



The Role of Local Governments in the Effective Implementation of SDGs in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

To hasten the implementation of SDGs at the local level, policymakers are stressing the role of local governments. This study investigates the local government's capacity and role in the effective implementation of SDGs in Pakistan. The data is gathered from the Household Integrated Economic Survey of Pakistan from 2004 to 2019, from which indicators were created using key variables. Based on these indicators, regression analysis shows that there is less chance that the individual will use government healthcare facilities when the local government is suspended (SDG-3, Good Health Being). Similarly, suspension of local governments leads to a small reduction in the average number of years of schooling (SDG-4, Quality Education). Moreover, there is less chance that the individual will have toilet facilities when the local government is suspended (SDG-6, Clean Water and Sanitation). To expedite the localization of the SDGs in Pakistan, the study recommends that the state should empower their local bodies to a greater extent which would allow the local bodies to work independently of external pressures for the betterment of their communities.

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1. Introduction

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UN-Habitat, and the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments (GTF) have released reports advocating the need for local governments in promoting inclusive and sustainable development within countries. They are of the view that,

By creating broad-based ownership, commitment and accountability, local governments are vital partners in the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals (Bregon, 2015).

Localization of the governance structure relates both to how SDGs may provide a framework

for local development policies, as well as how local governments tend to support the effective implementation of SDGs through the bottom-up approach, which can also further provide a framework for local development policy.

In order to end poverty, inequality, and injustice, and combat climate change, 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted by UN Member States at the Sustainable Development Summit on the 25th of September 2015. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), often known as the Global Goals, are a global initiative and these 17 goals are the extension of MDGs. Since the goals are related, accomplishing one usually necessitates addressing issues that are more typically linked to another (NISD, 2022).

Over the years, Pakistan has made just minimal SDG progress and it is ranked 125th out of 163 countries. Table 1 shows that Pakistan’s SGD score is 59.3 which is low compared to other South Asian countries. Providing quality education, skill development, and job creation are the remaining concerns in the economy. On the other hand, Pakistan has performed well in combating poverty, losses from natural disasters, and accessibility to health and the internet.

Table 1: SGD Rank of South Asian Countries

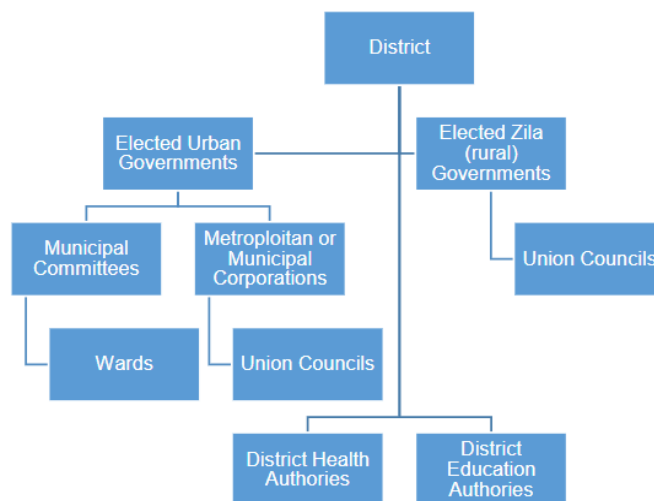
Countries	SGD Index Rank (Out of 163)	SGD Index Score
Pakistan	125	59.3
India	121	60.3
Bangladesh	104	64.2
Nepal	98	66.2
Bhutan	70	70.5
Sri Lanka	76	70.0

Source: Sustainable Development Report, 2022

The localization of the SDGs in Pakistan has included more than just signing agreements with government partners. For all stakeholders, especially local actors, the transformation of abstract SDG objectives into concrete, quantifiable targets have also been a collaborative process that relies on evidence-based solutions. The 18th constitutional amendment transferred several governmental duties, including the provision of social services, from the federal to the provincial governments. To consolidate and strengthen efforts at the federal and provincial levels in order to accomplish Pakistan's targets for sustainable development and poverty reduction, the Pakistani government held discussions with all interested parties concerning the Post-Millennium Development Goals (PMDGs). Improved data collection, national SDG categorization, and the implementation of monitoring methods were all heavily emphasized during the consultation process (NISD, 2022).

The history of local governments in Pakistan demonstrates a countercyclical pattern of national and local democracy, with military regimes paving the way for nonpartisan elected local government institutions and succeeding civilian governments weakening such institutions by centralizing both functions and finances. Recently though, there has been a resurgence of interest in strengthening local governments, as a result of Article 140-A of the constitution which was passed in 2010, forcing provincial governments to transfer political, administrative, and financial authority to the elected local councils (Bryan, 2019).

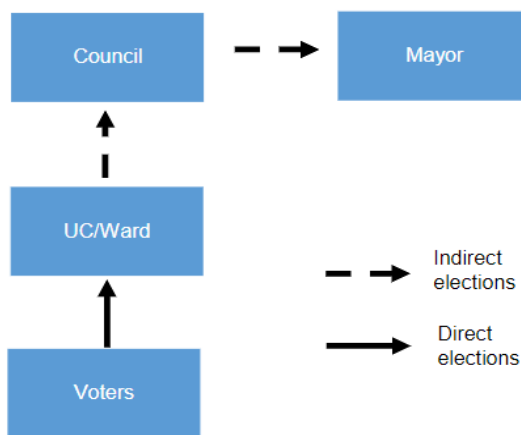
Figure 1: Structure of Local Governments in Pakistan



Source: PLGA (2013)

The Pakistan Local Government Act 2013, which is the latest to have been implemented, supports the creation of separate local governments for rural and urban areas. **Figure 1** shows that urban local governments consist of municipal committees (for urban areas with a population between 30,000-500,000), and municipal corporations (for urban areas with a population greater than 500,000). Rural areas of every district are classified as Zila council. These are placed directly under the political authority of elected local governments, also having been granted service delivery, regulatory, and revenue powers. Moreover, as evident from **Figure 1**, separate district education and health authorities are also established, which work directly under the district administration rather than the elected bodies. Districts being the most important units of civil administration at the provincial level, typically consist of several towns and cities within their jurisdiction. For instance, Punjab comprises 36 districts which are further subdivided into 144 tehsils, also known as subdivisions (Resnick, 2017).

Figure 2: Local Electoral System in Pakistan



Source: PLGA (2013)

Another crucial aspect of PLGA, (2013) is that chairpersons of local governments are indirectly elected by the local council members of a rural or urban area (Figure, 02). Members of municipal committees are chosen by a plurality vote from single-member electoral wards on a

partisan basis. Citizens in Zila councils and municipal councils directly elect councilors and chairpersons of union councils, a more condensed form of a local government. Directly elected union council chairpersons in a Zila council or municipal corporation then join the council (Resnick, 2017). The primary distinction between a ward and a union council is that the former is merely an electoral constituency at the local level, while the latter is both an electoral ward and a smaller unit of local government with a limited assignment of functions.

The present study aims to identify and analyze the role of local governments in the effective implementation of the three significant sustainable development goals, including health, education, and water sanitation in Pakistan. The next section presents relevant literature concerning the role of local governments in implementing SDGs around the world, as well as in Pakistan. Including local and global case studies, the literature sets the base for the findings extracted from the paper through regression analysis. Further, the explanation of the data used and the methodology behind the variables constructed and regressed is presented. Following this, the findings and its discussion convey to the audience the main conclusions of the report. Lastly, the quantitative limitations faced while working on the study are put forward.

2. Review of the Literature

A senior policy analyst, Oosterhof, believes that to effectively accelerate the implementation of SDGs, in a way that they sustain post-2030 as well, strong collaboration is required to localize the targets of the goals (Oosterhof, 2018). Localization can play a significant role in addressing the pressing problems that individuals and countries in Asia and the Pacific are facing, such as rapid urbanization, rising inequality, the effects of climate change, and natural catastrophes. Having worked with the UN on the SDGs, Oosterhof believes that the development goals have been aligned in a way that suits the local-level implementation system within countries, and hence, is essential to achieve optimum results (Oosterhof, 2018).

Mechanisms that encourage the alignment of local and national sustainable development agendas must be in place for this aim. Additionally, in order for localization to be successful, there must first be knowledge of the SDGs because doing so can help people realize how local goals relate to global goals and vice versa (Oosterhof, 2018).

Nayyer, (2006) reviews the impact of devolution, in the form of the 2001 local governance system, on the effective implementation of development works, concentrating on healthcare, education, and water sanitation. He further analyzes the progress and challenges of effective and efficient service delivery in these three sustainable development goals considering the 2001 local governance ordinance of Pakistan. Moreover, he also discusses the district-level implementation of these three SDGs through reviewing policy setting, funding, legal and institutional set-up, technical capacity, incentives, and district service delivery for healthcare, education, and water sanitation. Conclusively, recommendations are presented concerning further improvements in district-level service delivery by the government of Pakistan.

Tjandradewi, (2018) explains the significance of the devolved form of governance in achieving the sustainable development agenda by the year 2030. Localizing SDG indicators, as well as, collecting data at a local level would tend to provide countries with accurate aggregated reporting on the implementation of the targets put down by SDGs. Helping governments in more precise monitoring, she also argues that the greater success in achieving SDGs would largely depend on the

degree to which the local governments work together with other stakeholders of the community.

Guha, (2019) discusses the role of local district-level governance is discussed to achieve sustainable development goals. Challenges surrounding the implementation of SDGs on the local government level such as increased reliance on locally generated revenue, the imperfect flow of information, and managing diverse actors are highlighted as well. Having included a review of relatively recent literature on devolution, through the aid of pragmatic examples, she outlines the processes that could overcome the above-mentioned challenges in the effective deliverance of SDGs on the local level. She focuses on the need of enhancing local leadership capabilities, in terms of both local politicians and bureaucrats, to improve SDG implementation.

Ahmad, (2021) highlights the primary role of local governments in sustainable urban development, in the case of Punjab. With the support of examples from Brazil, Colombia, and Germany, the study signifies the role of local governments in ensuring sustainability at the local level. Through the application of mixed-method research, the practices and policies of local government representatives are assessed for effective sustainable development implementation. It concludes that even though the local government representatives were found capable to implement sustainable development and sustainable urban development policies, they do need capacity building through pieces of training to enhance their efficiencies.

A Plethora of studies is available which discuss the SDGs however, only a few discuss the role of local governments in the effective implementation of SDGs. Similarly, we could not find any study in Pakistan that thoroughly examines the role of local governments in implementing the SDGs.

3. Data and Methodology

In this study, we examine the impact of local governments on the effective implementation of the SDGs. We picked health, education, and water sanitation in particular. We gathered these statistics from the HIES data collected on a yearly basis. We merged the relevant data sections for each year that contained the data for the SDGs.

Since we were unable to find relevant variables directly from the data across the years, that we could use in our regression analysis, we decided to come up with an innovative way of capturing the data of our SDGs in one indicator that could be created using the corresponding data from each year. We created some generic variables across the years so that the data across could be used in regression analysis. We created a continuous variable '**Edu**' that captured the number of years of schooling of the individual. We created a categorical variable '**school_dist**' that captured how far the school is from the individual's place of residence. The continuous variable '**income**' captures the income of the household. The binary variable '**gender**' captures the gender of the individual. The variable '**consult_first**' captures whether the individual visited/consulted a government facility when they required healthcare. The dummy variable '**child_diar**' captures whether the child in question had diarrhea in the past 30 days from the date of filling out the survey. The dummy variables '**lady_h_vis**' and '**lady_h_worker**' capture whether in the past 30 days, their household was visited by a lady health visitor or a lady health worker, respectively. And finally, we created a dummy variable '**toilet_tosewer**' to capture whether the household's toilet facilities are connected directly to the sewerage or not. These variables were created to be used as indicators for the SDGs.

To look at the impact of local governance on these SDGs, we looked at the statistics of these

SDGs across the years when there was a local government present and the years when the local government was suspended. To capture this presence of the local government, we created a new dummy variable ‘suspended’ which took the value 0 in the years 2004 – 2009, when the local government was present, and the value 1 in the years 2010 – 2019, when the local government was suspended.

Table 2: Brief Description of the Variables

Variable Name	Variable Label	Source
Edu	Education	<i>Household Integrated Economic Survey (2004-2019)</i>
Income	Income	
school_dist	Distance of School	
Gender	Gender	
consult_first	Use of government facility	
child_diar	Child diagnosed with diarrhea	
lady_h_vis	Lady health visitor	
lady_h_worker	Lady health worker	
toilet_tosewer	Sanitation	

Next, once the relevant sections from each year’s data had been merged and the above-mentioned variables had been created, we appended the data for the years 2004 – 2019. Once the datasets from across the years had been merged, we realized that there might be repetitions of some individuals, so we tagged one out of these observations and dropped the rest. What this does is that it leaves us with the observations that represent the data of a unique individual, and this reduces the bias we would have had in the coefficients we would obtain from our regression analysis.

Through this methodology, the following equations are formed:

$$Edu = \beta_0 + \beta_1suspended + \beta_2income + \beta_3gender + \beta_4region + error \tag{1}$$

$$P(consult_first = 1) = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1suspended + \alpha_2income + \alpha_3region + \alpha_4gender + \alpha_5lady_h_vis + \alpha_5lady_h_worker \tag{2}$$

$$P(toilet_tosewer = 1) = \delta_0 + \delta_1suspended + \delta_2income + \delta_3gender + \delta_4region \tag{3}$$

4. Empirical Estimations and Discussion

4.1 Education

Since ‘Edu’ is a continuous variable, we can simply run a linear regression on it. As can be seen from **Table 3**, when the government is suspended, the number of years of schooling decreases by 0.4828226 years on average, ceteris paribus. This result is statistically significant at the 1% significance level because the p-value is 0.000 which is less than 0.01.

Table 3: Regression Using Education as a Dependent Variable

Edu	Coef.	St.Err.	t-value	p-value	[95% Conf	Interval]	Sig
suspended	-.483	.045	-10.78	0	-.571	-.395	***

income	5.07e-08	5.79e-09	8.500	0.000	3.93e-08	6.20e-08
region	-0.251	0.004	-66.200	0.000	-0.259	-0.244
gender	-0.037	0.007	-5.260	0.000	-0.050	-0.023
lady_h_vis	-0.135	0.005	-26.870	0.000	-0.144	-0.125
lady_h_worker	-0.006	0.005	-1.200	0.232	-0.015	0.004

The results, as shown in **Table 4**, illustrate that when the government is suspended, the probability of the individual going to a government facility decreases by 0.286 on average, ceteris paribus. This means that there is a 28.6% less chance that the individual will go to a government healthcare facility when the local government is suspended. This result is statistically significant at the 1% significance level because the p-value is 0.000 which is less than 0.01.

4.3 Water Sanitation

The variable ‘toilet_tosewer’ is a dummy variable and therefore, it would be problematic to run a linear regression. To solve this, we ran a Logit regression. The results we obtain illustrate the probabilistic impact of the absence of local governments. The variable ‘toilet_tosewer’ takes the value 1 when the toilets are connected directly to the sewerage, and 0 when their toilet facilities are connected to a septic tank first, or it is a toilet to pit, etc.

Table 5: Regression Using Sanitation as a Dependent Variable

Average marginal effects Number of obs = 63,763
 Model VCE : OIM
 Expression : Pr(toilet_tosewer), predict()
 dy/dx w.r.t. : suspended income gender region

Delta-method						
	dy/dx	Std.Err.	z	P>z	95%Conf.	Interval]
suspended	-0.055	0.002	-29.380	0.000	-0.059	-0.052
income	3.09e-08	2.24e-09	14.010	0.000	2.65e-08	3.52e-08
gender	-0.015	0.002	-6.990	0.000	-0.019	-0.011
region	-0.065	0.002	-32.840	0.000	-0.068	-0.061

Table 5 illustrates that when the government is suspended, the probability of the individual having their toilet facilities connected to the sewerage directly decreases by 0.055 on average, ceteris paribus. This means that there is a 5.5% less chance that the individual will have toilet facilities directly connected to the sewerage when the local government is suspended. This result is statistically significant at the 1% significance level because the p-value is 0.000 which is less than 0.01.

The results of the data analysis put forward in the previous section tend to be in line with the literature provided in the paper, as well as being statistically significant, that local governments resulted in the more efficient implementation of the three stated SDGs as compared to when the LG system was suspended. 2004-2009 were the years segregated as the ones in which the local government system was present. The reasoning for this is that following the introduction of the local governments’ ordinance in 2001, its practical implementation was not fully done until the end of 2003, and so to increase the accuracy of the data, we started the data analysis from the year 2004.

The year 2009 has been selected as the last in which the local governments were operational, as following the general elections of 2008, it wasn't until 2009 that the newly formed government suspended the LG system. Similarly, the years selected as those in which the local government system was suspended, in our data analysis, are 2010-2019. In this time frame, even though local governments were reinstated from late 2016 to early 2018, the powers devolved to them by the then federal government were close to negligible, with greater power residing with the provinces. Hence, those years have also been included in the 'suspended' range, as effective local governments were absent.

With regards to the three SDGs, health, education, and water sanitation, devolution of governance at the grass-root level is crucial for the local governments, in line with the results obtained, to effectively contribute towards achieving the development goals through actions such as;

4.4 Health

Local governments may assist relevant areas of need in locating health services, providing medical support to local communities, ensuring, and coordinating the prevention of disease, and managing prompt response activities across various departments (Shah, 2009). Apart from these, indirect measures by the local governments such as traffic safety standards, cleaner air, fresh water to drink, and healthy soil for crops also result in the improvement of health within communities.

4.5 Education

The local governments are directly responsible for the provision of quality education and learning opportunities for all eligible within the district population, through efficient identification of local educational needs and trends (Shah, 2009). Through actions at the local level, local governments ensure that primary and secondary education is made equally accessible to all students irrespective of gender, along with vocational pieces of training as well to enhance employment skills within the community.

4.6 Water sanitation

Challenges pertaining to water sanitation may be addressed by local governments through practices that improve water quality as well as implementing sustainable sewerage systems, further contributing to the efficient use of water, and ensuring the safe withdrawal of waste within local households (Shah, 2009). Such is done by acting upon water and waste management policies.

Even though the results prove that local governments were observed to be relatively more effective in the implementation of the three SDGs, there exist certain hurdles faced by the local government system of Pakistan.

Firstly, ever since the establishment of the LG system in the country, the tussle between the bureaucrats and the elected bodies has remained a constant (Hussain, 2020). Both being a crucial part of the district administration, have almost always been involved in a fight for power within the district. The revenue powers of the district reside with the deputy commissioner, who is a civil servant, while the authority pertaining to the development works is with the local government representative, hence, as both complement one another, both the stakeholders indulge with one another to establish their writ.

Secondly, powers devolved to the local governments have been exponentially cut down, as

compared to the 2001 LG Ordinance (Ali, 2017). Such has been done by the federal governments, through section 23 of the Local Government Act, to exert greater control over the matters of the districts, through increased involvement and authority of the provincial governments, as compared to the local.

Thirdly, negligible financial autonomy exists within the local government system of today, where the local governments, as per section 137 of the act, are not authorized the collection of revenue at the district level, only receiving the small amounts of resources they receive through provincial grants (Hussain, 2020). These further compromises the control of the local governments over the community's development.

Fourthly, the percentage of female and youth representation has been very less over the years within the LG system of Pakistan. From 33% in the 2001 act, female representation through reserved seats has been reduced to 16%, depriving the 51% population of females in the country of their democratic rights (Ahmad, 2021). The minimum age of eligibility to contest the local government elections has also been increased from 21 years to 25 years.

To increase the effective role of the local governments in implementing development goals within the communities at a local level, certain policy recommendations may be implemented. For truly representative and effective local governments that can manage local affairs and address public issues at the grassroots, far more expanded fiscal powers will need to be allocated for elected local governments (Ali, 2017). Financial autonomy may be granted to the local governments for them to not only collect revenue from their districts in the form of taxes but also to be independent of the control of the provincial governments in dictating how and where to spend resources, so that the voice of the local community may be heard.

A collaborative organizational framework is established which would allow all local and national stakeholders to efficiently contribute towards the development of the communities, whether they be state institutions or organizations from the private sector. The current provincial laws must be updated to give local governments a reasonable amount of autonomy in order to create a system of local governments that is truly empowered and effective throughout Pakistan's provinces (Hussain, 2020). The ability of provincial governments to exclude regions from the scope of the acts, among other arbitrary powers granted to provincial governments, should be eliminated. Examples include provisions that permit the discretionary removal of elected representatives of the LG systems, arbitrary inspection powers, hand over control of district council affairs to the bureaucracy, and others.

There is a need to foster critical reforms that address the provision of appropriate mandates and laws for the local-level governments that provides the locally elected bodies with effective authority over district-level matters. This would allow them to move towards sustainable urban economic development, in departments of health, education, water and sanitation, and other necessary facilities, within their communities.

5. Conclusion

Keeping in view the uncertainty and ambiguity the local government system of Pakistan has been a victim of for the past 20 years, it is crucial that the state moves towards developing and implementing a framework for the LG system that is better accepted and adaptive to the local needs

of the country. Up till now, post-2009, it has been evident that every new federal government has worked towards damaging the LG system to increase control of the center, with less devolution of powers and resources. Nevertheless, as the first drop of rain, the Sindh government has recently empowered their local bodies to a greater extent, through the provision of financial autonomy and internal accountability, which would allow the local bodies to work independently of external pressures for the betterment of their communities. Such measures may be seen to move the country towards a more progressive system to achieve sustainable development goals in a better way.”

6. Limitations

At first, we were only able to find simple statistics, in the form of one figure, as a percentage, for a whole province that indicated the prevalence of a disease in that region in that specific year. This statistic limited our ability to conduct quantitative analysis in our paper. We continued to look for the data that we could use as indicators for our SDGs in the MICS dataset, which presented another challenge: the data had been presented in the form of pdf reports and we were unable to find raw data in the xls/csv/dta format which meant we could not conduct regression analysis. The PSLM dataset we found had been divided up into sections according to the questionnaires. This meant that once the relevant SDG indicators had been identified, they could be merged. However, the data in each dataset was not uniquely identified by any variables, i.e., there was a household code variable that was repeated as per the number of individuals in that household; however, there was no id variable for each of those individuals from the household. In addition to these, since local governance is a structure of government, we were not able to find data to be able to establish a relevant direct causal link. This very much slowed down the progress of our paper and took up too much of the time that could have been spent on other aspects. Furthermore, since we were not able to quantify the changes in the Local Government Acts, it became increasingly difficult initially to find data to quantify each of their impacts on the SDGs separately. We created categorical variables that captured the impact of the local government in our SDG. We have attempted to tackle each of these limitations in our methodology with the resources we had available.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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