
Role of Local Government in Sustaining Development Goals: A Case Study of Pakistan

Dr. Tahira Mumtaz¹, Abira Munir², Dr. Gulnaz Akbar³

¹ Lecturer, Department of Politics & International Relations, Government College Women University, Sialkot. tahira.mumtaz@gcwus.edu.pk

² MS Political Science, Department of Politics & International Relations, Government College Women University, Sialkot.

³ Lecturer, Department of Education, Government College Women University, Sialkot. Gulnaz.akbar@gcwus.edu.pk

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Abstract

The research discusses the significance of local governments in the context of democratic decentralization and the realization of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the Pakistani political landscape. The research aims to explore the historical development of the systems of local governments in the country, specifically focusing on the Local Government Ordinance of 2001 and the provincial acts in Punjab, Sindh, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Employing qualitative research methodology, this study focuses on the constraints placed upon the functioning of local governments in terms of rendering services and achieving sustainable developments because of political instability, centralization of power, lack of autonomy in institutions, and limited financial capacity in the country. Despite such remarkable adoption of Agenda 2030 at the national level in the country, this research bears out that limited empowerment of local governments has been one of the pivotal hindrances to sustainable development in the country.

Keyword: Decentralization, Sustainable Development Goals, Local Governance Reform, Fiscal Autonomy, Pakistan

Introduction

Local government in Pakistan has faced a multitude of difficulties stemming from the political situation, the prevailing power of the center, and the erratic nature of democracy. The process of local governance has been heavily influenced by various factors, such as the continuous military coups in the country, the frequent interruptions of civilian rule, and the overall unstable and insufficient local government system that was never fully established. Nevertheless, despite the promises made to the public through various decentralization measures like the 1950s Basic Democracies, the “New Social Contract” of the 1990s, and the 2001 Local Government Ordinance, centralized control, weak institutional autonomy, and political motives still prevailed over genuine democratic development. Consequently, Pakistan is still grappling with the problem of laying down a local governance structure that would be adequate to meet the contemporary development challenges in terms of responsiveness, accountability, and service provision (Ahmed, Tan, Shaikh, & Waqas, 2020). Local governments have a vital and very important function in the area of public service management, poverty removal, resource mobilization, and democratic accountability; nevertheless, decentralization in Pakistan has remained the same as before, that is, fragmented and inconsistent among the provinces. Local governments' credibility and performance have been impacted negatively by factors like lack of administrative strength,

political meddling, and also by their financial dependence on the central government, poor service delivery, as well as the fact that there are no coordination mechanisms in place between the provincial and local levels. The Local Government Ordinance (LGO) of 2001 tried to bring about changes by developing a comprehensive and participatory local governance model through transferring the functions related to health, education, and municipal services, yet it still had to deal with structural issues, bureaucratic opposition, corruption, and a lack of democratic space. There are still similar challenges for provincial legislation introduced after 2010, which have varying degrees of power, financial independence, and scope, and as a result, local bodies are not able to play their proper role in the achievement of development objectives (Khushik & Diemer, 2018).

The Sustainable Development Goals have been localized and thus again pointed out the need for strong and functional local governments in Pakistan. Local governments are the ones who provide and manage these services: water, sanitation, education, health, environmental management, and community development. They are the backbone of SDGs at the grassroots level, and directly support the government's frontline institutions. The different ways in which Pakistan is demonstrating its support for the 2030 Agenda, including through the establishment of federal SDG units, parliamentary oversight, and reforms in the provinces, cannot result in major outputs unless local authorities are given the required power, financial support, and independence from institutions. The present research, thus, investigates the performance of local government systems in Pakistan, their challenges, and variations among provinces, to measure their contribution towards sustainable development, unearth structural deficiencies, and recommend policy reforms for the purpose of inclusive and resilient development (Hayat, Khan, & Ashraf, 2019).

Literature Review

Sustainable development is a holistic and multidimensional approach that points out how important the social, economic, environmental, cultural, and institutional dimensions of human nature interaction are for the good of both current and future generations. The idea of a global framework for sustainability governance became more discussed after the publication of the Limits to Growth report by the Club of Rome. The report illustrated the severe necessity of dealing with and being ready for the long-term requirements of sustainable development, and it was a major factor in getting the world to start talks on the issue. Yet, the MDGs at the beginning of the new century did not show any real commitment to social, environmental, and cultural sustainability, hence yielding missed opportunities. The reason for this lack of commitment is due, in part, to global policymakers' ignorance of local realities and the constraints of local governance institutions, especially in the Global South. Integrated Area Development technique helps to enumerate the major obstacles related to the localization of SDGs through better comprehension and accomplishment of the LA21 aims. The general lack of access to reliable data, the setting of unrealistic targets, and the absence of monitoring and public awareness of the SDGs are the main challenges identified by the literature review and case study analysis in Pakistan. Moreover, limited access to the local government's tax revenue, dependence on higher government levels for funding, and the participation of multiple private or civil society actors with the least knowledge of government processes can lead to public representatives losing a large part of their control over the decision-making process (Cheema, AR., Ahmed, I., Mehmood, A., 2024).

Localization of the SDGs in Pakistan has involved more than just the conclusion of agreements with government partners. The transformation of abstract SDG objectives into concrete, quantifiable targets has been a collaborative process relying on evidence-based solutions for all stakeholders, especially local actors. Among the several government functions, including social service delivery that the 18th constitutional amendment transferred from the federal to the provincial governments, was the provision of social services. To unify and fortify efforts at both the federal and provincial levels to achieve Pakistan's targets for sustainable development and poverty reduction, the government of Pakistan organized dialogues with all the stakeholders regarding the Post-Millennium Development Goals (PMDGs). The consultation process drew extensive attention to improved data collection, national SDG categorization, and the enforcement of monitoring

procedures (NISD, 2022). The history of local governments in Pakistan reveals a countercyclical pattern of national and local democracy, as military regimes opened the door for non-partisan elected local government institutions while civilian governments that followed often undermined such institutions by centralizing both functions and finances. Political, administrative, and financial authority were granted to the elected local councils (Mahmood W., Massod S., Nawaz AR. 2023).

Local governments have been recognized as very important players in the attainment of SDGs since they are the nearest to the people and often help in creating and executing policies that have an impact on people's everyday lives. The province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, is one of the places where achieving SDGs faces the most diverse challenges and opportunities. The province has a rich endowment of natural resources yet faces a number of problems that include the economic crisis, political instability, and the degradation of the environment (Baber, 2023). Though the perceived effectiveness of LGs performing their duties remains a matter of opinion during the current community perception investigation. Community perceptions are paramount in measuring the success of local governance efforts in determining how well they are working (Khaliq, 2024 & Jones, 2019). It is necessary to present to the community how LGs are contributing to the attainment of SDGs to improve LGs' practices and, in turn, support their developmental programs. Community perceptions exert a strong impact on the acceptance of policies and development projects. Pakistan is a growing economy in South Asia, and it is still encountering a lot of economic and political difficulties. One of the major takeaways from MDGs (2000-2015) was the lack of localization for the accomplishment of MDGs, which is also a key factor for the successful implementation of SDGs (Salim T., & Khan A., 2025).

The current system in Pakistan resembles more the local government model, as the local institutions are not fully independent nor protected by the constitution at all, as they work under different provincial laws, like the Punjab Local Government Performance. On the other hand, India's local self-government system, with its Panchayati Raj, regards local bodies as institutions that have constitutionally recognized roles and responsibilities. The difference is important when assessing the governance structures at the local level in relation to the development objectives, as a rule, the more freedom a local government system enjoys, the more effective, accountable, and local planners will be, and service delivery will be. An ongoing reform process in the local government system has been the hallmark of all governments in Pakistan over the years as they tried to build a democratic institutional setup for the new policies and the political-economic activities along their lines. Gradually, the whole country witnessed the rising of people's dissatisfaction with democracy first at the local and later on at the national level (Mumtaz T., Munir A., & Zafar H., 2025).

This entails the role of local governments in facilitating such partnerships and makes up the contribution of the local governments by creating an enabling environment, ensuring support, and facilitating engagement. As a developing country, Pakistan's involvement in the fulfillment of the SD Goals by Pakistan, in line with the adaptation of the sustainability agenda, entails a rather lengthy list of challenges. These challenges have impeded the fulfillment of the SD Goals for a rather prolonged period in Pakistan, being considered a developing country because of the factors of poor infrastructure, drained budget, poor governance approaches, a politically unstable environment, the absence of finance, and governmental. As such, the use of PPPs by the Pakistani government to overcome the aforementioned challenges has now gained momentum in the domains of health, education, and the development of alternatives in the form of renewable energy. Eventually, the use of PPPs in direct application has culminated in a stage where evidence of their important parts in aiding the fulfillment of the SD Goals has already been affirmed in research in the domains of infrastructure, the provision of services, and the promotion of innovation (Tabbasum, Hussain, Shah, & Aslam, 2025).

The post-World War II era saw the birth of the contemporary notion of sustainable development. Economic growth has been the main driver towards global development and the subsequent move to human quality of life improvement as the prime concern (Du, 2006). Industrialization, innovation, and the like, along with effective human resources, have really brought a great number of countries on board with the economic miracles after the 1950s. The planet, of course, was very much affected by human activities exceeding

environmental thresholds during the period of huge economic development, rapid population growth, and urbanization (Rockstrom et.al., 2009) that eventually turned the negative impact on both Earth and man and raised the issue of the welfare of present and future generations in many countries (Reid, 2005 & Rockstrom et.al., 2009). When people feel that the environment is decaying very fast and it would be harmful not only to them but also to their children, they start thinking about switching (Sajjad & Javed, 2015).

Local governments are on the front line of service delivery, and thus, they are the most immediate responders to basic needs in their respective areas. The study would like to know more about the roles local governments could have played in the past and will play in the future for the better delivery of health and education services under the MDGs. The selection of three MDGs is mainly for the purpose of simplifying the research scope and disentangling subsequent indicators of goals from complexity. The UN General Assembly in 2000 set the target for the global realization of 8 MDGs by 2020, among which two goals are explicitly related to education, and three are to health (Riaz, Nawab, Khan, & Zubair, 2021).

In the seven years since the Paris Agreement, LRGs have shown that they are able to scale up their contribution to SDG implementation regarding climate action. With only eight years left, what is needed is a quantum leap. Supporting them to meet this timeline, LRGs need technical and financial assistance to align their plans with the SDGs and scale up their investments and policy reforms. This also involves incentives rewarding performance and special attention to build the capacity of those LRGs most in need (Mohieldin Wahba, Parez, & Shehata, 2022).

Research Methodology

The performance of Pakistani local government systems and their contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are investigated in this study using a qualitative research methodology. Because it enables a thorough understanding of intricate governance structures, institutional difficulties, policy frameworks, and stakeholder perceptions that cannot be sufficiently captured by quantitative measures alone, a qualitative approach is appropriate. An analytical research design is opted for interpreting meanings, experiences, and institutional practices pertaining to decentralization, service delivery, and sustainable development, which is the main focus of the study.

Results and Discussions

Performance of Local Government

Pakistan is a democratic state within the South Asian region, yet it has been denied political context since its liberation from the British Empire in 1947, particularly in the sphere of local self-government. Pakistan's history proves that inconsistency in civilian norms has undermined the development of a strong democratic culture throughout all levels of government. The decentralization improvements in Pakistan can be traced back to the most recent military coup led by General Musharraf in 1999. Under the leadership of General Musharraf, the recent decentralization efforts in Pakistan have been analyzed (Malik, Rana, 2019).

Many other matters indeed require policymakers' urgent attention. But devolution reforms could solve some of the biggest problems, including the management of law and order, the control of prices, the alleviation of poverty, the mobilization of social services, the utilization of public funds, the generation of taxes, etc. As governance and public administration at the native level are the closest to citizens, local governments could dispense public goods in several ways. Moreover, an efficient local government is another factor that would determine the credibility and the stability of the democratic governance processes. However, this research demonstrates that simply transferring new tasks to local executives without tending to the recognized inducements for being responsive to citizen needs and responsible for actual outcomes is not necessarily an improvement on the previous arrangements (Ruge & Ritgen, 2021).

The research has been conducted at a time when all the provinces of Pakistan are officially studying and improving their native administration systems for better service transfer to the people. Historically, native

administration systems have been compulsory in the provinces, and this is the first time the provinces are reforming their native administration systems in an open and advice-giving method. By taking the voice of the people into account when formulating the new local government system, policymakers can ensure a better understanding of the new scheme across all levels of society (Taj & Baker, 2022).

The Local Government System in Pakistan

The Local Government Ordinance (LGO) of 2001, passed by the Parvez Musharraf regime to transfer controls from the center to native government and institutions, was not the first attempt toward local self-governance, financial independence, and responsiveness to the people. The Undeveloped Democracy Organization of the late 1950s and the New Social Contract of the mid-1990s pursued similar goals, but both were rendered ineffective due to the exercise of centralized power (Malik, 2009). The LGO stands out, yet in all fairness, for its advancement. By substituting in December 2003 to embed native administration reforms within the 1973 Constitution, President Musharraf shielded the devolution construction from amendment or repeal for a period of six years (to December 31, 2009), dependent only upon presidential agreement (Ahmad, Khalid & Muzaffar, 2015). The 2001 LGO established a three-tier local government structure (union, tehsil/taluka municipal government, district) in each area, with the union nazim (mayor) and union naib nazim (deputy mayor) being the only representatives directly chosen; transferred 10 sectors/functions to the provinces like fitness and learning, as well as transferred thousands of local government staff working in these sectors (Ahmad & Talib, 2013).

The lack of adequate devices for management between the shires and native administrations, specifically, the inability to create protocols for carrying out the order and elucidating the parts and tasks of the various levels of government, was another significant flaw in the 2001 LGO's implementation (Farooqi & Forbes, 2020).

The national government has also entered the conversation, occasionally with differing opinions from various ministries, agencies, and lawmakers. Acknowledging the crucial part that provinces play in reforming native supremacy, the Office of Native Administration and Country Growth (MLGRD) of the national government adopted a cautious stance, advocating for a shared legal structure that could be modified based on each province's specific needs and emphasizing the importance of established intergovernmental dialogue and cooperation. The NRB contributed to the discussion by proposing particular changes to the 2001 Native Administration Ordinance. Additionally, the district and tehsil nazims, who had remained quiet following the 2008 elections, began to respond by forming emerging native administration relations in Punjab and NWFP and pursuing lawful measures in court to challenge regional efforts to limit their directorial and monetary authority (Khan, Saha & Bhuiyan, 2018).

Achievement of the SDGs in the Local Government System of Pakistan

Being among the first states to sign up for the 2030 Plan for Sustainable Development in 2015, Pakistan has shown an exceptional commitment to it. On February 16, 2016, the Assembly decisively accepted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as the country's growth strategy. As one of the few nations to do so, it established the Parliamentary SDGs Secretariat. The first and most crucial step in mainstreaming and localizing the SDGs was this legislative process. It has busy more than simply committing to formal agreements with government partners to localize the SDGs in Pakistan. Additionally, it has served as a collective platform that emphasizes evidence-based tactics to turn the vague goals of the SDGs into specific, significant priorities for all parties involved, including local players. The 18th constitutional amendment transferred several public responsibilities, such as the allocation of communal facilities, from the central government to native governments (Hanif & Hanif, 2024). To strategize and reinforce federal and provincial activities to achieve Pakistan's long-term growth and development goals, the government of Pakistan consulted with all relevant stakeholders over the post-Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Throughout the discussion process, it was emphasized how important it is to create reporting systems, collect more data,

and categorize the SDGs nationally (Mohieldin & Wahba, 2022).

The SDGs status report for 2021 from Pakistan provides a thorough analysis based on both national and preliminary statistics. The Central SDGs Care Unit of the Ministry of Preparation, Development, and Special Creativities released this report, which is the first of its type. In 2021, Pakistan was placed 129th out of 165 countries by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) statement, ahead of Bangladesh at 120 and India at 116 (Ain, Yusaf & Tahir, 2025).

According to the study, Pakistan has made relatively consistent progress toward SDG 1 (No Poverty). The poverty rate decreased between 2014 and 2015 and between 2018 and 2019. According to the national poverty line, around 9.3 million people were lifted out of poverty. According to the study, undernourishment decreased by 4.2% from 20.2% in 2015 to 16% in 2019 for SDG 2 (No Hunger). The percentage of those who said they were impoverished was just 4.1%. The results further improved to 0.2% for the incidence of poverty at \$1.90 per day. According to the second unpaid national report by the UN High-Level Political Forum (UNHLPF) report, the Multidimensional Poverty Index demonstrates that equity-based savings in Pakistan's most underdeveloped regions have resulted from government-approved regional growth strategies and civic segment development programs (Zahra, Anjum & Sultan, 2024).

Progress on SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being) is characterized as unassertive. There was a 32.6% reduction in caring humanity during pregnancy and childbirth between 2007 and 2019. Between 2013 and 2018, the number of births attended by trained medical professionals increased by 10%, and the country's immunization rate increased by 11.5%. On the other hand, SDG 4 (Quality Education) is said to have made little progress. Between 2015 and 2020, the national literacy rate stayed steady at 60%, while the primary school completion rate stayed at 67%. Pakistan has made strides in many areas despite these obstacles. The percentage of women in executive roles has significantly improved, doubling from 2.7% in 2015 to 4.53% in 2019, in line with SDG 5 (Gender Equality) (Habib & Rafique, 2019). Despite these advancements, there have been conflicting findings regarding the prevalence of physical violence against women. Between 2012–13 and 2017–18, the overall rate of bodily ferocity decreased by 5.3%. Regional differences still exist, though, with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) and Baluchistan having the peak rates, first 31%, and then 23.4%, before rising to 34.6% in the following period (Khan, Hameed & Mushtaq, 2023).

Central and Established Initiatives towards Sustainable Development in Pakistan

The Pakistani Parliament was the first to formally adopt the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as part of the country's growth plan on February 16, 2016, demonstrating Pakistan's commitment to the SDGs. This action emphasized how critical it is to close the holes that were shown by the nation's presentation on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (Baqir, Banerjee & Yaya, 2019).

The Prime Minister's Office SDGs Unit is responsible for overseeing the execution of SDG-related projects and receives a substantial amount of funding each year, amounting to approximately Rs 55 billion for the Prime Minister's SDG program (Ahsan, Atif & Lemmen, 2024). With Rs 12 billion set aside expressly for these projects, the financing supports several initiatives, such as universal access to fresh drinking water and power. With a sizeable yearly budget of RS 30 billion, the Parliament SDGs Unit, which is headed by the Speaker of the National Assembly, is essential to the coordination and execution of policies. The Planning Commission's SDGs Unit is responsible for coordinating policies and incorporating the SDGs into national development plans (Iqbal, Ahmad, Iftikhar & Saddique, 2025).

The Context of Pakistan

The country's major financial, ecological, and communal issues, such as shortage, reserve reduction, and climate susceptibility, make sustainable development imperative for Pakistan. With a population of more than 230 million, fast development, and climate-related disasters, including floods and droughts, Pakistan's sustainable development programs concentrate on finding an equilibrium between environmental

preservation, public impartiality, and financial advancement. Sustainable development is crucial because of Pakistan's vulnerability to weather changes. Incorporating sustainable practices is essential for long-term resilience since environmental degradation and natural disasters, particularly floods, have had a significant influence on Pakistan's economy (Oosterhof, 2018). Talking about sustainable development in Pakistan's energy, farming, and city preparation areas can help decrease carbon emissions, boost reserve efficiency, and promote economic stability. As a result, maintainable growth is essential to creating a resilient Pakistan that can manage environmental issues and maintain growth (Shahid, Polkinghorne & Bobeva, 2023).

Pakistan has significant promises to global sustainability agendas, such as Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations, which set areas for tackling worldwide matters like environmental degradation, poverty, inequality, and climate change. Pakistan endorsed the SDGs as a signatory in 2015 and has since developed frameworks to implement and localize them. The Department of Arrangement, Development, and Special Enterprises has included the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Pakistan's general expansion plan to support initiatives to fight poverty, improve health, and protect the environment Government of Pakistan, 2022; Hassan, 2021).

Pakistan's progress and challenges in achieving the SDGs are the main topics of the Volunteer National Review (VNR) statement, which was accessible at the UN High-Level Political Forum in 2021. The research states that although Pakistan has made progress in areas like wellbeing, education, and the availability of clean energy, resource limitations and problems with policy implementation are preventing climate action and economic growth. Pakistan's strategy to match its national development objectives with international sustainability standards has been spearheaded by Agenda 2030, which has established partnerships with institutions like the UNDP and World Bank to support policy frameworks and capacity-building (UNDP, 2021; Abbas, Nadeem & Majoka, 2021).

Even though Pakistan faces significant challenges in applying maintainable performs, the nation's dedication to international sustainability values is a step toward a stronger and wealthier future. By ordering SDG boards and following Agenda 2030, Pakistan is following sustainable development options that advantage present and future peers (Gillani, 2021).

Conclusion

The conclusion drawn by this research is that, despite their plausible positioning for a transformative role in pursuing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Pakistan, the efficiency and effectiveness of local governments have been critically challenged and constrained by their structured, political, and financial limitations. Notwithstanding a lack of democratic decentralization and commitments towards Agenda 2030, local governance experiences a dominance influence from the central and provincial governments, with neither constitutional guarantees nor financial independence. Moreover, it is also evident that a lack of democratic stability, a dominance influence by bureaucratic apparatuses, and inconsistencies in provincial laws have critically affected services delivery, accountability, and people participation at the local level. Although a few positive advancements have also been noted towards a few selected SDGs, including the ones that target poverty reduction, health, and institutional frameworks, the lack of efficient and self-administering local governments obstructs complete localization towards sustainable development.

Recommendations

On the basis of this research, several recommendations are proposed to improve the effectiveness of local governments in the context of Pakistan in realizing the targets of the Sustainable Development Goals. Firstly, there is an urgent need to constitutionalize the provision of local governments by clearly demarcating their status, powers, and term within the constitutional framework to avoid the repeated dissolution of the local government bodies in the future and prevent manipulation of this body at the provincial and national levels. Second, fiscal decentralization should be supported to enhance financial autonomy for local government

institutions. Each local government institution should be empowered to raise its own financial resources from appropriate sources, such as local taxes and fees, and should have access to guaranteed government transfers from the selected provinces. All financial matters should be transparent to facilitate planning and implementation at the grassroots and to facilitate actions towards achieving the SDGs.

Third, the administrative capacity of the local governments should be strengthened by implementing capacity-building measures. Capacity-building of elected representatives and officials on governance, financial management, SDGs, and community planning and participation will become significant. Building the ability of the institutions will ensure accountability, overcome administrative inefficiencies, and help design development interventions by the local governments according to the needs of the locality.

Fourth, there is a need for a proper definition of roles and responsibilities among the different levels. This is crucial if duplication, lack of cooperation, and governance gaps are to be averted. Coordination among governments can be implemented by developing proper structures that facilitate cooperation in a number of key sectors that relate to the achievement of the SDGs, including health, education, water, and environmental management.

Fifth, citizen participation and community engagement must be institutionalized in the governance setup. Activities such as citizen consultations, Citizen Community Boards (CCBs), social audits, and grievance redressal mechanisms must be reclaimed to ensure community involvement in decision-making and increase trust in governance. Community involvement increases accountability and ensures that development programs are community-oriented.

Sixth, gender inclusion and social equity need to be strengthened at the local government level. While there are reserved seats, the female representation remains tokenistic. It would be good to encourage the local governments to focus on female leadership, economic empowerment, and engagement in planning and decision-making related to the SDGs, specifically those concerning education, health, and poverty reduction. Seventh, localizing SDGs should be incorporated as part of local government planning processes. This requires greater interaction between SDG units at both the provincial and the federal levels with local governments. Doing this will help local governments make progress towards SDGs by aligning their developmental plans with SDG indicators.

At last, for the sustainability process of local governments in Pakistan, there is a need to strengthen stability in the political system and democratic practices in the country. This is true because, for Pakistan, decentralization in relation to politics will result in the lack of utilization of the potential of local bodies for sustainable development in the country.

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