

Pakistan's Institutional Strengthening and Capacity Building: Challenges and Strategies towards Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

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Abstract

Pakistan has encountered substantial obstacles in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) due to systemic institutional flaws and inadequate skill development. This study provides a comprehensive analysis of these challenges, highlighting issues such as insufficient financial resources, political instability, ineffective stakeholder coordination, and gaps in human resource development. Additional barriers include stakeholder resistance and a lack of robust tracking and evaluation mechanisms. To address these issues, the study recommends several strategies: significantly boosting investments in education and training programs, decentralizing decision-making to empower local governments, and enhancing collaboration among governmental bodies, businesses, and civil society organizations. A coordinated approach that integrates efforts from the public and private sectors as well as non-governmental organizations is crucial for overcoming these barriers. By adopting these recommendations, Pakistan can make substantial strides towards achieving the SDGs and fostering sustainable development. Data for this study were collected through a rigorous review of reports, news articles, and academic research using qualitative methods..

Keywords: Pakistan, development, sustainable, institutional, capacity building, SDGs

Introduction

Despite its abundance of natural and human resources, Pakistan is facing challenges related to sustainability. The nation has been unable to effectively utilize its abundant human and natural resources, which has resulted in persistent hardship for subsequent generations. The country's economy is confronting a huge decrease in financial development and slow advancement in formative tasks, which is reflected in regrettable social pointers. While the population is rapidly approaching a crucial threshold, the prevalence of poverty has significantly increased. The general prosperity of people has essentially declined. The 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have been officially adopted and incorporated into Pakistan's national development initiative. A resolution to officially adopt the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as its own was unanimously approved by the National Assembly in 2016. In this way, the country has accomplished prominent headways by integrating these goals into public arrangements, commonplace development procedures, and long haul plans. Pakistan is ranked 122nd out of 157 countries on the global index of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In 2017, Pakistan's exhibition of 55.6 was beneath both the normal for the area of 63.3 as well as the evaluations of its companion bunch, which comprises of Bangladesh (56.2) and India (58.1). Capacity building is absolutely necessary for sustainable development because it plays a crucial role in the formulation of policies and their implementation. According to Connolly and York the development of organizations is a methodical process for enhancing an organization's leadership and oversight in order to enable it to effectively accomplish its objectives.¹

¹ Connolly, P., & York, P. (2002). Evaluating capacity-building efforts for non-profit organizations. *OD Practitioner*, 34(4), 33-39.

To achieve this goal, people should procure progressed degrees of limit improvement alongside a readiness to carry out the necessary changes.² In addition, this will make it easier to establish a government that is open, effective, and accommodating to its citizens (Imam, 2011). Through capacity building, institutions, individuals, civil society organizations, think tanks, and federal and provincial governments must improve their capabilities in order to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Numerous developing nations require technical assistance to effectively implement the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, statistical analysis is an essential part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) program's formulation, implementation, and monitoring on a local and sectorial scale, but many nations lack the necessary resources and capabilities. Regarding Sustainable Development Goal 16, numerous Pakistani sectors have placed an emphasis on institutional strengthening and capacity building in the pursuit of sustainable development. This objective looks to cultivate comprehensive and tranquil social orders. According to Hafiz Syed Muhammad Abbas, efforts have been made to improve the quality of healthcare, effectively implement services for the health of mothers, newborns, and children, and participate in training related to international health relations.³ The Norwegian Focus of Greatness for Oil Studies (NCEPS) has been instrumental in supporting scholarly staff and developing capable faculty inside the petrol designing industry.⁴ In addition, the USAID-funded U.S.-Pakistan Center for Advanced Studies in Water Research has made significant progress toward the promotion of the resilience and sustainability of water infrastructure in accordance with Sustainable Development Goal 16.⁵ The joint initiatives aim to improve Pakistan's institutional capabilities and advance sustainable development. Capacity building is hindered by a lack of established organizations, insufficient abilities, and interagency coordination. In addition, the lack of progress in this area is caused by the absence of policy reviews and evaluation procedures. The trouble of fostering the important abilities and assets is available in various areas, including training, wellbeing, natural science, and foundation, which are all vital to the fruitful execution of Feasible Improvement Objectives in non-industrial nations. It is important to acknowledge that a multitude of capacity building concerns are interrelated, and effectively tackling a single obstacle can significantly contribute to the realization of numerous sustainability-related objectives. Strategic plans, such as the SDGs. It should be noted that various capacity building issues are interconnected, and addressing one challenge can have a positive impact on the achievement of multiple goals related to sustainability. The study also delineates the capacity building obstacles encountered by those departments, which are crucial to the long-term growth and prosperity of the nation.

² Milen, A. (2001). What do we know about capacity building? An overview of existing knowledge and good practices. Institutional Repository for Information Sharing (IRIS). World Health Organization, Geneva. Retrieved from <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/67394>

³ Abbas, H. S. M., & others. (2021). the role of state capacity and socio-economic determinants on health quality and its access in Pakistan (1990–2019). *Socio-economic Planning Sciences*, pp. 101109-101109.

⁴ Shaikh, B. T., & others. (2018). Capacity building on health diplomacy: a training experience from Pakistan. *Eastern Mediterranean Health Journal*, 24(9), 933-939.

⁵ Burian, S. J., & others. (Year). Higher education capacity building in water resources engineering and management to support achieving the sustainable development goal for water in Pakistan. *Journal Name*, Volume Number (Issue Number), pp. Page Numbers.

SDG 16 and its significance to the sustainability of Pakistan

SDG 16 capabilities as a significant depiction of joy for social orders that look for equity and strong organizations. This objective is committed to diminishing brutality, preserving human rights, enforcing the rule of law, and resolving disputes. Pakistan is a nation that is confronted with a variety of complex issues, so SDG 16 is of the utmost importance. This not just connotes a significant commitment for the country yet in addition fills in as a way to accomplish long haul and harmless to the ecosystem progress. Pakistan's understanding with SDG 16 prompts different measurements that are utilized to evaluate its encouraging. The goals incorporate killing youngster misuse and savagery related fatalities, propelling the standards of equity, battling unlawful monetary exchanges, controlling the exchange of weapons, and fighting coordinated wrongdoing.⁶ In addition, the objectives call for the development of institutions that are both effective and crystal clear, the promotion of sincere decision-making procedures, the provision of legal identification for each individual, and the implementation of policies that encourage sustainable development. These objectives are fundamental parts of building a general public that maintains the guidelines of decency, balance, and regard for common liberties. Pakistan will need to overcome numerous opportunities and challenges in order to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 16. The nation faces obstacles that prevent it from achieving its objectives despite the advancements that have been made. Pakistan recognizes the importance of promoting peaceful societies and enhancing regional stability as a nation plagued by internal and regional conflicts. Pakistan has attempted to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal in a number of ways. Societies, particularly those striving for justice and strong institutions, can take heart from the 16th Sustainable Development Goal. SDG 16 expects to diminish viciousness by effectively teaming up with networks and legislatures to handle clashes and weakness. The protection of fundamental human rights and the strengthening of legal principles, both of which are essential components for establishing a lasting peace, are an essential component of this undertaking. Furthermore, confining the development of arms as well as expanding the portrayal of non-industrial nations in global administration bodies are significant parts that add to the accomplishment of SDG 16's evenhanded of making a more secure, more impartial, and safer world. The goal of achieving SDG 16 is very important to Pakistan, a country that is dealing with many complicated issues. Not only is it an important national priority, but it is also a way to make progress over the long term that is good for the environment. The objective of SDG 16 is to advance quiet and far-reaching networks, ensure availability to every general set of laws, and make powerful, responsible, and comprehensive associations on all levels.

Implementation Framework for SDGs 16 in Pakistan

Pakistan has actively engaged in resolving internal conflicts through a multifaceted approach that includes political discourse, development projects, and focused reconciliation endeavors. These initiatives are designed to address the root causes of conflict and foster long-term stability and socioeconomic development. One of the most significant steps in this regard was the incorporation of the tribal areas under the Federal Administration (FATA) into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) in 2018. This merger aimed to integrate these regions more fully into the national framework, providing greater access to resources, governance, and development opportunities. The initiative has been accompanied by extensive infrastructure development, educational programs, and economic projects designed to uplift these historically marginalized

⁶ Mujtaba, G., Shah, M. U. H., Hai, A., Daud, M., & Hayat, M. (2024). A holistic approach to embracing the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goal (SDG-6) towards water security in Pakistan. *Journal of Water Process Engineering*, 57, 104691.

areas and reduce the potential for conflict by addressing the underlying issues of poverty and disenfranchisement. Pakistan has a long-standing commitment to advocating for the peaceful resolution of cross-border conflicts through negotiation and dialogue. This approach is essential for maintaining regional stability and fostering cooperative relationships with neighboring countries. Pakistan's diplomatic efforts include participating in international forums and bilateral negotiations aimed at resolving disputes amicably. The country promotes dialogue as the primary means of conflict resolution, encouraging all parties involved to engage in peaceful discussions rather than resorting to violence. This stance is evident in Pakistan's ongoing efforts to address complex issues such as the Kashmir dispute, where it consistently calls for dialogue and adherence to international resolutions to find a lasting solution that respects the rights and aspirations of all parties involved.⁷

In response to the escalating threat of terrorism, Pakistan launched Operation Zarb-e-Azb in 2014, a comprehensive military campaign aimed at eradicating terrorist networks and restoring peace in the region. This operation significantly improved regional security and created a safer environment for development and economic activities. Complementing these military efforts, the National Action Plan (NAP) was introduced in the same year, outlining a holistic strategy to combat terrorism. The NAP includes stringent legal measures, enhanced intelligence sharing, and de-radicalization programs to address the multifaceted nature of terrorism. These initiatives reflect Pakistan's commitment to eliminating terrorism and creating a secure environment for its citizens.⁸

Pakistan demonstrates proactive involvement in regional initiatives through its membership in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). By participating in various forums, dialogues, and confidence-building measures, Pakistan aims to foster better relations among member states and enhance regional stability. These efforts include economic cooperation, cultural exchanges, and joint initiatives to address common challenges such as poverty, terrorism, and climate change. Pakistan recognizes that regional stability is closely linked to economic development and actively promotes initiatives that support economic growth and integration within the South Asian region.

To strengthen the rule of law and ensure justice for all, Pakistan has implemented various initiatives aimed at enhancing legal frameworks and judicial systems. These efforts include reforming existing laws, improving judicial processes, and ensuring equitable access to justice. Pakistan's commitment to these principles aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 16, which emphasizes the importance of promoting peaceful and inclusive societies. The country has taken steps to streamline judicial procedures, reduce case backlogs, and make the legal system more accessible and transparent. These reforms are designed to build public trust in the justice system and ensure that all individuals, regardless of their socioeconomic status, can seek and obtain justice.

Pakistan has enacted several laws aimed at strengthening the criminal justice system and protecting the rights of vulnerable groups, particularly women. Legislation such as the Criminal Law Reform Act, the Women Protection Act, and the Ordinance of Anti-Rape has been introduced to provide stronger safeguards against abuse and discrimination. Reforms in family law, including the Protection of Women against Violence Act and the Muslim Family

⁷ Xu, D., Abbasi, K. R., Hussain, K., Albaker, A., Almulhim, A. I., & Alvarado, R. (2023). Analyzing the factors contribute to achieving sustainable development goals in Pakistan: A novel policy framework. *Energy Strategy Reviews*, 45, 101050.

⁸ Aftab, W., Siddiqui, F. J., Tasic, H., Perveen, S., Siddiqi, S., & Bhutta, Z. A. (2020). Implementation of health and health-related sustainable development goals: progress, challenges and opportunities—a systematic literature review. *BMJ global health*, 5(8), e002273.

Laws Ordinance, underscore Pakistan's commitment to promoting gender equality and protecting women's rights. These legal modifications aim to ensure fair and just treatment in family matters and address issues such as domestic violence, inheritance rights, and child custody, contributing to a more equitable society.

To expedite the administration of justice, Pakistan has implemented several improvements to its legal systems. These include the adoption of modern case management systems, the digitization of case files, and the development of a digital case management system. These technological innovations enhance efficiency, transparency, and accessibility within the legal system. Additionally, alternative dispute resolution (ADR) mechanisms have been integrated to provide timely and cost-effective resolutions to conflicts. Reconciliation councils, dispute resolution forums, and mediation centers offer alternatives to the traditional court system, allowing parties to settle disputes amicably and reduce the burden on the judiciary.

Pakistan has launched awareness campaigns to educate the public about their legal rights, processes, and available remedies. These initiatives aim to foster greater understanding and engagement between the justice system and the general public. Programs such as the Punjab Access to Justice Program and the Sindh Legal Empowerment and Assistance Program are specifically designed to offer legal assistance and support to marginalized communities, ensuring that their socioeconomic status does not hinder their access to justice. By providing legal aid and educational resources, these programs empower individuals to seek justice and uphold their rights.

To combat corruption and promote accountability, Pakistan established the National Accountability Bureau (NAB). The NAB is tasked with investigating and prosecuting corruption cases, fostering a culture of transparency and integrity within public institutions. In addition to NAB, Pakistan has implemented various citizen feedback mechanisms, ombudsman offices, and electronic governance systems to enhance accountability and public trust. These measures are designed to ensure that public officials are held accountable for their actions and that governance processes are transparent and fair, thereby strengthening institutional stability and governance.

Pakistan has taken significant steps to improve governance and enhance the effectiveness of its institutions. Anti-corruption measures, such as those implemented by NAB, aim to tackle widespread corruption and foster transparency. Additionally, initiatives to improve public finance governance, including the digitization of financial records and performance-based budgeting, are critical components of these efforts. Pakistan's strategic choices in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) reflect its commitment to balancing various objectives in line with national priorities. By focusing on both infrastructure development and human development, Pakistan aims to create a sustainable and inclusive growth trajectory that benefits all segments of society.

Notable Challenges in Achieving SDGs 16 in Pakistan

One of the primary challenges Pakistan faces in achieving Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16) is enduring political instability. Frequent changes in government and political upheaval can disrupt the consistent implementation of policies aimed at promoting peace, justice, and strong institutions. Political instability often leads to policy discontinuity, where initiatives started by one administration may be altered or abandoned by the next. This lack of consistent commitment hampers long-term efforts to achieve the objectives of SDG 16. Moreover, political instability can erode public trust in government institutions, further complicating efforts to establish a stable and just society. Security concerns, particularly

terrorism, pose significant obstacles to establishing peace and maintaining stability in Pakistan. Despite considerable efforts to combat terrorism, such as military operations and the implementation of the National Action Plan (NAP), the threat remains. Terrorist activities not only cause loss of life and property but also create an environment of fear and uncertainty that undermines development efforts.⁹ The ongoing security challenges divert resources and attention away from other critical areas, such as judicial reforms and governance improvements, making it difficult to achieve sustainable peace and development. Corruption is a major impediment to achieving SDG 16 in Pakistan. Despite the establishment of anti-corruption bodies like the National Accountability Bureau (NAB), corruption remains pervasive across various sectors. Corruption undermines the rule of law, erodes public trust in institutions, and hinders effective governance. Efforts to combat corruption need to be intensified and complemented by reforms that promote transparency, accountability, and integrity in public administration. Improving governance also requires enhancing the capacity and effectiveness of institutions at all levels, ensuring that they are able to function independently and efficiently. Reducing social and economic inequality and promoting gender equality are critical to ensuring equal access to justice for all. In Pakistan, significant disparities exist between different regions and social groups, exacerbating issues of exclusion and marginalization. Women, in particular, face numerous barriers to accessing justice, including discriminatory laws, cultural norms, and limited legal awareness. Addressing these inequalities requires targeted policies and programs that empower marginalized communities, improve legal literacy, and ensure that justice systems are accessible and responsive to the needs of all citizens. Building the capacity of institutions, especially within the justice system, is fundamental to the successful fulfillment of SDG 16. Pakistan's justice system faces numerous challenges, including outdated infrastructure, inadequate resources, and procedural inefficiencies. Strengthening institutions involves not only improving physical infrastructure but also investing in human resources, training, and technology. Enhancing the capacity of institutions to deliver timely and effective justice is crucial for building public trust and ensuring that the rule of law is upheld. The scarcity of resources presents significant difficulties in effectively allocating funds towards establishing peace, improving justice systems, and enhancing institutions. Pakistan faces competing demands on its limited resources, making it challenging to prioritize and fund initiatives aimed at achieving SDG 16. Adequate funding is essential for implementing reforms, conducting capacity-building programs, and maintaining the necessary infrastructure for justice and governance systems. Without sufficient financial resources, efforts to achieve SDG 16 may be severely constrained.¹⁰

Organizational Structure and Coordination Challenges

The Pakistani government has taken significant preliminary actions to build a robust organizational structure to facilitate the successful implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). National and provincial assemblies have established task forces, and the Planning Commission and provincial Planning and Development Departments have created specialized units. However, the initial examination revealed notable obstacles regarding the execution and attainment of SDG 16. The thematic and institutional framework for Goal 16 is excessively populated and distributed among executive, legislative, and judicial bodies at both national and subnational levels. This overlap leads to a situation of institutional

⁹ Arif, S. M. W. K., Bannian, B., & Gardazi, S. M. F. (2022). Situation of Poverty in Pakistan and its commitments with respect to Sustainable Development Goals: prospects and challenges. *Global Economics Review (GER)*, VII.

¹⁰ Cho, J., Isgut, A. E., & Tateno, Y. (2016). Pathways for adapting the Sustainable Development Goals to the National context: The case of Pakistan.

diversity without clear coordination, resulting in inefficiencies and potential conflicts of interest. The dispersion of responsibilities among numerous entities creates a fragmented approach to achieving SDG 16, making it challenging to maintain cohesive and synchronized efforts. Various institutions are responsible for specific goals, including national and provincial legislatures, higher and lower courts, law enforcement agencies, prosecution and correctional departments, human rights and legal authorities, federal and provincial ministries, and regulatory bodies. The coexistence of diverse themes complicates coordination and implementation, and currently, no central agency serves as a hub for managing, reporting, tracking, planning, and overseeing progress toward Goal 16. Previous attempts to address this gap, such as establishing provincial justice committees, have not been fully effective due to design and implementation challenges.

A central coordinating body is essential to streamline efforts, monitor progress, and ensure that all stakeholders work towards common objectives. The majority of the indicators for SDG 16, particularly those related to justice and governance, are not consistently generated, as highlighted in the Data Gap Report commissioned by the Planning Commission in December 2017. This lack of reliable and consistent data makes it difficult to establish benchmarks, monitor progress, and identify areas that need improvement. Accurate and timely data is crucial for informed decision-making and effective implementation of policies and programs. Therefore, addressing data gaps and establishing robust mechanisms for data collection and analysis are imperative for achieving SDG 16. While Pakistan has made significant efforts to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 16, it faces numerous challenges that must be addressed to ensure success. Political instability, security concerns, corruption, social and economic inequalities, institutional capacity issues, resource constraints, organizational fragmentation, and data gaps all pose significant obstacles. Overcoming these challenges requires a coordinated and sustained effort from all stakeholders, including government agencies, civil society, and international partners. By addressing these critical issues, Pakistan can enhance its ability to promote peace, justice, and strong institutions, ultimately contributing to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Potential Solutions for Achieving Sustainable Development Goal 16 in Pakistan

Building capacities and institutional reform are fundamental to Pakistan's pursuit of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). To achieve SDG 16, which focuses on promoting peace, justice, and strong institutions, Pakistan needs to prioritize funding education, implementing policies that enhance government oversight, and fostering strategic alliances.¹¹ By investing in education, the country can develop a knowledgeable and skilled workforce capable of driving sustainable development in various sectors. Policies aimed at improving government oversight and accountability are crucial for combating corruption and ensuring that institutions function transparently and effectively. Furthermore, promoting alliances with international organizations, private sector entities, and civil society can provide the necessary support and resources to implement these reforms. A collaborative approach will enable Pakistan to leverage its human and institutional resources to promote long-term growth and stability across all fields. The creation of the SDG 16 Data Reporting and Implementation Framework is essential to monitor progress and address the political and economic challenges associated with this goal. The framework should focus on efforts to combat corruption, promote equal access to justice, increase representation, and eliminate discrimination. Accurate data

¹¹ Latif, M. H., Amjad, M., Qamar, A., Asim, M., Mahmood, W., Khalid, W., & Rehman, A. (2022). Nexus implementation of sustainable development goals (SDGs) for sustainable public sector buildings in Pakistan. *Journal of Building Engineering*, 52, 104415.

collection and reporting are vital for identifying gaps, tracking advancements, and making informed decisions. The framework will also facilitate accountability and transparency, ensuring that the initiatives undertaken are effective and aligned with the objectives of SDG 16. By addressing these critical issues, Pakistan can strengthen its commitment to the global sustainable development agenda and work towards creating a more just and equitable society. Implementing a robust data reporting system will enable policymakers to measure progress accurately and adjust strategies as needed to overcome obstacles. The successful implementation of the SDG 16 agenda necessitates a collaborative effort between public and private organizations, as well as civil society members. All levels of government must establish both horizontal and vertical partnerships to collaborate effectively and make significant advances towards meeting the SDG 16 goal. Horizontal partnerships involve cooperation among various government agencies and departments, while vertical partnerships connect national, provincial, and local governments. Such an integrated approach ensures that policies and initiatives are coherent and complementary across different levels of governance. Additionally, engaging civil society and private sector stakeholders fosters a sense of shared responsibility and collective action. By acknowledging and addressing potential obstacles, capacity-building programs can navigate the complexities of sustainable development more effectively and develop the essential skills for enduring positive transformation. This comprehensive approach will enhance the effectiveness of programs aimed at building capacities and creating the necessary conditions for sustainable and inclusive development in Pakistan.

Conclusion

Progressing towards Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16) presents a worldwide challenge that requires action for implementation and subsequent oversight in both developing and developed countries, albeit with different approaches. Capacity requirements and gaps pose a significant obstacle to the effective implementation and monitoring of SDG 16 in numerous countries. Post-conflict, post-transition, fragile, or least-developed nations frequently experience these capacity issues. Simultaneously, in numerous advanced and developing nations, the well-being of women and children remains jeopardized by ongoing acts of violence, hindering their ability to achieve their maximum capabilities. Persistent moral and political unrest, illicit financial transactions, various manifestations of prejudice, and social cohesion continue to be significant obstacles. It is imperative that Member States and the international community increase their efforts to prevent and eliminate conflict while concurrently striving to improve the well-being of individuals residing in regions affected by conflict. This can be achieved through the mitigation of factors that fuel violent conflict, enhancement of outreach strategies for marginalized populations impacted by conflict, and advancements towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As stated in SDG 16, the 2030 Agenda emphasizes the need for institutions that are transparent, efficient, inclusive, and responsible in order to promote the eradication of poverty and achieve sustainable development. The objective is to guarantee decision-making that is flexible, inclusive, and participation-oriented at every level. Goal 16 highlights the critical significance of organizational structures and efficient processes of decision-making in attaining the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Similar to the other components of the 2030 Agenda, the successful implementation of SDG 16 relies on a comprehensive approach involving all sectors of society, not just governments. Civil society organizations play a multifaceted role, both as executors and as champions for marginalized segments of the population, including women, youth, and marginalized groups. The private sector can significantly contribute to endeavors aimed at fostering development, promoting inclusion, advancing the rule of law, and eradicating corruption—all of which are critical for establishing a thriving business environment. Academic institutions, local governments, and lawmakers are essential players in the 2030 Agenda's fulfillment of SDG 16 and in achieving overall sustainable development goals. Their involvement ensures a holistic approach to creating transparent, inclusive, and efficient institutions, leading to the broader eradication of poverty and sustainable progress.