



MEASURING PAKISTAN’S PROGRESS TOWARD MEETING THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS AS PER THE UN AGENDA 2030

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Article History: Received: 20 September 2024 Accepted: 25 November 2024 Published: 30 December 2024</p> <hr/> <p>Keywords: Global Sustainability Agenda 2030, inclusive development, sustainability framework, Pakistan’s status report on SDGs, SDGs challenges and recommendations.</p>	<p>The United Nations Global Sustainability Agenda 2030 introduces a transformative framework through Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), its designed to achieve global equitable, prosperous, and sustainable development. Unlike the incremental Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the SDGs aim for systemic changes across economic, social, and environmental dimensions, ensuring no one is left behind. This article comprehensively examines Pakistan’s progress towards achieving the SDGs under the UN Global Sustainability Agenda 2030. Specifically, it includes an analysis of the prioritisation of SDGs in Pakistan, highlights federal and institutional initiatives to promote sustainable development and explores the role of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in advancing these goals. Additionally, the article critically analyses the SDGs in Pakistan’s annual status report, identifies the key challenges faced by the nation in implementing these goals, and offers recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of SDG implementation. Overall, the focus is primarily on the detailed analysis of the annual status report, the challenges encountered, and strategic recommendations for achieving excellence in SDGs in Pakistan.</p>

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Introduction

The UN Global Sustainability Agenda 2030 provides a universal roadmap for achieving more equitable, prosperous, and sustainable development by 2030. Unlike incremental improvements, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aim for systemic changes. The SDGs present an opportunity to drive systematic change across economic, social, and environmental dimensions, facilitating sustainable development. The core objective of the SDGs is to ensure that “no one is left behind”, a principle that promotes inclusive progress and benefits for all segments of society (McGregor, 2020).

The SDGs offer a comprehensive and integrated approach to addressing various

challenges including social, economic, and environmental issues (Khokhar, 2022). They provide a framework for diverse sectors—government, civil society, businesses, and individuals—to collaborate and work towards a more sustainable and inclusive future. Specifically, Pakistan has adopted the SDGs as a transformative agenda to tackle pressing challenges such as poverty, inequality, education, healthcare, and environmental sustainability (Ikram *et al.*, 2021).

As the global community transitioned from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to the SDGs under the UN Global Sustainability Agenda 2030, the definition of sustainability has evolved (McGregor, 2020). Previously,

focused on reducing hunger and the SDGs emphasised ending hunger and poverty entirely (Nhamo *et al.*, 2020). The MDGs were oriented towards addressing common global challenges whereas the SDGs are designed to tackle both ongoing and emerging issues. This shift from MDGs to SDGs reflects a broader commitment to universal action, moving beyond the goals pertinent to developing countries alone (Ul Hassan, 2021). Sustainable development as promoted by the SDGs aims to enhance long-term growth and well-being. Key factors influencing sustainable development include decision-making, management, advocacy, participation, consensus-building, and research analysis.

The distinguishing features of the SDGs are their universality, comprehensiveness, and integrated ambition. They address the needs of vulnerable and marginalised segments of society and emphasise partnerships and a long-term vision. The central focus of the SDGs includes evidence-based decision-making, monitoring, and accountability. Effective partnerships and multi-stakeholder collaboration are crucial components of the SDGs (View, 2021).

The fundamental principle of “leaving no one behind” is central to the SDGs, ensuring inclusive development that encompasses all segments of society. The significance of the SDGs lies in their role as a global framework for sustainable development, applicable to countries at all stages of development—whether they are developing, developed, or somewhere in between (Fonseca *et al.*, 2020). The SDGs address a wide range of social, economic, and environmental challenges, striving to improve the lives of the most vulnerable and marginalised people including women, children, individuals with disabilities, indigenous communities, and other deprived groups.

Key Priorities: Sustainable Development Goals in Pakistan’s National Agenda

In Pakistan, the 17 SDGs are categorised into three groups: Category 1, Category 2, and Category 3 (Ammar, 2023). To achieve rapid

results, goals in Category 1 require immediate attention. Each nation has different priorities based on its needs and challenges.

For Pakistan, the highest-priority goal in Category 1 is Goal 2: Zero hunger. This goal is crucial for achieving food security and eradicating global hunger. It is ranked at the top due to the ongoing food crisis and recent inflation which have heightened the need for immediate action. Goal 3: Good health and well-being. Pakistan’s focus includes improving healthcare facilities, implementing preventative strategies across all age groups, enhancing life expectancy, and addressing both epidemic and pandemic crises. Goal 4: Quality education. This goal aims to provide education for all. In Pakistan, an estimated 22.8 million children are out of school. The goal includes sustainability in education and the development of accessible and high-quality school and university infrastructure. Goal 6: Clean water and sanitation. This goal focuses on ensuring a hygienic living environment, combating water pollution, and reducing waterborne diseases. Clean water and sanitation are crucial for water efficiency and public health. Goal 7: Affordable and clean energy. This extends electricity access nationwide to impoverish and hard-to-reach areas. Pakistan’s initiatives include the development of windmills, hydroelectricity projects, and solar power. Goal 8: Decent work and economic growth. It emphasises economic sustainability, social protection, and creating productive and decent employment opportunities.

In addition to Category 1, Pakistan’s second priority goals include:

- Goal 2: No poverty.
- Goal 5: Gender equality.
- Goal 9: Industry, innovation, and infrastructure.
- Goal 10: Reduced inequality.
- Goal 11: Sustainable cities and communities.
- Goal 17: Partnerships for the goals.

Goals in Category 3 include:

- Goal 12: Responsible consumption and production.

- Goal 14: Life below water.
- Goal 15: Life on land.
- Goal 13: Climate action – Given Pakistan's recent floods and environmental disasters, climate action has become a critical priority.

By focusing on these goals and categories, Pakistan aims to address its most pressing challenges and work towards sustainable development effectively.

Analysis of Pakistan's Annual Status Report on SDGs

Based on national and provisional data, Pakistan's SDGs status report for 2021 presents a comprehensive overview. This report, the first of its kind was published by the Federal SDGs support unit at the Ministry of Planning, Development, and Special Initiatives. According to the SDGs report, Pakistan ranked 129th out of 165 countries in 2021, compared to Bangladesh at 120th and India at 116th.

The report highlights that Pakistan's progress on SDG 1 (No poverty) is steady. There was a decline in poverty between 2014 and 2015 to 2018 and 2019. According to the national poverty line, approximately 9.3 million people were lifted out of poverty. On SDG 2 (No hunger), the report indicates a 4.2% decrease in undernourishment, from 20.2% in 2015 to 16% in 2019. Only 4.1% of the population reported being poor. For the frequency of poverty at US\$1.90 per day, the performance further improved to 0.2%. The Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) indicates that the government-approved district development plans and public sector development programmes have led to equity-based investments in Pakistan's most backward districts, as noted in the second voluntary national report by the UN High-Level Political Forum (UN HLPF).

On SDG 3 (Good health and well-being), progress is modest. From 2007 until 2019, there was a 32.6% reduction in maternal mortality during childbirth and pregnancy. From 2013 until 2018, there was a 10% increase in births

attended by skilled health personnel and an 11.5% improvement in national vaccination coverage was observed. However, SDG 4 (Quality education) progress is reported as dismal. The primary school completion rate stagnated at 67% from 2015 to 2020, and the national literacy rate remained constant at 60% during the same period. Despite these challenges, Pakistan has shown progress on several fronts. On SDG 5 (Gender equality), there has been a notable increase in the proportion of women in managerial positions doubling from 2.7% in 2015 to 4.53% in 2019.

Despite this progress, the rates of physical violence against women have seen mixed results. The overall rate of physical violence was reduced by 5.3% from 2012 and 2013 to 2017 and 2018. However, regional disparities persist, with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) and Baluchistan experiencing the highest rates, initially 31% and later 23.4%, though these figures increased to 34.6% in the subsequent period.

Significant improvements have been observed in SDG 6 (Access to clean water and sanitation). As of the 2021 progress report, 94% of Pakistan's population has access to clean drinking water. In Baluchistan, access to clean drinking water increased by 17% from 2015 to 2020. For SDG 7 (Affordable and clean energy), there was a substantial increase in reliance on clean fuels with usage rising from 41.3% in 2014 to 2015 and 47% from 2018 to 2019. Progress has been slow regarding SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth). The economy experienced a downturn in 2014 to 2015 with GDP per capita declining by -3.36% in the fiscal year 2019 to 2020 from a positive growth of 2.04% in 2014 to 2015. SDG 9 (Industry, innovation, and infrastructure) has shown some advancement, with the contribution of small-scale industries to total industry value added increasing from 8.4% in 2014 to 2015 to 10.5% in 2019 to 2020. The negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic somewhat impacted this progress.

For SDG 10 (Reduced inequality), the Pakistan SDGs status report 2021 indicates a 2% reduction in income inequality from 2016 to 2019. Although this represents a slight improvement, it highlights the ongoing challenge of achieving significant reductions in inequality. On SDG 11 (Sustainable cities and communities), an analysis of statistics shows a 7% decline in the urban population living in slums and a 38% decrease in inadequate housing from 2014 to 2018. However, 45% of the population still resides in informal settlements. For SDG 12 (Responsible consumption and production), Pakistan remains committed to addressing waste management issues and adhering to the Basel Convention requirements. On SDG 13 (Climate action), the country has made minimal contributions to National Disaster Risk Reduction. Still, it has adopted strategies aligned with the Sendai Framework, improving its index score from 0.4 in 2018 to 0.8 in 2020. Nevertheless, greenhouse gas emissions have increased by approximately 375.03 million tonnes, reflecting a 2.6% annual rise since 2015.

Regarding SDG 14 (Life below water), Pakistan has maintained fish stocks within biologically sustainable levels with a stability of 30% from 2015 until 2020. For SDG 15 (Life on land), the proportion of total land covered by forests remains around 5% despite rapid urbanisation and population growth. In SDG 16 (Peace, justice, and strong institutions), an 8.2% improvement in under-five children's birth registration was observed from 2013 to 2018. Finally, SDG 17 (Partnerships for the goals) has shown significant progress with a 20% increase in fixed Internet broadband subscriptions per 100 inhabitants between 2017 and 2020. Looking ahead to 2030, Pakistan must enhance its implementation mechanisms for various SDGs by collaborating with experts and focusing on balanced outcomes, particularly at the planning commission level.

Federal and Institutional Initiatives Towards Sustainable Development in Pakistan

Pakistan's commitment to the SDGs became evident when the Parliament of Pakistan was the

first to formally approve the SDGs as part of the national development agenda on 16 February 2016. This step underscored the urgency and importance of addressing the gaps evident in the country's performance on the MDGs (Khokhar, 2022).

To effectively coordinate and implement the SDGs, three distinct SDG units have been established at the federal level:

- Prime Minister's office SDGs unit: This unit oversees the implementation of SDG-related initiatives and is allocated significant funds annually, estimated at Rs 55 billion for the Prime Minister's SDG programme. This funding supports various projects including clean drinking water and electricity for all, with Rs 12 billion specifically dedicated to these initiatives.
- Parliament SDGs unit: Led by the Speaker of the National Assembly, this unit plays a crucial role in policy coordination and implementation, with a substantial annual budget of Rs 30 billion.
- Planning commission SDGs unit: This unit focuses on policy coordination and integrating SDGs into national development plans.

In addition to these units, several key institutions in Pakistan are working to advance the SDGs:

- Ministry of Climate Change: This ministry addresses environmental challenges and promotes sustainable development practices in line with SDG 13 (Climate action). It plays a pivotal role in shaping and aligning environmental policies with global climate goals.
- Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training: This ministry focuses on improving access to quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities in alignment with SDG 4 (Quality education).

It works on initiatives aimed at enhancing educational infrastructure and accessibility.

- **National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW):** An autonomous body dedicated to advancing gender equality and women's empowerment, aligning its efforts with SDG 5 (Gender equality). The NCSW works to address gender disparities and promote women's rights.
- **National Rural Support Programme (NRSP):** This non-governmental organisation works to alleviate poverty and promote sustainable rural development. NRSP's programme target multiple SDGs including poverty reduction, education, healthcare, and clean water and sanitation.
- **Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund (PPAF):** A government-funded organisation focused on poverty reduction. PPAF supports initiatives that align with SDG 1 (No poverty), working to empower marginalised communities through social and economic development.
- **Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI):** A think tank that conducts research, advocacy, and policy analysis on sustainable development issues. SDPI contributes to the SDG discourse by providing policy recommendations and supporting evidence-based decision-making.

Through these concerted efforts and institutional frameworks, Pakistan aims to address its development challenges and make significant progress toward achieving the SDGs by 2030.

CPEC's Contribution to Advancing Sustainable Development in Pakistan

Complementing these institutional efforts, the CPEC is a significant development initiative to enhance connectivity and foster economic

cooperation between China and Pakistan. This project can potentially contribute to several SDGs by emphasising infrastructure development, energy projects, and socio-economic cooperation (Abbasi, 2023).

Infrastructure development: CPEC involves the construction of roads, railways, ports, and other critical infrastructure projects. These developments are set to improve transportation networks, facilitate trade, and contribute to SDG 9 (Industry, innovation, and infrastructure). By upgrading infrastructure, CPEC aims to bolster economic efficiency and connectivity in the region (Khalid *et al.*, 2022).

Energy projects: The corridor includes a range of energy-related projects such as coal-fired power plants, hydroelectric dams, and renewable energy initiatives. These projects are designed to increase Pakistan's energy capacity, contributing to SDG 7 (Affordable and clean energy). By enhancing the country's energy infrastructure, CPEC supports efforts to provide reliable electricity and meet growing energy demands (Zubedi *et al.*, 2022).

Economic growth and job creation: CPEC also focuses on establishing Special Economic Zones (SEZs) which are expected to attract investment, promote industrialisation, and create employment opportunities. This initiative aligns with SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth) by fostering inclusive and sustainable economic growth, thus, generating job opportunities and stimulating economic development.

Poverty reduction and social development: The development of infrastructure, industries, and job opportunities under CPEC can positively spillover effects on poverty reduction and social development (Kanwal *et al.*, 2022). These outcomes support SDG 1 (No poverty) and SDG 10 (Reduced inequalities), aiming to enhance living standards and reduce social disparities.

Regional connectivity: CPEC aims to boost regional connectivity and promote trade relationships between China, Pakistan,

and neighbouring countries. By enhancing regional collaboration, CPEC supports SDG 17 (Partnerships for the goals), fostering international and regional partnerships for sustainable development.

The support provided by China is crucial for Pakistan's progress towards achieving social, economic, and environmental sustainability. The second phase of CPEC focuses on sustainability, economic development, and the education sector including investments in technical education institutes and study exchange programme. This phase is expected to contribute to an improved quality of life, increased GDP, reduced poverty, better working conditions, and enhanced living standards in Pakistan (John *et al.*, 2020).

Conclusions

Issues Confronting Pakistan's SDGs Implementation

Implementing the SDGs in Pakistan faces numerous challenges that hinder progress and effectiveness. Economic instability, marked by sluggish growth, high inflation, and persistent unemployment severely limits the country's ability to allocate resources effectively toward SDG initiatives (Xu *et al.*, 2023). The lack of sufficient financial resources is a significant obstacle, as many SDGs require substantial investments in infrastructure development, social services, and environmental protection (Razzaq *et al.*, 2024). The government's limited budget and competing priorities often result in inadequate funding for SDG-related initiatives. Ongoing fiscal deficits and financial constraints, exacerbated by excessive fiscal deficits and funding shortages, hinder the government's capacity to invest in crucial SDG projects (Danish, 2022).

Global and regional crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, recent floods, and international conflicts have diverted resources away from SDGs and delayed progress due to the need for immediate emergency responses (Ahmad *et al.*, 2023). Political instability and frequent changes in government disrupt policy

continuity and affect the effective execution of long-term SDG strategies. Additionally, a weak institutional framework, characterised by inadequate coordination among government departments and agencies leads to fragmented efforts and inefficiencies in policy execution (Rahman *et al.*, 2020).

The limited involvement of local communities in the decision-making process has resulted in top-down approaches that often fail to address specific local needs, leading to ineffective implementation strategies (Khan, 2020). This issue is compounded by a significant lack of awareness about the SDGs among the public and stakeholders, as well as insufficient technical expertise and resources to support the effective implementation and monitoring of SDG projects (Nazir & Sharifi, 2024). The poor integration of sustainability into national policies, driven by a short-term focus on economic gains, further hinders progress toward environmental sustainability. The absence of integrated planning and a robust prioritisation framework contributes to fragmented implementation and inefficient resource allocation (Isgut, 2024).

Political and administrative challenges including inconsistent political will and centralised decision-making limit the capacity of local governments to address SDG-related issues effectively (Kazma Baqi, 2024). Bureaucratic inefficiencies and outdated data systems contribute to ineffective monitoring and evaluation, resulting in poor accountability and slow progress (Gnaldi & Del Sarto, 2023). Pakistan also faces significant data collection and analysis challenges, hampering its ability to track progress accurately and make informed decisions. Capacity constraints, particularly limited technical and human resources within institutions responsible for SDG implementation, further restrict the effectiveness of development programme (World Bank, 2021). Additionally, persistent socio-economic inequalities including poverty, gender disparity, and regional disparities, pose significant challenges to achieving SDGs. Addressing these inequalities requires targeted

interventions and inclusive policies (Saxena *et al.*, 2021).

Pakistan's limited engagement in global partnerships and reliance on foreign aid without fostering self-sustaining collaborations restrict the exchange of knowledge and resources necessary for achieve the SDGs (Uddin, 2024). Governance and corruption issues including a weak rule of law and financial corruption, further undermine efforts to ensure transparency and justice in SDG implementation (Kazma Baqi, 2024). Finally, the insufficient integration of SDGs into national planning and inconsistent reporting on progress create disjointed efforts and a lack of strategic focus on priority areas, ultimately hampering Pakistan's overall progress toward sustainable development. Therefore, addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive and coordinated approach that strengthens governance (View, 2021), builds resilience, and prioritises sustainable development across all sectors.

Recommendations for Strengthening SDGs Implementation in Pakistan

To effectively address the challenges Pakistan faces in implementing the SDGs, the following strategic recommendations are proposed:

Economic Stability and Growth

- Stimulate economic growth: Develop and implement policies that promote economic growth such as creating incentives for investment in high-potential sectors and supporting entrepreneurial ventures.
- Control inflation: Strengthen monetary policies and improve supply chain efficiencies to manage inflation and stabilise prices.
- Leverage projects like CPEC: Utilise the CPEC to enhance connectivity and economic cooperation and contribute to multiple SDGs.

Increase Financial Resources for SDGs

- Diversify funding sources: Explore various funding mechanisms such

as public-private partnerships, international aid, and innovative financing to ensure adequate resources for SDG initiatives.

- Strengthen fiscal management: Improve fiscal discipline by enhancing tax collection, reducing non-essential expenditures, and ensuring effective management of public finances.

Strengthen Global Partnerships

- Collective action: Foster global partnerships through collective action, sharing of knowledge, and mobilising resources. Engage in collaborative decision-making processes and ensure political commitment to drive sustainable development.
- Role of international agencies: Leverage foreign investment and support from international agencies to achieve SDGs. Strategic partnerships can provide the financial and technical resources needed for effective implementation.

Strengthen Policy and Planning Frameworks

- Integrate SDGs into national planning: Incorporate SDG targets into national development plans including sectors like education, health, economic well-being, water, peace, security, and affordable energy.
- Establish prioritisation frameworks: Create structured frameworks for prioritising SDG targets based on urgency, impact, and resource availability.
- Annual reports: Consistently publish annual status reports on SDG progress to maintain transparency and track advancements.

Reinforce the Rule of Law

- Legal framework: Reinstate and strengthen the rule of law to support justice and accountability. Develop a professional framework for enforcing

legal standards and combating financial corruption.

Enhance Collaboration and Coordination

- **Expert collaboration:** Work with relevant experts to develop and implement a target-oriented approach for SDG achievement. Coordinate efforts under a unified federal framework to ensure comprehensive implementation.
- **Increased citizen engagement:** E-governance platforms can facilitate greater public participation and feedback, allowing citizens to actively engage in policy-making and program implementation. This can ensure that development initiatives are more aligned with the needs and preferences of the population.
- **Local government engagement:** Strengthen collaboration between federal, provincial, and local governments to ensure alignment and effective execution of SDG initiatives.

Foster Political Will and Commitment

- **Engage political leaders:** Build strong political support for the SDGs through advocacy, dialogue, and demonstrating the benefits of achieving SDG targets.
- **Ensure policy continuity:** Promote continuity in SDG-related policies and programmes to maintain momentum and achieve long-term objectives.

Address Administrative and Local Governance Challenges

- **Empower local governments:** Delegate administrative and financial powers to local governments to enhance their capacity to address SDG-related issues effectively at the grassroots level.
- **Improve administrative efficiency:** Streamline administrative processes and enhance coordination among government agencies to improve the efficiency of SDG implementation.

Adopt a Bottom-Up Approach

- **Involve local communities:** Engage local communities in decision-making and implementation processes to ensure that SDG initiatives are tailored to local needs and conditions.
- **Customise implementation strategies:** Adapt SDG strategies to address specific local challenges and priorities, ensuring that interventions are relevant and impactful.

Promote Sustainable Development Practices

- **Integrate sustainability in policies:** Ensure that all policies and programmes incorporate sustainability principles and contribute to achieving SDG targets.
- **Encourage responsible consumption:** Promote practices that support responsible consumption and production including waste reduction, recycling, and efficient resource use.

Increase Public Awareness and Education

- **Conduct awareness campaigns:** Implement public awareness campaigns to educate citizens about the SDGs and their importance.
- **Localised awareness:** Translate SDG materials into regional and local languages to improve understanding and foster local engagement in sustainability efforts.

Empower and Engage Youth

- **Youth involvement:** Utilise the energy and creativity of the youth to drive local action and promote sustainability. Educate and engage young people in SDG-related activities and initiatives.

Enhance Data Collection and Monitoring

- **Modernise data systems:** Adopt advanced data collection and monitoring techniques to replace outdated methods, ensuring accurate and real-time data tracking of SDG progress.

- **Accountability mechanisms:** Implement robust monitoring and evaluation systems to track progress, identify challenges, and adjust strategies as needed.

Leverage Technology and Innovation

- **Promote technological solutions:** Use technology and innovation to address SDG challenges. This includes adopting new technologies for better data collection, resource management, and service delivery.
- **Build technical expertise:** Invest in capacity-building initiatives to enhance the technical skills of personnel involved in SDG implementation through training programmes, workshops, and knowledge-sharing platforms.

Mitigate the Impact of Global and Regional Crises

- **Develop resilient systems:** Build robust systems for disaster preparedness and response to manage the impacts of global crises like pandemics and conflicts.
- **Leverage international support:** Seek international assistance and collaboration to address the consequences of global crises and support SDG efforts.

By implementing these recommendations, Pakistan can address existing challenges and make significant progress toward achieving the SDGs, leading to a more sustainable and prosperous future.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author have no conflict of interest.

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