initiatives and projects. It also failed to highlight their other socio-economic effects on the lives of those communities. The plight of such communities, therefore, often went unnoticed, overshadowed by the dominant narratives promoted by other key players such as the government and the private developers – as is obvious from the data being presented and analyzed here.





# Conclusion

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Accurate and comprehensive media coverage of energy transition and climate justice is essential to raise public awareness and generate policy mobilization for many urgently-needed changes that can ensure Pakistan's smooth, speedy and just transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources. This analysis, however, finds that news media has done little to raise that awareness and generate that mobilization mainly because of its skewed focus on the financial aspects of energy sector and its exclusion of other important factors such as politics, society and environment. This analysis also suggests that energy sector's news coverage is mostly, if not entirely, limited to reporting about current/ongoing developments. In fact, hardly any in-depth and investigative reporting figures in the news coverage being reviewed here.

The coverage also does not dwell upon the relationship between emissions of greenhouse gases caused by the use of fossil fuels and global warming/climate change. For instance, the use of coal for power generation in Thar is mostly reported as a positive development. It, indeed, is touted as a means to secure energy independence and save foreign exchange required for the import of other fossil fuels such as gas and oil. News media, therefore, shows no sense of urgency for Pakistan to move away from fossil fuels and towards renewable sources of energy – a move necessitated by rapidly increasing and disastrous climatic change events taking place around us such as the previous year's floods and landslides and hill torrents that have become a routine every monsoon season.

This analysis also shows that news media pays very little attention to renewable energy which hampers general

public and policymakers from developing an informed understanding and perspective about the affordable, sustainable and secure alternatives they have to the current sources of energy which are increasingly becoming unaffordable, are unsustainable – indeed harmful for our environment and climate – and are mostly dependent on imports that we are finding hard to finance.

There are two major reasons for the flaws in the news media coverage being analyzed here. Firstly, news media in Pakistan generally remained fixated upon politics, crime and celebrity news, leaving little space for the coverage of such non-glamorous, non-sensational sectors as energy transition and climate justice. The few reports pertaining to these sector that do make it to headlines are often covered either in a lifeless manner with no human interest or they focus entirely on energy's cost for consumers. Seldom do they dig deep to investigate and highlights the various social, political, environmental and climatic impacts of previous, present and future energy policies. This factor has its basis mostly in news media's business model: it grabs the attention of its users – no matter how fleetingly and how superficially -- and sells it to advertisers. It, therefore, runs after those topics that are followed by large audiences. Serious, public interest topics such as energy transition are yet to acquire an audience large enough for news media to cater to its needs profitably.

Secondly, news media is challenged by its lack of capacity and understanding to cover energy-related topics in a comprehensive manner driven by a constructive journalism that is premised on public interest. It often criticizes for the sake of criticism and does not offer sufficient context

and perspective to its readers and stops of well short of discussing and highlighting the alternatives. This factor has its basis in the lack of training for mid-career and senior journalists working in news media houses in senior decision-making position. Most of them are so set on their old ways that they reject anything that is new and innovative simply because they fear it might fail to attract audiences.

There is a third – though admittedly a minor – factor is also at play here: news media is so caught up in the

24-hour news cycle that it has lost any sense of the big picture. It, therefore, does not bother about following up on its breaking news and is almost always fails to present a news in its entire context. For instance, while covering the inauguration of various energy sector projects and initiatives, it presents all the government projections and claims uncritically and then it never follows up if and when those projects and initiatives start getting delayed, fail to produce their desired results and, worse still, result in large-scale financial, human and environmental catastrophes.