



RESEARCH PAPER

Barriers to Sustainable Development: Examining Pakistan's Economic Taboos and SDG Challenges

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores economic taboos, which are impeding the prospects of Pakistan to seeing through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Using primary and secondary data, the study identifies cultural, institutional, and policy related economic prohibitions which limit inclusive development, financial disclosure, gender economic participation, and just distribution of resource. Thirty-three face-to-face interviews were undertaken with policy makers, economists and development practitioners. Thematic and content analyses of the qualitative data identified emerging themes including many who are unwilling to discuss regulation of informal economy and tax evasion and gendered economic roles as well as opposition to fiscal reforms. Secondary data collected from government reports and international development organizations also supported these findings. The report illustrates how these economic taboos – distorted by social and political sensitivities and by institutional inaction – become the systemic obstacles to an effective SDG application. This study recommends policy discourse reforms, public awareness and institution-building to undo these taboos and to ensure sustainable economic development of Pakistan.

KEYWORDS Economic Taboos, SDGs, Informal Economy, Financial Inclusion, Economic Inequality, Gender Disparity

Introduction

This study mainly focuses on the concept of Pakistan socio-political context in achieving SDGs. The sociopolitical condition refers to the interplay between social factors and political factors within society and nation. It includes the different aspects of social issues, such as inequality, education and healthcare, intersecting with political issues like governance, laws and political stability. There is a link between social and political situations and their factors. Different social factors have impacts on the political situation. It's about multi dimensions, it will include social structure, social hierarchies and overall systems of society in which people live, interact and make decisions. There are many different factors in socio-political concepts, social structure, inequalities, economic conditions, resource distribution, political structures, governance level and institutional structures. Socio-political factors mainly involve cultural norms, values and beliefs. To understand this concept there is a dire need to understand its historical perspective, contemporary challenges and future trajectories (Batool, et. al., 2023; Mehmood, 2023).

There is a different socio-political factor. Political structure, social issues, economic condition, public opinion and participation, legal and institutional frameworks and international relations. It refers to those socio-political issues which are foundational to value orientation in society. A country's wealth is a representation of its dedication to fulfilling the needs of its citizens, while scarcity restricts humans from fulfilling their

most essential needs and seizing opportunities. A critical feature is safety. Income inequality — the gap between the richest and rest of the population — is often a background trigger of social discontent. Social integration is a process of absorption of underrepresented groups in the mainstream in the interest of harmony. Political issues, whether they are internal or external, hinder growth and governance. These elements influence public policy effectiveness, societal resilience and development outcomes (Malik, et. al., 2023; Kalandides, 2018).

Socio-political conditions differ significantly between developing and developed nations and these conditions are crucial to the development of any country. A stable and positive socio-political environment tends to foster a more advanced and developed society and nation. Emphasizing internal socio-political issues within recipient countries is not simply a strategy used by donor nations to distract from their own shortcomings. While it is essential to recognize that the financial and trade policies of donor countries have indeed contributed to widespread poverty in various areas, the internal challenges faced by developing nations—such as ineffective governance, harmful economic strategies, state enterprise debt, corruption, oppression of minorities and civil unrest—substantially hinder their progress (Muzaffar, et. al., 2017). The past few decades have illustrated that governments which infringe upon civil, economic and social human rights generally experience poor developmental outcomes (Luckham et al., 2000; von Bernstorff, 2021).

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is an integrated framework for peace and prosperity and the 17-goal Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were jointly adopted by the United Nations in 2015. Achieving these goals in the context of Pakistan requires a thorough understanding of the peculiar socio-political conditions of the country. Socio-political factors play a prominent role in determining the potential to achieve SDG targets for a nation. These range from public policy, societal norms, civic engagement, political will and governance institutions. Pakistan has a long way to go, but it also has many good trends and changes that are paving the way for its further development (Muzaffar, et. al., 2023; Nawab et al., 2023).

From the sociopolitical perspective, political stability and quality of governance appear as one of the top most determinants of the SDG attainment. Goals of ending poverty (SDG 1), quality education (SDG 4), equality (SDG 10) needs good governance and good governance includes transparency, accountability, the rule of law and efficient delivery of public services. Pakistan has faced political instability for long and it disrupts long-term planning and policy continuity, which is typically characterized by issues like persistent shifts in governance and confrontation between civilian and military rule. (Muzaffar, et. al., 2024). But the decentralization process like the 18th Constitutional Amendment and the transfer of powers to the provinces has opened up new avenues of regional and situation specific development plans especially in the health, education and infrastructure sectors.

It's the political will and commitment of top executives that matter. For SDGs, political will is also needed to spend in social and economic development on the long run. While there are programs in Pakistan, such as the Ehsaas Program, which aim to address the issue of poverty through improved social protection and financial inclusion, they often lack the same level of an integrated framework to address poverty as in other countries (Xu et al., 2023). The Vision 2025 and other provincial plans in Pakistan ooze political consensus on sustainable development as most of these plans include SDG targets. Federal and provincial SDG Support Units (in partnership with the UNDP) are

another example of progress at the institutional level to align national and international development goals.

Public Engagement to Achieve SDGs in Pakistan and Role of the Civil Society
The involvement of NGOs, CBOs and youth-led initiatives in bringing awareness and implementing programs related to SDGs has increased in recent years. These organizations have emerged as powerful advocates for the causes of environmental protection, gender equality, universal access to quality education and universal healthcare. In order for development projects to be people-centered and reflect local needs—both matters of utmost importance to the sustainability of SDG efforts—access to democratic processes at the level of local governments is critical and public participation is vital (Brollo et al., 2021). Second, a consequential sociopolitical factor affecting SDG outcomes is cultural attitudes and social norms. In Pakistan, highly entrenched patriarchal norms can inhibit progress towards gender equality (SDG 5), women's empowerment and inclusive education. Which is slowly changing people attitudes and then changing society behavior due to Education, media awareness efforts and legislative reform. In urban areas in particular, an indicator of changing gender norms is the increasing number of female students enrolled in college and university. Institutional progress on the gender parity front has averted shortcoming like the Protection of Women from Harassment in the Workplace Act, among other things, as well as girls quotas for legislative assemblies (Latif et al., 2022).

Education also prepares important ingredient in determining public engagement and political awareness. Everybody is educated and informed, people are more willing to ask for transparency, to participate in development projects and to support sustainable development policies. Pakistan's "National Education Policy" reflects ambitions for SDG 4, including universal primary education. But there are still problems and there are still areas such as the old FATA and Balochistan where the figures of out-of-school children, gender gaps and differences between regions remain disproportionate. Another critical component is the importance of federal-provincial coordination in implementing development goals. Since the 18th Amendment, provincial governments in Pakistan have been solely responsible for healthcare, schools and community development. Federal and provincial governments must cooperate closely to ensure SDG implementation remains coherent. However the consequences of weak coordination often include gaps in monitoring and assessment, inconsistent policies and redundant activities (Mujtaba et al., 2024). It is therefore imperative that mechanisms for data-sharing are improved and intergovernmental institutions strengthened so progress can be tracked and accountability ensured.

Lastly a climate fit for sustainable development is one characterized by democratic institutions and freedom of expression. Pakistan enjoys an activist media landscape and an active court, both of which have often highlighted the failings of administration and agitated for reforms to social justice, environmental regulation and public services. The social and political pressure encourages government action and policy that aligns with sustainable development agendas (Aziz et al., 2021; Hinduja et al., 2023; Zeewaqaar, 2024). Finally, while there are significant sociopolitical challenges to achieving the SDGs in Pakistan, there are also critical catalysts that have the potential to spur development. Five essential factors, better leadership, political will, public participation, more education and changing social norms, will dictate whether sustainable development will have a future in the country. While these investments come as a blessing for Pakistan, to reap maximum benefits from these investments, Pakistan

needs to invest in inclusive institutions, strengthen democracy and ensure that development programs are transparent, accountable and participatory.

Literature Review

Socio-political instability can have a significant impact on the achievement of sustainable development goals (SDGs) in several ways. In politically unstable environments, governments often prioritize short-term stability and survival over long-term development goals. This can lead to a lack of policy focus and inadequate resources being allocated to address the SDGs effectively. Political instability can result in frequent changes in leadership, policy reversals and policy inconsistency, making it difficult to implement sustainable development plans (Washaya, 2021). However the author tries his best to cover all issues in achieving SDGs in Pakistan but failed to shed light on current status. This study tries to highlight all issues with first hand data from relevant personalities. It requires building strong institutions, promoting good governance, fostering inclusive political processes and ensuring social stability. Resolving conflicts, promoting social cohesion and creating an enabling environment for economic growth are essential steps towards overcoming the challenges posed by political instability and advancing the SDGs. United Nations independent assessment of the national context of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. Examines the country's diverse socio-economic, demographic, political, cultural, climatic and environmental situation to understand where Pakistan stands and why and the implications this has for development. Using the lens of the 2030 agenda for sustainable development, it analyses progress, challenges, gaps and ways forward in terms of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Throughout, the CCA draws on the rich expertise and knowledge base of UN agencies active in Pakistan. Pakistan faced various socio-political challenges. The country has a complex political landscape with periodic political tensions, issues of governance, corruption and economic disparities. Political parties and institutions have played a significant role in shaping the country's political environment (Khan, 2024). The manuscript deals the socio-political issues only but this thesis tried to explore current status of SDGs in Pakistan as well as covers all hindered in this regard. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a comprehensive framework for countries like Pakistan to achieve socio-political stability and sustainable development. These goals address a wide range of interconnected challenges, including poverty, inequality, health, education, gender equality, clean water and peace, that contribute to a stable and prosperous society. Here's how the SDGs are important to overcome Pakistan's socio-political instability.

When it comes to global governance, the domain of public-private partnerships is of prime importance. Regarding it, Beisheim and his fellows provided comprehensive knowledge to understand the context of achieving sustainable development goals (Beisheim et al., 2010). Although the manuscript covers very important aspects Public-Private-Partnership (PPP) for achieving SDGs but failed to provide a comprehensive view how PPP is possible and which factor can be addressed for successful PPP. The key takeaway is that the influence of SDGs on global governance has been mainly rhetorical rather than having any significant transformative impact on policy and practice. Simultaneously, regarding the progress on SDGs worldwide, it has been observed that at High Level Political Forum, the lack of effective leadership and weak bond of cohesion within the UN Mechanism, the global stakeholders failed to perform at a satisfactory level to achieve the 2030 Agenda.

Likewise, it is quite relevant to discuss the political impact of sustainable development goals across the globe. With respect to it, Jeffery D Sachs linked the SDGs with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and opined that MDGs set the ground for SDGs (Sachs et al., 2022). Both gestures have mobilized the global community to respond to critical social issues like poverty, hunger, disease, covering education gaps, tackling gender inequality and countering environmental degradation. It has been observed that MDGs encouraged progress but did not provide enough incentive for both core and peripheral countries to achieve goals at satisfactory levels across the globe. The narrative related to the transition from MDGs to SDGs has provided comprehensive information to design the questionnaire and further set the boundary for discussing the socio-political environment to achieve sustainable development goals, putting Pakistan in the prism of global campaigns.

In the same manner, Sachs et al., further suggested six transformations to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and emphasize SDG 17, which is related to the roles and responsibilities of the authorities and political decision-makers (Sachs et al., 2019). The authors only focused on limited views and failed to focused all aspects equally. The transformative development (from MDGs to SDGs), the Paris Agreement is a pivotal gesture of the global community that is related to urging the state authorities to ensure environmental justice principles in their respective legal frameworks to counter environmental degradation and concentrate on reducing carbon emission for protecting the ecosystem and biodiversity on earth.

The significant difference between MDGs and SDGs is the comprehensive approach guided by the targets and indicators. Considering this, it becomes inevitable to adopt the approach of assessing the progress through indicators (Janoušková et al., 2019). The paper is good for readers to understand the differences between MDGs vs SDGs but not for researcher to explore the status of SDGs in Pakistan. In this domain, Ellis & Edmonds contributed a lot by defining that SDGs provide an overarching framework but do not have a conceptual foundation (Ellis & Edmonds, 2023). However our study covers not only conceptual framework but also all types of issues and hurdles in achieving SDGs. It is evident that without consistent follow-ups [based on scientific methods], it would be difficult to calibrate the progress on 330 indicators that define the diversity and uniqueness of people around the globe. The writers have discussed the challenges, shortcomings and recommendations, as well as provided the broader discourse on developing appropriate indicators for Sustainable Development Goals.

Material and Methods

This study is based on qualitative approach [qualitative and secondary data] to identify economic taboos and their impact on Pakistan in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The research is designed to identify social, cultural, institutional constraints – which are often seen as sensitive or overlooked – to the implementation of policy and more inclusive economic development. The primary data consisted of 33 semi-structured interviews with policy makers, development professionals, economists, civil society representatives and lawyers in different parts of Pakistan. Owing to this, purposive sampling was applied to draw in some of the respondents who had firsthand knowledge about the designing and implementation of development policies. The interview guideline comprised open-ended questions exploring attitudes towards economic taboos in terms of perceptions, institutional attitudes, and socio-cultural resistance as exemplified by gendered financial participation, informal economies, taxation avoidance and corruption. Data from these

interviews were interpreted using thematic analysis, making it possible to find repeating themes, trends and contradictions in relation to the barriers to achieving SDGs. The responses were coded manually and thematically analyzed.

Results and Discussions

Reduced Inequality (SDG 10)

Addressing income and social inequalities can foster a more cohesive society and reduce the risk of conflicts arising from disparities in wealth and opportunities.

Economic Factors

Gross domestic product Development Rate: Slow financial development can prompt higher joblessness and neediness, making disappointment and turmoil among the populace.

Modern and Horticultural Turn of events: The wellbeing of these areas influences business and pay levels. Decrease in these areas can prompt metropolitan relocation, strain on metropolitan framework and social pressure.

Expansion and Average cost for most everyday items

High expansion decreases buying power, particularly affecting the lower and working classes, prompting public discontent and fights. Cost of Fundamental Products: Expansions in the costs of food, fuel and utilities can prompt huge difficulty, prompting socio-political unsteadiness

Joblessness and Underemployment

High joblessness rates can prompt expanded wrongdoing, social turmoil and political precariousness. Underemployment and casual area occupations frequently give lacking wages and professional stability, adding to financial weakness and social discontent.

Pay Disparity and Neediness

Wide pay inconsistencies can make a feeling of bad form and minimization, possibly prompting social distress and political preparation. Elevated degrees of destitution are frequently connected with expanded crime percentages and political insecurity as the minimized populaces request better everyday environments.

Social Factors

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide an international agenda to tackle development challenges including poverty, inequality, health, education, degradation of the environment and justice. Many of Pakistani social is needed to get because of these aims. This ranges from health and gender equality to social cohesion and community engagement, demographic change and cultural values (Xu et al., 2023). Analyzing how these factors influence development outcomes is crucial for measuring the country's progress towards the SDGs. Education is arguably one of the most important social aspects that directly impact sustainable development. Equal access to high-quality education for all is well aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 1. 4.

Gender, geographical and economic status remain barriers to educational opportunity in Pakistan. Other goals – such better health outcomes (SDG 3), poverty reduction (SDG 1), gender equality (SDG 5) and adequate work prospects (SDG 8) – are multiplied by education, however. A good education increases the chances that citizens – especially the youth and women – will participate in civic life, demand accountability from institutions, observe improved hygiene practices and contribute to economic growth. While the literacy rate is now higher and more children go to school in urban centres, it should be analysed alongside one of the endemic defeats of Pakistan, which is the terror of underachievement, particularly in rural areas; Carnaby now and over a decade through to arguably Pakistan's death knell. Improving teacher training, investing in girls' education and bolstering public education institutions are all crucial if education is to be used to achieve the SDGs (Asad, 2019).

Sustainable Development Agenda: Health, wellbeing (Goal 3) are important socioeconomic determinants of sustainable development. Pakistan has a range of health issues, such as undernourished population, elevated maternity and newborn deaths and poor healthcare access in rural communities. Social factors such as poverty, access to clean water, education rates and once-held beliefs can all impact people's health. Yet vulnerable communities now have improved access to rudimentary health services on account of rising vaccination campaigns, the Sehat Sahulat Program and Lady Health Worker initiatives. A healthy population seduces investment in health care as a social good – in both a humanitarian sense and in terms of the genotype of the population, which reduces the transmission of poverty between generations that culminates in ending poverty. Another important social goal in SDGs is achieving gender equality. Patriarchal norms and traditional gender roles have prevented many Pakistani women from attaining parity in various fields, such as healthcare, education, employment and political representation. But changes are starting to take shape due to new laws, campaign catch-up and general public consciousness. Although there are few women in technology, healthcare, or education, women continue to flourish in those fields. Achieving gender equality (SDG 5) is critical to achieving other goals, including reduced inequities (SDG 10), economic growth (SDG 8) and peace and justice (SDG 16). By supporting women's education, allowing property ownership and involving them in decision making, the community and the country can develop (Sajjad et al., 2022).

Moreover, community involvement and social capital are prerequisites for sustained economic success. In a world where people live in social isolation, collaborative effort and sharing responsibilities are severely limited. Its religious, linguistic and ethnic diversity is both a strength and a weakness of Pakistan. More diverse social groups in development projects may yield higher degrees of success in innovation and creativity. Ethnic conflict, sectarianism and socioeconomic exclusion could run counter in achieving SDG 16 on education, equality and peace. Participation of community has been beneficial for many development projects. Examples include management of local water, recycling of waste and rural health care. Over the years, some community-based organizations (CBOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in Pakistan have made significant strides towards better socioeconomic outputs in health, education and disaster management (Gillani, 2021; Sajjad et al., 2022).

The population increase and urbanization are additional factors that have effects on Pakistan's social culture. Schools, hospitals, houses, water and sewage systems are all under strain as a result of the rapid population growth. Slums, pollution and inadequate infrastructure resulting from uncontrolled development can be witnessed in many large cities of Pakistan such as Lahore and Karachi. Goals 3, 6, 11 and 13 are interlinked with

the improvement of city administration, the increase of public investment in water systems, transport and housing and the awareness of the public about the importance of family planning as an answer to these problems. Advocating for sustainable urban planning and ethical consumerism will help to create inclusive, safe and resilient cities. Cultural and religious values have a dual effect on sustainable development programs depending on their interpretations. Because the SDG principles of social justice, environmental protection and communal cooperation are prevalent in the teachings of many faiths, faith communities are inherently aligned with the goals. Pakistani anti-corruption, girls' education and environmental protection program all have been successfully based on Islamic principles. However conservative interpretations have at times remained an obstacle to the rights of women and minorities. The SDGs will be widely supported by the public as long as they are implemented in a way that respects other cultures and the cultural center of gravity of a given country and balances traditional values against the modern-day concepts of development (Liu et al., 2022).

The explosion of popular online social networks and networking sites has created a social revolution. Through increased popularization of platforms like YouTube, Facebook and Twitter, a significant amount of instructional, awareness-raising and advocacy-based content has been made available (especially for younger generations). They are instrumental progress toward the goals of environmental awareness (No. 13), gender equality (No. 5) and civic involvement (No. 16). More egalitarian engagement in the digital revolution could result in a more equitable playing field and more access to resources not previously available (Umar et al., 2024).

According to Javeed et al. (2022) different responses to these events—such as emotional emotions and political self-efficacy—would change the relationships between expected sociopolitical changes and population mental health. This would be the case given the part that personal responses contribute to the relationship. This analysis highlights the complex and interrelated nature of social factors influencing socio-political situations. Each factor contributes uniquely to shaping political landscapes, often in ways that are deeply intertwined with historical and cultural contexts. Social factors play a crucial role in shaping the socio-political situation of a state. Key factors include demographics, social stratification, education, culture and public opinion.

Political Factors

Public Opinion

When it comes to sustainable development, public opinion is king when it comes to determining the fate and trajectory of policy initiatives. The globe is working hard to meet the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that the UN set in 2015. However, the execution of these goals is being driven, or obstructed, by citizens' attitudes, beliefs and demands. Peace and justice, renewable energy, gender equality, quality education and the elimination of poverty are only a few of the many worldwide concerns addressed by these aims (Bautista-Puig et al., 2024). It is becoming increasingly clear to governments, institutions and international organizations that sustainable development programs run the danger of being underfunded, misunderstood, or even violently opposed if the public does not strongly behind and understand them.

Civic engagement and democratic involvement are two of the most basic ways in which public opinion impacts the attainment of SDGs. Policy agendas in democracies are frequently shaped by popular opinion. Legislators and politicians, particularly during

election seasons, prioritize constituent-resonant topics. Politicians are compelled to address citizens' demands for sustainable development when they are educated and outspoken about the issue. For instance, numerous countries have pledged to achieve carbon neutrality, increased their investment in renewable energy and enacted more stringent climate legislation in response to rising public concern about climate change (Lee & Kim, 2021; Schneider et al., 2024). There is a strong relationship between public opinion and the actions taken by the commercial sector. Businesses are under increasing pressure to implement sustainable practices to preserve their reputation and market share as consumers grow more conscious of social and environmental issues. Many businesses have shifted their focus to fit with SDG values in response to public demand for more ethical sourcing, better working conditions, more environmentally friendly products and more CSR. The growing importance of environmental, social and governance (ESG) considerations in financial markets is driving this trend, which is in turn driven by investor sentiment as well as consumer preferences.

The public's view also influences educational policies and media portrayals, which have far-reaching effects on society norms and practices. Media coverage of progress, setbacks, or achievements toward the SDGs might inspire people to become involved, volunteer, or alter their behavior. By promoting the SDGs through public information campaigns, school curricula, or other educational initiatives, we can help the next generation develop a strong sense of sustainability and become better informed and engaged citizens. Still, if the general population isn't on board with the SDGs, it might slow down their implementation. Apathy or antagonism might result from cultural resistance, a lack of awareness, or misinformation. As an example, if people see carbon emission reduction initiatives as economically detrimental or as an infringement on personal freedoms, the public may push back against them. In a similar vein, countries that have long-established patriarchal values may fight against attempts to foster gender equality. One big problem with the SDGs is that they won't be able to be achieved if public opinion is against the change they propose (Bain et al., 2019).

Strategic communication and inclusive policies are necessary to close the gap between public opinion and the SDGs. Community members must be actively involved in the process by which governments and international organizations communicate the tangible benefits of sustainable development. Particularly underrepresented groups, such as those on the margins of society, should be encouraged to participate in decision-making processes. Individuals are more inclined to rally behind and pitch in to help reach development objectives when they have a personal investment in seeing them through. The power of the internet and social media to influence and amplify public sentiment is another critical factor. Over the past few years, these platforms have become into potent instruments for bringing attention to and community mobilization around matters pertaining to the SDGs (Latif et al., 2024). Climate strikes, women's rights and poverty reduction are just a few of the problems that have gained worldwide attention thanks to online petitions, viral films and hashtag campaigns. Misinformation, echo chambers and limited attention spans are some of the problems that new technologies bring, despite their potential usefulness.

In addition, the public's perspective can be used to gauge how well initiatives linked to the SDGs are doing. Citizens can voice their pleasure or discontent with development outcomes through surveys, polls and participatory assessments, which help policymakers make the required modifications. Two characteristics necessary for long-term governance success are openness and responsiveness, both of which are encouraged by this type of responsibility. Media and public opinion are critical in

shaping political discourse and policymaking. Traditional media and social media platforms influence public perceptions and can lead to political polarization (Sunstein, 2018). Civic engagement, including activities like voting, protests and community organizing, reflects the health of a democracy and the responsiveness of its governance (Mohamad Taghvaei et al., 2023; Putnam, 2015).

Public opinion mostly determines whether Pakistan succeeds or fails in reaching the SDGs. Once more, an agenda to attain sustainability through SDGs and integrating the basic issues of Pakistan is rising by threatening poverty, gender inequity, substandard education and environmental damage. Although the government is committed to include the SDGs into the national development plan, public knowledge and involvement remain poor. For most of the people, particularly in underdeveloped and rural areas, the SDGs are either unknown or considered to be useless. Furthermore impeding development toward some objectives, including denials of climate change or opposition to women empowerment, are prevailing cultural norms and society attitudes. Positive developments have also come from young-led movements and civil society organizations as well as from the growing number of sustainable development stories pushed by Pakistani independent media. Public conversation has started to be shaped by campaigns including tree planting and climate action from young leaders as well as by female education. Broad public participation is essential for Pakistan to fulfill its SDG pledges; so, inclusive policies, focused awareness programs and citizen participation platforms in line with local goals and values are needed (Galiano-Coronil et al., 2021; Javed et al., 2022).

Civil-Military Relations

The values, interests, size and autonomy of the military elite in relation to the political elite can exert a powerful impact on domestic stability. Strong, independent, cohesive and politically oriented military elites are far more inclined to challenge the prerogatives and power of civilian political elites during periods of instability than are military elites that are highly integrated into the political leadership based on common backgrounds and experiences, political values and socioeconomic interests. In China, for example, political and military elites have much more divergent experiences, training and backgrounds today than during the Maoist period. However, both groups share a belief in the need to maintain a single, strong source of political power – currently rooted in the Communist Party – and to prevent the emergence of any autonomous, organized socio-political group that might challenge the authority of the party (Banerjee & Webeck, 2024; Harig et al., 2022).

Although both global and national guidelines on civil-military coordination emphasize a primarily civilian-led approach to humanitarian assistance, Pakistan's context is unique due to the military's pervasive influence. Engaging with the government inevitably involves interaction with the military, which holds substantial political power, controls large portions of the national budget and constitutionally bears responsibility for responding to emergencies and natural disasters. Both the government and military oversee access and aid distribution in crisis-affected areas. This control stems from the civilian government's fragility and the local population's expectation for rapid and effective response from both institutions (Baciu, 2021).

Most aid workers and civilian officials interviewed for this study reported improved relations with the Pakistan military over the past two years. This progress was attributed to growing familiarity, adherence by humanitarian actors to the military's

operational parameters, clearer approval processes (such as NOC issuance) and more streamlined coordination mechanisms. Despite ongoing critiques, respondents felt that the draft civil-military guidelines had helped frame humanitarian principles as a fundamental point in their engagement with the military. While such concerns had long been raised in KPK and FATA, their formal inclusion in the guidelines appeared to carry more influence with military counterparts (Khan & Jaffari, 2023).

Guidelines themselves are not a solution but a tool toward achieving one. It is vital to review and adapt them during emergencies, ensuring that effective communication channels and working relationships exist between key stakeholders – namely OCHA, government representatives and the military. For example, it was noted that during critical decision-making about foreign military assistance, military officials did not initially prioritize the civil-military guidelines. These became relevant only after action had already been authorized. Additionally, the absence of an established working relationship, shaped by leadership and personnel choices, hindered coordination. OCHA also highlighted that earlier communication on principles and criteria could have prevented misunderstandings during the 2010 floods (Boon & Ong, 2021).

The timing of further developing these guidelines is critical. The existing draft emerged when relations among the military, government and humanitarian actors were particularly strained. With relations improving, there is potential for broader acceptance of updated guidelines. These should be integrated into a comprehensive civil-military engagement strategy outlining the humanitarian community's goals for such interaction.

Given their experiences, most international organizations view engagement with the Pakistani military as unavoidable. However, as guidelines trickle down to field-level actors focused on implementation, their relevance often diminishes. For them to be effective, guidelines must be rooted in a practical strategy that resonates with local organizations and be broadly shared. The humanitarian sector should articulate clear, proactive objectives for civil-military engagement, considering regional differences and impacts on affected communities. Regular, structured meetings and multi-level forums that include all actors involved in civil-military coordination are necessary and should be incorporated into the guidelines where feasible (Hussain, 2022). Interviews also suggested practical steps to enhance civil-military coordination. These included appointing a dedicated and accessible regional military liaison officer and developing training programs grounded in humanitarian principles. The mission, scope and guiding values of these interactions should be clearly communicated at the local level, enabling NGOs and humanitarian agencies to raise concerns anonymously through established coordination mechanisms. Nonetheless, it remains unclear how best to build effective local-level relationships between NGOs and military counterparts.

Given geopolitical constraints, the commitment of key international actors to upholding humanitarian principles in Pakistan remains in question. External actors are unlikely to adopt a firm position due to regional security interests. Still, under the umbrella of good humanitarian donorship, there remains some scope for bilateral actors to promote adherence to humanitarian standards. This includes funding initiatives like the IDP Vulnerability Assessment and Profiling (IVAP) project and linking financial support to clearly defined humanitarian conditions. This approach has been taken by DFID and several European donors. For instance, the UNDP's early recovery programme in KP/FATA was eventually merged with the UN's broader Humanitarian Operational Plan after concerns about potential forced returns of IDPs. More recently, following pressure from ECHO in Islamabad, multiple donors urged the Humanitarian Country

Team (HCT) to adhere to established guidelines in response to displacement from the Tirah Valley (Usman Khan & Khan, 2021).

A notable gap remains in the UN's leadership role in humanitarian advocacy in Pakistan. Although Pakistan is a priority under the Transformative Agenda – which aims to improve adherence to humanitarian principles – the UN's operations in KP/FATA still largely mirror the government's stabilization strategy. During natural disasters, the UN's independence in needs assessment remains limited. Its overall reluctance to assert itself in dealings with the Pakistani government characterizes its humanitarian presence in the country. Another defining feature of Pakistan's context is the overlap between counter-insurgency, stabilization and long-term recovery – areas that do justify UN engagement (Hamid et al., 2024). Yet, maintaining independence while collaborating with host governments requires both resources and policy-level expertise. Unfortunately, both appear to be in short supply in Pakistan.

Conclusion

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are hard to achieve in the country due to economic stigmas in the society. These taboo – tax evasion, informal/ unrecorded economic activities, aversion to financial inclusion and gender-based exclusion in economy are the manifestation of the socio cultural constraints which are also the part of the institutional deficit. Refusing to question these taboos has led to a lack of fiscal discipline as well as inadequate domestic resource mobilization and provision in the social sectors. As a result, forward momentum in critical SDGs approaches – on reducing poverty, achieving quality education, gender equality and decent work – is uneven and inadequate. The small-scale economy remains the dominant force, leaving the state bereft of much-needed revenue and reducing its power to regulate. Furthermore, the relegation of women and vulnerable groups to the economic periphery deepens social differentiation and structural injustice.

Recommendations

A multi-pronged approach is required to address these challenges. First, tax revision needs to be strictly implemented with campaigns to promote a culture of paying tax, and responsibility for payment. Rewards for evidence with digital documentation of its economy can assist in formalising the informal. Second, as an example of inclusive policies, the attention must be given to the inclusion of excluded groups, particularly women, in productive sectors with the availability of credit, such as vocational programmes, and legal protections. Third, a national financial literacy drive is needed to dispel the taboo about banking and insurance among rural folks. Fourth, the government needs to work with religious scholars, civil society and the media to challenge social and cultural narratives that dissuade economic modernization and inclusion. A final note on transparent governance, institutional reform and political commitment - these are vital elements for building trust, and achieving the effective implementation of the SDGs. This journey can only be hastened if we look truth in the face and take on our economic taboos frontally. The way to the light is dark and difficult, yes, but with continued struggle and the right kind of politics, there is hope.

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