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A Critical Review of SDGs Prioritization in Pakistan



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Abstract

The following paper provides a critical analysis of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Framework adopted by Pakistan. Many countries, including Pakistan have adopted such frameworks to ensure timely implementation of the goals while keeping in consideration the local needs, context and priorities. The SDGs framework adopted in Pakistan prioritizes the SDGs into three categories by providing a step-by-step pathway in order to achieve the set goals. The current standpoint of Pakistan with regards to each SDG on its priority list is discussed along with the progress that has been made till now. The paper concludes that poor attention has been directed towards prioritized goals which raises the question that whether the “priorities” are set right or not.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals, Prioritization, National SDG Framework, Critical Pathway, Priorities.

Introduction:

Pakistan has been at the forefront of making the Sustainable Development Goals a nation-wide owned agenda rather than an international one. In this regard, on February 2016, the Agenda 2030 was adopted as the national development agenda. However, after extensive deliberations, the Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives devised the need for ‘Localizing of SDGs’. Localizing and prioritization of SDGs is equally important which requires horizontal and vertical coordination among government units and equal participation by the civil society organizations (CSOs) and private sectors. Keeping this need in consideration, the Planning Commission evolved a National SDGs framework, that translates the universal agenda into the national agenda while keeping in view the local context, needs and priorities¹.

The National SDGs Framework prioritises those goals and targets which are more important for Pakistan and places them into three categories. These priority areas or categories are built after extensive analysis of the current position of Pakistan regarding each SDG target and indicator. The

¹ “National_SDGs_Framework_Technical_Guidelines.Pdf,” accessed July 8, 2020, https://www.sdgpakistan.pk/uploads/pub/National_SDGs_Framework_Technical_Guidelines.pdf.

theme of this framework is “Reducing Regional Inequalities through Sustainable and Inclusive Development (RRISID)”. It goes hand in hand with the theme of Agenda 2030 i.e., ‘Leaving no one behind’. The framework follows five critical pathways (CPW) that eventually lead to a sustainable, just and inclusive society. These pathways are:

- Critical Pathway – I: Better Governance and Improved Security
- Critical Pathway – II: Improved access to quality social and municipal services.
- Critical Pathway – III: Increased investment, employment and productivity in key sectors and improve economic growth.
- Critical Pathway – IV: Improved environmental stewardship and climate action.
- Critical Pathway – V: Reduce Inequalities and improve social cohesion.

This paper provides a critical review of the three priority areas under this framework and the progress of each goal under the Priority I, II and III. The baseline of SDGs targets and indicators are presented along with the achievements till now, and what more is needed to be done in order to achieve the targets.

The Need of Prioritizing the SDGs:

The prioritizing of SDGs was necessary in order to determine the relative priority of all SDGs and to effectively localize the goals inscribed in the Agenda 2030. The prioritization plays an important role for Pakistan, the reason being that some SDGs are more important for Pakistan than the others². For this the prioritization activity was conducted under the National SDGs Framework. Secondly, the prioritization helps in transforming the ambitious international goals into national goals that can be achieved, keeping in view the available resources and proposed constraints.

The aim of the National SDGs Framework is to localize the SDGs in order to form coherent policies which is a pre-requisite for achieving the targets because every target is directly or indirectly linked with other goals. For instance, to achieve good health and well-being (SDG 03), hygiene, clean water and sanitation is very important (SDG 06), which ultimately is linked with poverty (SDG 01) and education (SDG 04). Hence, in such a scenario it is important to have coherent policy formulation which implies strong coordination and integration among different sectors³. The decline in silos policy making will eventually lead to achieving the prioritized and inter-connected goals and targets by putting forward the priorities, constraints and inter-linkages among institutions of various sectors.

The prioritized goals provide a systematic pathway to achieving the national goals while simultaneously moving towards the end goal of 2030 Agenda. This pathway does not include only the prioritization of goals but also the shift in policymaking, development planning and programs to be aligned with the sustainable development goals. In the longer run the prioritization provides the country with a strategic direction to carefully set out the targets and strategies that will be adopted for achieving the desired outcomes, within the given timeframe.




The Priorities

The National SDGs Framework prioritizes the seventeen SDGs based on fourth order ranking i.e., high, medium-high, medium-low and low. The criteria adopted for prioritization is based on seven characteristics for each of the target. The characteristics include width (how many people are affected), depth (how badly they are affected), multiplier (how many other targets it contributes

² "National_SDGs_Framework_-_NEC_20182.Pdf," accessed June 28, 2020, https://www.sdgpakistan.pk/uploads/pub/National_SDGs_Framework_-_NEC_20182.pdf.

³ "National_SDGs_Framework_Technical_Guidelines.Pdf."

to), level of urgency (status of target/indicator is poor), low resource requirement (is there value for money), less structural change (institutional change required can be managed), and relevance for all provinces (easily achieved in each province)⁴. After rating each of the characteristic between 0 and 10, the total weighted score was calculated, based on which the goal was placed into either the First, Second or Third Priority. Based on the following judgment, the prioritized goals are listed as follows:

▪ Zero Hunger	SDG 02		Priority - I
▪ Good Health and well-being	SDG 03		
▪ Quality Education	SDG 04		
▪ Clean Water and Sanitation	SDG 06		
▪ Affordable and Clean Energy	SDG 07		
▪ Decent Work and Economic Growth	SDG 08		
▪ Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	SDG 16		
▪ No Poverty	SDG 01		Priority - II
▪ Gender Equality	SDG 05		
▪ Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	SDG 09		
▪ Reduced Inequalities	SDG 10		
▪ Sustainable Cities and Communities	SDG 11		
▪ Partnerships for the Goals	SDG 17		
▪ Responsible Consumption and Production	SDG 12		Priority - III
▪ Climate Action	SDG 13		
▪ Life Below Water	SDG 14		
▪ Life on Land	SDG 15		

⁴ "National_SDGs_Framework_-_NEC_20182.Pdf."

Analyzing the Priorities:

Priority – I

The list of goals under priority – I are: Zero Hunger (SDG 02), Good Health and Well-being (SDG 03), Quality Education (SDG 04), Clean Water and Sanitation (SDG 06), Affordable and Clean Energy (SDG 07), Decent Work and Economic Growth (SDG 08), Peace Justice and Strong Institutions (SDG 16)⁵

Zero Hunger: According to National SDG Framework, the target 2.2 and indicator 2.2.1 and 2.2.2 are prioritized which focus on malnourishment, stunting and wasting. The goal ascribed in the Agenda 2030 is to completely end all forms of malnourishment by 2030 and achieve the internationally agreed targets by 2025⁶. However, the targets set for Pakistan are low, i.e., stunting should be reduced to 21.9% by 2030, which was recorded to be 43.7% in 2014-15. Wasting is targeted to be reduced to 7.5% by 2030, which was standing at 15.1% in 2014-15. Unfortunately, the stats present a wary image of the current scenario. According to the National Nutrition Survey (NNS) of 2018-19, 40.2% of the children under five years of age are stunted. This shows that Pakistan has only reduced the stunting amongst children by 3.5%, which is a very small number. If the progress remains constant or even increases by two or even five percent every year till 2030, the lower target for Pakistan can still not be achieved, let alone eliminating malnourishment completely by 2030. The wasting among children has increased by 2.6%, 17.7% children under the age of five are wasted according to NNS 2018-19, this percentage was low in 2014-15 i.e., 15.1%. Pakistan seems to be going in the wrong direction when it comes to the prevalence of wasting among the children. One in three children – 28.9% of children under five are under weight. This number has reduced by only 2.6% which is very less if the aim is to reduce it to 10% by 2030.

Good Health and Well-being: The prioritized targets to ensure good health and well-being in the country are: 3.1, 3.2, 3.6, 3.7 and 3.8. The maternal mortality ratio has significantly reduced over the period of six to seven years. In 2014-15 it was recorded to be 276 deaths per 100,000⁷ and

⁵ "Federal SDGs Support Unit," <https://www.sdgpakistan.pk/web/sdgs>.

⁶ "Goal 2 ... Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform," <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg2>.

⁷ "National_SDGs_Framework_-_NEC_20182.Pdf," https://www.sdgpakistan.pk/uploads/pub/National_SDGs_Framework_-_NEC_20182.pdf.

currently stands at 140⁸. This means that we have achieved the target set forth in the National SDG framework which was to reduce the mortality ration to 179 by 2030. On the other hand, the under 5 mortality rate is still standing at 69.3 whereas the goal is to bring it down to 40 deaths per 1000 by 2030.

Quality Education: The National SDG Framework prioritizes 4.1, 4.5 and 4.6 targets to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all. The primary and secondary level enrollment ratio between the years of 2013-18 was 96 and 45 respectively⁹. Whereas the goal is to take it up to 100 percent by 2030.

Gross enrolment Ratio (GER) 2013-18			
Pre-Primary	Primary	Secondary	Tertiary
SDG 4.2	SDG 4.1		SDG 4.3
52	108	89	69
101	102	98	19
91	102	n/a	14
14	115	75	28
25	93	86	11
40	111	67	18
86	134	71	12
80	96	45	10
n/a	104	55	10

Literacy rate adult %age 15 years and older (2008-18)	Youth %age 15-24 years old		Population with some secondary education %ages 25 years & older (2010-18)
	Female (2008-18)	Male (2008-18)	
SDG 4.6			
85.5	97.9	98.3	69.8
91.9	99.1	98.5	82.8
98.6	99.4	99.1	47.1
69.3	81.8	90.0	51.6
57.0	84.5	90.4	12.0
72.9	94.5	91.5	46.7
59.6	80.2	89.9	35.9
57.0	65.5	79.8	37.2
31.7	32.1	61.9	26.1

The highlighted bars represent Pakistan's standing position with regards to the following SDG indicators.

⁸ "11_Health_and_Nutrition.Pdf," http://www.finance.gov.pk/survey/chapter_20/11_Health_and_Nutrition.pdf.

⁹ "10_Education.Pdf," http://www.finance.gov.pk/survey/chapter_20/10_Education.pdf.

The proficiency level of children in class 5 in reading is found out to be better in urban areas as compared to the children studying in rural areas. Only 55% of children enrolled in grade 5 in rural areas can read English sentences and 57% children can solve arithmetic (division) questions, whereas 67% children in grade 5 of urban areas can read sentences in English and 66% children can solve arithmetic (Division) questions¹⁰.

Clean Water and Sanitation: Water is the most essential human need. Hence, every individual requires safe and clean drinking water in order to maintain a healthy lifestyle. In Pakistan, under this goal, the targets 6.1, 6.2, 6.5 and 6.6 are prioritized. Pakistan aims to provide safely managed drinking water services to hundred percent of the population. According to the latest data, around 95 percent of the households have improved access to drinking water¹¹. The percentage is higher in urban areas where 99 percent have safe drinking water services as compared to 93 percent in rural areas. Whereas, when sanitation is concerned i.e., the population having basic hand washing facilities with soap and water, hand washing facilities are widely available to urban population which accounts for 74 percent, as compared to 36 percent in rural areas who have this basic facility. The overall population having hand washing facility with washing agent, according to the Pakistan Social and Living Standard Measurement 2018-19, accounts for 50 percent¹² only; the goal however is to take this percentage up to 100 percent by 2030. For targets 6.5 and 6.6 the national SDG Framework does not provide either the national baseline of the indicator nor the target for 2030.

Affordable and Clean Energy: Under the SDG seven the prioritized targets are 7.1, 7.2 and 7.3. Keeping in account the target 7.1, the proportion of population with access to electricity is 92.2 percent¹³, which has unfortunately decreased by 1.3 percent when compared to 2014-15. The end goal however is to provide the access to electricity to 100% of the population. The percentage of the population using clean fuels for cooking accounts for only 48.2%. This percentage has increased by 6.3% since 2014-15, which is a very slow progress, if the goal is to provide 65% of

¹⁰ "ASER_National_2019.Pdf,"

http://asERPakistan.org/document/asER/2019/reports/national/ASER_National_2019.pdf.

¹¹ "Pslm_report_2018-19_national_provincial.Pdf," accessed June 29, 2020,

http://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files//pslm/publications/pslm2018-19/pslm_report_2018-19_national_provincial.pdf.

¹² "Pslm_report_2018-19_national_provincial.Pdf."

¹³ "Demographic and Health Survey 2017-18" Pakistan, <https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR354/FR354.pdf>.

the population with clean fuels for cooking by 2030. The share of renewable energy in the total final energy consumption stood at 41% in 2017¹⁴.

Decent Work and Economic Growth: Pakistan strives to promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth by prioritizing the targets 8.1, 8.2, 8.3, 8.5, and 8.6. The annual growth rate of real GDP per capita during 2014-15 was 1.00%. The goal is to increase it to 5% by 2030. The proportion of informal employment in non-agriculture employment stood at 73.6% in 2014-15; the goal is to lower it down to 55% by the end of 2030. However, according to recent reports, it has only decreased by 2.37% i.e., 71.23% in 2018¹⁵.

Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions: Under the goal sixteen, the prioritized targets are 16.1, 16.3, 16.4, 16.5, 16.6, 16.7 and 16.10. The baseline and target for 2030 is only provided by 16.1. According to the United Nations Crime Trend Survey, the victims of intentional homicide per 100,000 population accounted for 7.8% in 2014-15. This rate has reduced to 3.9% in 2018¹⁶. This means that to achieve the target 0.9% rate needs to be lowered as the goal is to reduce it to 3.0% till 2030. Meanwhile, the proportion of population subject to sexual violence was 1.9% in 2014-15 and the percentage has increased where it is recorded to be 3.1% in 2018¹⁷.

Priority – II

According to the National SDG Framework, the goals under priority – II are No Poverty (SDG 01), Gender Equality (SDG 05), Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure (SDG 09), Reduced Inequalities (SDG 10), Sustainable Cities and Communities (SDG 11) and Partnership for Goals (SDG 17)

No Poverty: The Agenda 2030 calls for eliminating poverty in all its forms by the end of 2030. The prioritized targets in Pakistan are 1.2, 1.3 and 1.4. According to the Pakistan economic survey 2019-2020, 50 million people live below the national poverty line which accounts for a poverty headcount ratio of 24.3 percent. This ratio was recorded to be 29.50 percent in 2014-15 which

¹⁴ "Pakistan | Tracking SDG 7," accessed July 16, 2020, <https://trackingsdg7.esmap.org/country/pakistan>.

¹⁵ "Informal Employment (% of Total Non-Agricultural Employment) - Pakistan | Data," <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.ISV.IFRM.ZS?end=2018&locations=PK&start=2009&view=chart>.

¹⁶ "Homicide Rates," UNCTS

¹⁷ "Sexual Violence," UNCTS

represents a decrease of only 4.7 percent. The goal is to lower the population residing below the poverty line to only 9 percent. Even if the progress remains constant in the decade of action, it seems impossible to achieve the target keeping in consideration the decrement faced by the economy in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. The pro-poor expenditures have also fallen during the year 2018-19. During 2017-18, the pro-poor expenditures accounted for 9.2 percent of the GDP, whereas now it has fallen to 8.0 percent of the GDP¹⁸.

Gender Equality: The national SDGs framework lists out the prioritized targets in order to achieve gender equality and empower women and girls all over Pakistan, but neither addresses the baseline of these targets nor the prescribed targets for Pakistan¹⁹. The overall representation of women in national parliaments has remained constant from 2015 to 2019. 20.2 percent of the seats in parliament are held by women. Whereas the goal is to take it up to 30 percent by the end of 2030. Keeping in view the current progress – which is constant, in mind, it seems that no or little attention is diverted to this target of goal number five. The target 5.b addresses the use of information and communications technology to empower women which is marked by the ownership of mobile phone among the individuals (indicator 5.b.1). According to the Pakistan Social and Living Standard Measurement (PSLM) 2018-19 a gender gap is observed in the ownership of mobile phones. Only 25 percent of the female population owns a mobile phone as compared to 65 percent male population²⁰. The goal is to increase the mobile ownership to 85 percent by 2030.

Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure: The goal number nine focuses on building resilient infrastructure while promoting resilient and sustainable industrialization. The prioritized targets under this goal are 9.2, 9.3 and 9.5. Taking into consideration the indicator 9.2.1, the share of manufacturing in GDP is 13-14 percent²¹. When looked into the share during the previous years, the progress shows a constant graph. In 2014-15 the manufacturing share in GDP accounted for 13.56 percent. This shows that no or very little progress has been made which will not be enough for rising the share of manufacturing as a percentage of GDP to 16 percent by 2030. The

¹⁸ “15-Social Protection 02-06-2020,” *Social Protection*, n.d., 17.

¹⁹ “National_SDGs_Framework_-_NEC_20182.Pdf.”

²⁰ “Pslm_report_2018-19_national_provincial.Pdf.”

²¹ “03-Manufacturing and Mining 03-06-2020,” n.d., 24.

employment in manufacturing sector was 15.3 percent out of the total employment in 2014-15²². The share of manufacturing employment in total employment has only increased by 0.98 percent and stands at 16.28% according to the Pakistan Economic Survey 2018-19. The goal however is to increase the manufacturing employment by 18% in 2030. The expenditure on research and development as a percentage of GDP remains standing at 0.2 percent in 2015 and 2017²³. The goal entitled in the National SDG framework is to increase the expenditure on R&D by 2.0 percent of the GDP, which seems impossible if the current progress is taken into consideration.

Reduced Inequalities: The SDG 10 focuses on reducing inequalities that reside within and among countries. Under the SDG framework in Pakistan, the prioritized targets of this goal are 10.1, 10.2, 10.3 and 10.4. According to the Household Integrated Economic Survey (HIES) 2018-19, the average per capita income has increased from PKR. 5653 in 2016-17 to PKR. 6662 in 2018-19. However, a huge difference is observed in the average per capita income of the lowest 40 percent of the population and richest 20 percent of the population. The income per capita of richest 20% of the population is three times the income of the people belonging to the lowest 40% of the population²⁴. The goal is to increase the income per capita of the lowest 40% of the population by 2.5 percent by the end of 2030.

Sustainable Cities and Communities: The SDG 11 focuses on making the cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. The targets 11.1 and 11.2 are prioritized under this goal. The percentage of urban population living in slums, informal settlements and inadequate housing was recorded to be 45.50% in 2014-15 and the goal is to lower this percentage to 22.0% by the end of 2030. Unfortunately, the latest data sources do not provide insights into the percentage of population living in slum areas. The National SDGs Framework also fails to depict the percentage of population that has access to public transport and what is the goal for 2030.

Partnership for Goals: The SDG 17 focusses on strengthening the means of implementation and revitalizing the global partnership for sustainable development. The prioritised targets under

²² Pakistan Economic Survey 2015-16 “12_Population.Pdf,”

http://www.finance.gov.pk/survey/chapters_16/12_Population.pdf.

²³ The World Bank “Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) | DataBank,”

[https://databank.worldbank.org/source/sustainable-development-goals-\(sdgs\)#](https://databank.worldbank.org/source/sustainable-development-goals-(sdgs)#).

²⁴ “Hies_2018-19_writeup.Pdf,” http://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files//pslm/publications/hies2018-19/hies_2018-19_writeup.pdf.

this goal are 17.1, 17.3 and 17.4. Till March 2020, the Foreign Direct Investment in Pakistan was encouraging. The FDI increased by 137.3 percent²⁵ along with a 5.5 percent growth in worker's remittances. According to the Federal Board of Revenue, the tax collection increased by 10.8 percent. Pakistan has a low tax-to-GDP ratio and the goal is to take this up to 18%.

Priority – III

Under the last priority of the National SDGs Framework of Pakistan, four goals are placed. These goals are: Responsible Consumption and Production (SDG 12), Climate Action (SDG 13), Life Below Water (SDG 14) and Life on Land (SDG 15).

Responsible Consumption and Production: The goal number twelve focuses on ensuring responsible patterns of production and consumption. Target 12.1, 12.4 and 12.5 are prioritized in order to responsibly and sustainably consume the natural resources to produce products and services. In accordance with the target 12.1' indicator 12.1.1, Pakistan has a National Action Plan on Sustainable Consumption and Production and the target for 2030 is to devise a sub-national action plan with the aim of reducing the consumption and production losses²⁶. These sub-national action plans are not found anywhere on the governments agenda neither there are any reports on the working of government authorities regarding the formulation of these action plans. However, the framework does not address the targets and baselines of 12.4 and 12.5, which present a vague insight into the standing point and progress of Pakistan regarding this goal.

Climate Action: Climate Change has been the talk of the century and many countries throughout the world are taking various actions in order to combat the impacts of climate change. The SDG 13 focuses on the issues of climate change and urges countries to take immediate actions in order to combat climate change and its impacts. Surprisingly, Pakistan has been the fifth most affected country by climate change²⁷, when looked into the Long-term Climate Risk Index (1999-2018). Still the SDG focusing on climate action is placed amongst the last priority according to the

²⁵ "01-Growth and Investment 01-06-2020," n.d., 16.

²⁶ "National_SDGs_Framework_-_NEC_20182.Pdf."

²⁷ David Eckstein et al., *Global Climate Risk Index 2020 Who Suffers Most from Extreme Weather Events? Wether-Related Loss Events in 2018 and 1999 to 2018*, 2019.

National SDGs Framework. The prioritized targets under this goal are 13.1, 13.2 and 13.3. Pakistan has a disaster risk reduction plan both at national and sub-national levels, in accordance with the indicator 13.1.1. The target is to ensure effective implementation by the end of 2030. Keeping in consideration the target 13.2, the strategies and plans to increase climate resilience and enhance adaptive capacity are present in the National Climate Change Policy 2012, which till this date has not been revised to accommodate new and pressing challenges that have come in the wake of climatic changes. As far as the target 13.3 is concerned, the framework does not address the targets for 2030. However, recent reports indicate that Pakistan has accomplished the green goal ten years ahead of the deadline²⁸. The large-scale afforestation and biodiversity conservation have helped combat the climate change impact.

Life Below Water: Water is a necessity for life and without water life seems impossible. The SDG 14 focuses on conserving and sustainably using the ocean resources for sustainable development. Under the SDG framework, the prioritized targets are 14.1 and 14.2, whereas no data is presented relating to the indicators of each target, i.e., the coastal eutrophication and floating plastic debris density's baseline is not provided and is not followed up with the target for 2030. Same is the case for target 14.2.

Life on Land: The SDG 15 promotes the protection and restoration of terrestrial ecosystems, while sustainably managing forests along with combating deforestation, land degradation and biodiversity loss. Out of a total of nine targets, 15.1, 15.2 and 15.3 are prioritized under this framework. Out of these three the framework only addresses the baseline and targets for only 15.1. According to Pakistan Economic Survey 2019-2020, the land area covered by forest is 5.01 percent. The National SDG framework states that this proportion was 5.70 percent in 2014-15. Hence, instead of an increase in the total land areas occupied by forest, we have seen a decrease. The goal however is to increase this area up to 12 percent by the end of 2030. Which seems quite impossible keeping in consideration the current progress.

²⁸ "Pakistan Achieves UN Climate Action Goal 10 Years Ahead of Deadline," <https://gulfnews.com/world/asia/pakistan/pakistan-achieves-un-climate-action-goal-10-years-ahead-of-deadline-1.72574154>.

Conclusion:

The considerable efforts put into prioritizing the targets and goals of 2030 Agenda were expected to be fruitful and gradually lead to the achievement of the SDGs. The prioritization provided a step-by-step pathway to sustainability by primarily focusing on short-term, medium-term and then long-term prioritized national goals. However, a look into the current progress of Pakistan regarding each target and goal in the three priorities, does not provide a satisfactory image. It appears that the long-term goals placed in the priority- III, have been given more attention which has resulted in achievement of certain goals, even though these goals required much longer time as compared to the goals under priority – I and II. This results in various queries regarding the poor prioritization framework adopted by Pakistan or the poor attention directed towards goals that should have been achieved by now.

