



RESEARCH PAPER

Role of Good Governance and Local Government in achieving Sustainable Development Goals in Pakistan

¹Amina Tahir and Dr. Muhammad Muzaffar

1. BS, Department of Politics & International Relations, GC Women Universit Sialkot, Punjab, Pakistan
2. Assistant Professor, Department of Politics & International Relations, GC Women Universit Sialkot, Punjab, Pakistan

Corresponding Author: amina71tahir@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study examines the role that good governance and local government played in achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Pakistan, with the objective of analyzing the gap in how local government's ability to uphold SDGs through decentralization governance, inter-institutional coordination, and accountability is enhanced by good governance. It further describes how national policies of good governance, including rule of law, transparency and accountability, translate into effective community-level action. This framework also explores the challenges faced by both governance including limited inter-institutional capacity, poor decentralization, environmental pressures, and socio-economic demographic factors. The 2030 Agenda of SDGs was adopted in 2015. SDGs were adopted to address poverty, hunger, inequality, climate change, and environmental degradation. Pakistan has integrated SDGs into the budgeting process and national policies by incorporating SDG-aligned goals and establishing provincial and federal SDG support units. Pakistan's SDG ranking declined from 122nd to 137th, highlighting a gap between policy commitment and actual implementation. The study used a qualitative research method relying on secondary sources of data, including publications of international organizations, peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents, government reports, and books. Qualitative content analysis was used to examine the relationship between SDG implementation, local governance, and good governance, and to identify key themes. Thematic analysis was chosen because it provides in-depth information. The results indicate that to close the gap between policy aspirations and practical results, Pakistan must achieve the SDGs through greater fiscal decentralization, better accountability systems, and closer coordination between all governmental levels.

KEYWORDS Good Governance, Local Government, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Pakistan, Decentralization, Accountability, Institutional Coordination

Introduction

The United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in September 2015 to promote SDGs as a universal framework. The aim of this agenda is to address global challenges such as environmental degradation, poverty, climate change, hunger, peace, strong institutions, justice, and inequality, and it consists of 17 SDGs and 169 targets. In both developed and developing countries, the SDGs and MDGs are applicable and are based on the principle of Leave No One Behind. The agenda integrates three dimensions: social, environmental, and economic development. It encourages the private sector, governments, and civil society to work together. In its national development agenda, Pakistan adopted the SDGs in 2015. The Government of Pakistan established the Federal SDG Support Unit to facilitate implementation and achieve the 2030 agenda (United Nations, 2015; Batool, et al., 2023; Junaid, 2022).

By integrating the SDGs into its national development programs, Pakistan has made significant strides in their implementation. Ten development outcomes were identified as

priorities for medium-term strategic planning in Pakistan's One UN Programme 2018–2022, which was initiated by the Pakistani government in partnership with the UN. Since then, considerable work has been done to incorporate the SDGs into development initiatives, planning procedures, and national policies. Pakistan's initiatives for implementing the SDGs have focused on improving monitoring systems, promoting collaboration, national planning, and mobilizing financial resources among stakeholders and government institutions (Asad, 2019; Javeed et al., 2022). Achieving the SDGs requires collective efforts from all sectors. Without investing in poverty reduction, Pakistan cannot achieve sustainable social, economic, and environmental progress.

Good governance is considered essential to achieving the SDGs. It encourages openness, responsibility, public involvement, and strong institutions that enhance policy execution and guarantee the economical use of public funds. Economic growth and sustainable development are supported by these governance principles (Bos et al., 2012). Research also shows that by lowering corruption, strengthening the rule of law, and enhancing institutional efficiency, good governance supports sustainable development. SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) are supported by these elements, which also boost public trust and draw investment (Elkington, 2020). Good governance also supports cooperation among institutions and the integration of sustainable policies into national planning; transparent governance can promote sustainability and strengthen long-term sustainable development (Miskiewicz, 2022; Malik, et al., 2023; Arora & Mishra, 2023).

Local governments can implement national development policies at the local level through the localization of SDGs. Essential public services must be provided by local government, which plays an important role in SDG implementation. Their involvement improves service delivery, policy implementation, and citizen participation (Stafford-Smith et al., 2017). Without the localization of SDGs, they cannot be fully achieved. To increase participation and ensure that development initiatives consider the needs of local communities, Pakistan has transferred fiscal powers to lower levels of government. Pakistan's global ranking dropped from 122nd to 137th out of 166 countries in 2024, according to a UN report, indicating slow progress toward the SDGs (United Nations Pakistan, 2024). Local government, as a bridge between local communities and national policies, contributes to the achievement of SDGs (Stafford-Smith et al., 2017; Muzaffar & Choudhary, 2017) and plays a vital role in improving health, sanitation, local development, and education.

Strong ties between local government and good governance are essential for the successful implementation of SDGs. By guaranteeing effective public administration and policymaking, good governance fosters an institutional environment in which local government can translate policies into workable community-level initiatives. However, obstacles such as poor institutional frameworks, insufficient funding, and restricted administrative power make it harder for local governments to carry out SDG projects. Achieving the SDGs requires strong governance processes and greater authority for local governments (Hassan & Zeb, 2021; Cheema et al., 2024; Mumtaz et al., 2025; Saleem et al., 2023).

Literature Review

For promoting social inclusion, institutional capacity, development, economic growth and environmental sustainability the SDGs provide a comprehensive framework. The success of SDGs depends on political stability, effective governance and government institutions capacity. Local governance is considered a fundamental institution for achieving the SDGs. Good governance creates an institutional environment in which citizens actively participate in decision-making, laws are implemented efficiently, and public resources are managed effectively — improving service delivery, public confidence in government

institutions, and democratic institutions. After adopting the SDGs, Pakistan continues to face governance challenges related to corruption, limited accountability, weak institutional performance, and poor policy implementation, which have slowed progress toward socio-economic sustainable development. Strengthening governance mechanisms is essential to ensuring effective SDG implementation (Hassan & Zeb, 2021; Saleem et al., 2023).

The rule of law is another essential component of good governance that directly supports sustainability. Weak legal frameworks, political interference, and ineffective accountability discourage social and economic sustainable development and reduce institutional performance, while governance reforms improve institutional effectiveness, transparency, and public participation (Saleem et al., 2023). Good governance provides the policies that local government implements at the community level. As the tier of government closest to citizens, local government is best positioned to identify local needs and provide services such as clean drinking water, waste management, sanitation, healthcare, and education. It also encourages public accountability and community participation, which are closely linked to SDG objectives, and contributes significantly to inclusive and sustainable development (Mumtaz et al., 2025). Local government faces administrative and structural challenges, including limited administrative authority and weak coordination among provincial, federal, and local institutions, which delay the achievement of the SDGs (Muzaffar, et. al 2024; Mumtaz et al., 2025).

Moreover, implementing the SDGs requires collaboration between local governments, local communities, national institutions, and civil society organizations. Development policies are strengthened through effective institutional coordination, public participation, accountability, and transparency. To support SDG objectives, governance should enable institutions to make policies that are equally accessible to all people (Aslam & Muzaffar, 2025; Saleem et al., 2023; Muzaffar, et. al 2023).

Local government and good governance are both vital for sustainable development in Pakistan. Recent studies have tended to address these elements separately, focusing on governance reforms or local government functions in isolation. This study addresses that gap by exploring how good governance enhances local government's ability to uphold the SDGs through accountability, decentralized governance, and coordination, offering a comprehensive framework for their combined impact on sustainable development.

Material and Methods

To explore the role of good governance in achieving the SDGs in Pakistan, this study uses a qualitative research method. The qualitative approach is beneficial because it provides in-depth understanding of institutional performance, the contribution of local governments to sustainable development, and governance policies. The research is based entirely on secondary sources of data, including government reports, publications of international and national organizations, peer-reviewed journal articles, and policy documents. Qualitative content analysis was used to examine the collected information, identify key themes, and explore the relationship between local governance, good governance, SDG implementation, and governance challenges. This method supports the study in achieving its objectives and provides a comprehensive understanding of the literature.

Results and Discussion

Pakistan has taken important institutional steps to incorporate the SDGs into its national development agenda since adopting the 2030 Agenda in 2015. The National SDGs Framework, the creation of federal and provincial SDG support units, and the integration of SDGs into development planning and budgeting have all improved policy coordination and established an institutional basis for sustainable development (United Nations

Development Programme, 2016; United Nations Pakistan, 2024). Local organizations play crucial role in order to laid down the national policies into grassroots actions. Local government enjoys the privilege of keeping itself close to the community and local people that helps to recognize the needs of grassroots community and address their problems at local level as well. Local government has played important role for the implementation of numerous sustainable development goals regarding health, sanitation and education by devolution of power at local stage.(UNDP,2019,OECD,2020).In spite of these contributions lack of institutional capacity, poor coordination, low finances created hurdles in the effective implementation of sdgs. The good governance reforms, ameliorating coordination among governmental institutions and granting more fiscal freedom to the local government can help improve enforcement of sdgs (OECD,2020,UN,2024).

Meanwhile, the government of Pakistan has several key developments in improving women empowerment, reducing gender discrimination, and overcoming poverty. But, the country played a little role in the water, improving sanitary conditions and ameliorating the level of education.transparent(Mahmood,2025).The corruption, poor governance and limited finances continue to limited the development and implementation or sdgs(Mumtaz etal,2025).Pakistan has advocated to the thought that improving sdgs will ameliorate the countries rank in middle economies by 2030.The state and governmental institutions are learning from existing problems and try to improve coordination and sustainability(Khan&Ali,2029).

The Center of Government's Role

Strong leadership is necessary to enable institutional coordination and guarantee accountability, given the complexity and scope of the SDGs. The OECD Survey on Planning and Coordinating the Implementation of the SDGs (OECD, 2016) states that national governments employ a variety of methods for allocating leadership responsibility for implementing the 2030 Agenda, including the Ministry of Planning, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Environment, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or Development. To support SDG implementation, many nations have recently strengthened the institutional and financial capabilities of their Centers of Government (CoG) — bodies that report directly to the Head of Government and the Council of Ministries. The CoG also plays a significant role in regional and local SDG implementation. Because access to public services and economic opportunities can differ greatly between urban and rural areas, the 17 SDGs do not align uniformly across regions, and the need for vertical coordination mechanisms increases with the degree of state decentralization.

Priority-Setting and Strategic Planning

Translating the 17 SDGs into tangible actions and deliverables that reflect their multidisciplinary nature remains a major challenge. An efficient planning and budgeting process helps set priorities and ensures that available resources have the greatest possible impact. Public procurement is another strategic tool governments can use to address societal issues and encourage innovation. Although most nations already have national planning tools, these typically need to be modified to reflect the multidisciplinary and intricate nature of the 2030 Agenda (OECD, 2016). A typical national SDG strategy could include: first, mapping current national objectives at all levels and identifying priority areas for improvement, including specific targets and indicators consistent with the broader SDG methodology; second, selecting policy changes that could lead to the greatest progress across all SDGs; and third, creating an actionable plan compatible with available resources. Governments may use strategic visioning and foresight to engage in scenario planning aligned with the time horizons of various goals, involving different stakeholders to build societal acceptance and legitimacy that can sustain the strategy beyond election cycles.

Digital Tools, Human Resources, and Expertise to Support SDG Implementation

To support the credible implementation of the 2030 Agenda, both internally and externally, governments must ensure that the institutions involved have the necessary resources and expertise. A professional, competent, and responsive public service is more crucial than ever in today's rapidly evolving world to deliver public value and foster citizens' confidence in public institutions. As part of their SDG strategies, governments must adapt their fundamental management techniques to an increasingly complex economic, social, and environmental reality and make the most responsible use of human resources. Developing cutting-edge digital tools and improving civil service competencies and skills are among the potential solutions.

Using Budgeting as a Tool to Integrate the SDGs

The budget, which outlines how annual and multi-annual goals will be prioritized and accomplished, is a key instrument of government policy (OECD, 2015). It is an essential component of national development strategies and reflects the choices made by a nation's executive body regarding raising and distributing public resources. Budgetary decisions have far-reaching effects on society and the economy, determining the distribution of wealth and directly affecting citizens through the availability and quality of public services. Modifying budget systems and procedures can increase the degree to which resource allocation promotes efficient policy design and performance in support of national SDG agendas at all levels of government. The World Bank and the IMF have worked to help governments increase the effectiveness of government spending on SDG-relevant policies related to infrastructure, health, and education (World Bank, 2019).

The Rule of Law and Law and Order

Upholding the rule of law and preserving law and order are fundamental duties of government. Nations with strong legal systems are typically better positioned to achieve the SDGs because they can uphold social stability, reduce corruption, and enforce the law fairly (United Nations, 2015).

Preservation of the Environment

Governments play an essential role in preserving the environment and ensuring the sustainable use of natural resources. Economic growth and human well-being are threatened by environmental degradation, pollution, deforestation, biodiversity loss, and climate change.

Challenges Faced by Local and Good Governance in SDG Implementation

Economic and social imbalance and inclusive growth: Poverty and inequality present major challenges to SDG implementation at the local government level. Local institutions often have unequal access to healthcare, social assistance, education, job opportunities, and other social services. When local authorities have limited institutional capacity or inadequate resources, marginalized communities are deprived of government development programs. Local governments require good governance to identify marginalized communities, equally distribute resources, and ensure development measures reach the most vulnerable. Economic growth cannot proceed without accounting for local governance and equity (Dugarova & Gülasan, 2017).

Demographic changes and pressure on public services: Rapid urban growth, population expansion, migration, and an aging population increase pressure on local governments to deliver equal public services. A growing population increases demand for residential facilities, transport services, education, water and sanitation, health facilities, and employment access. Effective or good governance — through public participation,

effective administration, and strategic planning — is vital to addressing demographic strain and promoting SDG implementation.

Environmental exposure and climate challenges: Climate change and environmental degradation present significant challenges for local administrations. Cities face major problems such as land deterioration, flood disasters, insufficient water supply, pollution, environmental stress, and loss of biodiversity. Governance needs to strengthen systems through effective environmental management, sustainable planning, citizen involvement, accountable decision-making, and improved accountability for better environmental policies and decisions (Dugarova & Gülasan, 2017).

Institutional response to crises and emergencies: The capacity of local government to implement development programs is affected by natural disasters, health emergencies, economic shocks, and conflicts. Local and good governance may have to redirect short-term resources toward long-term SDG programs to meet immediate emergency needs. Good governance is responsible for effective coordination among institutions, crisis management, protection of communities, and transparent distribution of resources.

Fiscal limitations and resource mobilization: Financing remains one of the major challenges for local and good governance in SDG implementation. Sufficient financial resources are required for local governments to provide basic services such as health, education, water, sanitation, environment, and infrastructure. Dependence on higher levels of government and limited fiscal capacity restrict local governments' ability to implement development programs. Through transparent budgeting, responsible resource allocation, effective use of available funds, and prioritization of areas with the greatest development needs, good governance can help address this challenge.

Findings

Despite its importance community participation remains limited: In Pakistan a governance core principal is that it involves those directly affected by a policy in the decision making process. Without meaningful consultation with communities the local government largely tends to be planning to go down with bureaucrats and officials. Among the residents project ownership is weaker when the input community is excluded which in turn affects the sustainability.

To track real progress data gaps make it difficult: To measure the progress of SDGs it requires up to date, granular data, reliable which will be down to Union council level and district. In Pakistan the collection of data systems remain inconsistent in all departments and weak which resulted in the local government working in outdated or non at all data. SDGs progress becomes difficult without monitoring, evidence based decisions and accurate data.

Between government weak coordination impede SDGs implementation: Coordination and communication between provincial, local government and federal remain inconsistent and these levels are responsible for implanting SDGs in Pakistan and the work is also divided among these levels. Sometimes in many cases, without proper consultations overlapping schemes are launched by different tiers of the government leading to waste resources and duplication. Collected information and data sharing by the local government often fails to reach federal and authorities.

At local level lack of technical and skilled staff: Particularly there is lack of modern data collection methods, monitoring frameworks and personnel training in SDG in the offices of local government in smaller cities and rural areas. Many officials have no idea

which tools to use for tracking progress or not know about how to measure SDGs. As a result policymakers leave a blurry picture of where improvements are needed the most.

Long term SDG planning is affected by political instability: Within a short political cycle, the objectives of SDGs cannot be met and for the achievement of SDGs consistent policies, sustained investment and long term pattern required. Due to administrative reshuffling or elections leadership of local government changes frequently. This inconsistency leaves dismisses their overall impact and SDGs related initiatives incomplete.

Conclusion

The study emphasis that the Pakistan SDG's progress cannot be seen simply as either a failure or success story, but instead of nation worked for achieving its targeted results the developing of proper administrative institutions. The creation of SDG supporting institutions through build formal international partnership's, coordination of goal into national planning. Pakistan demonstrates the technical expertise, political support to promote the agenda of 2030 sincerely. Furthermore, the decline of SDG goals shows that insufficient management in institutional infrastructure are alone. The fight for SDG implementation is more rather than it's lost. A key aspect of this study is that the local government and good governance are not seperate objectives but they are two parts of a unified system. The main reason is that the the government administrator are well staffed but poorly governed local government still be insufficient, crouppted, uninvolved from state priorities. It is important to strengthen both pillars of governance instead of consecutively. The study also suggests that the state can concentrate on particular objective with constant political priority and they strengthen women empowerment, effective fundings, and the instead of gender discrimination. Pakistan aim to becoming the middle economy by the year 2030 will be undermined by an profusion of plans and institution but the implementation is ineffective. The study focus on the fiscal decentralization, effective accountability, emchanced coordination and sustained political commitment from national level to the local officials who improved their services ,policies towards the public and provide effective, achieveable roadmap. If these policies were implemented collectively and presited overtime. Pakistan has a achieveable opportunity to bridging the gap between it's aspirations and actual situations.

Recommendations

Most local governments, currently relay on the provincial governments for funding and have wait for many months for allocation of resources. The higher departments that may not fully understood the local conditions and create a reason in delaying of local government projects. Local government need to resolve these problems rapidly if the local authority to generate and supervise their own revenue and budgets.

The overlapping projects and insufficient use of resources between federal, local government and province creates challenges. Instead of unaddressed issues within all Levels of government. SDG implementation in national level through regular joint planning sessions, sustained responsibilities and effective coordination system.

Government should make budget plans around specific SDG goals rather than to oversee to consider the main aspect of written budget. Implementating citizens involvement in decision making to knowing the actual needs of nation to determine which local priorities such as school, hospitals and better water system should also received funding.

Local government have less coordination struggles to regulate comprehensive development programs and plans. Program of training and usage of digital tools are a long

term investment rather than a quick fix. They should be strengthen weak institution and administrative capacity.

The resources of development are equally distributed within as country and do not reach as always whose needs more. Because the poverty and marganilization are often intensified in specific communities rather than equal distribution is equal to fairness. Resources are distributed according to the SDG goals for strengthen local government and governance system.

Declarations

Authors' Contribution

Amina Tahir conceptualised the study, compiled and analysed and prepared the original draft of the manuscript, Dr. Muhammad Muzaffar supervised the research, and critically reviewed the manuscript. Both arthors have read and approved the final version.

Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Ethical Considerations

This study addresses exclusively on aggregated, publicwely available data. No individual complainants were identified, contacted or interviewed and no personal data were accessedin at any stage.

AI Use Statement

No AI tool was used to generate any data, conduct analysis and produce results, or draft the intellectual content of this article. The arthors reviewed and take full responsibility for the integrity and accuracy of the final manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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