

REVIEW ARTICLE

The Role of Parliamentarians in Implementing SDGs in Pakistan: A Qualitative Study Incorporating Lessons Learned across Eight Countries

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Received: 04 April, 2023, Accepted: 05 May, 2023, Published: 13 May, 2023

Abstract

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a comprehensive framework for addressing social, economic, and environmental challenges facing countries around the world. The role of parliaments in implementing the SDGs has been widely recognized, but the extent of their impact remains uncertain, particularly in developing countries such as Pakistan. This paper aims to investigate the role of parliament in implementing the SDGs in Pakistan and to draw lessons from other countries that have successfully integrated the SDGs into their legislative processes. To achieve this objective, a qualitative research design was employed, which included a comprehensive analysis of lessons learned from other countries. The findings suggest that while the Pakistani parliament has taken steps towards aligning its policies with the SDGs, there is still a long way to go in terms of effective implementation. Lessons learned from other countries indicate that parliamentary oversight, public participation, and capacity building are key factors in successful implementation of the SDGs. The paper concludes with a series of recommendations for enhancing the role of parliament in implementing the SDGs in Pakistan.

Keywords: SDGs; Parliament of Pakistan; implementing SDGs; developing countries; environmental challenges

Introduction

In 2015, countries adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals, building on the success of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). However, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a blueprint for achieving a much more sustainable future for all people (OECD, 2017). The main purpose of the SDGs was to address the global challenges being faced by international communities, and poverty eradication is the overarching target of this new agenda. A few of the other issues include inequality, environmental degradation, illiteracy, peace, and justice. Each goal interconnects with the others; therefore, it is important to incorporate all 17 goals and leave none unaddressed (Hák et al., 2016). Moreover, these new goals are unique in their nature as they call for action by not only the poor or developing countries but also the rich-income countries to

promote long-term sustainability, inclusive development, and prosperity while protecting their environment. Furthermore, Goal 16 (Goetz & Jenkins, 2016), also known as the governance goal, reflects the Inter-Parliamentary Union's (IPU's) and United Nations Development Program's (UNDP's) long-held view that democratic governance is not only an end in itself but also a means to achieving sustainable development through strong legislative and other important national institutions (Kettunen et al., 2018).

With the advent of the SDGs, the global community has turned its focus to the question of their effective implementation, both at the national and international levels. To ensure the successful implementation of SDGs, there is a need for an effective structure of procedures, functional institutions, and legal frameworks to not only promote but also implement SDGs to achieve desired results in the long

run (Kaushik, 2019). Each country will have its own level of prioritization of the goals/targets according to its capacity, understanding, and circumstances; therefore, countries must be provided enough space to determine and implement the goals they feel are most important to them. Moreover, it is not necessary that all 17 goals are relevant to every country; however, a strong commitment towards achieving them and effective implementation policies must be made by the national actors, including the Parliament, for the accomplishment of those targets that are applicable in their case (Oosterhof, 2018; Kettunen et al., 2018). Therefore, with the help of the national parliament, countries should translate global sustainable development goals into national sustainable development targets, each according to their needs (Hassan, 2022).

It is perhaps true that a country's parliament can act as a catalyst in implementing the SDGs, as it is widely believed that without a political will, the probability of success of progressive reform in any country is almost equal to null. Therefore, for the implementation of the SDGs through an effective institutional structure, the political environment of that particular country should be conducive to such progressive changes (Biermann et al., 2022). The issue is that the political arena, for the most part, is dominated by self-interests at the cost of the common good/interest which hinders the proper functioning of our legislative or administrative processes (Ugoani, 2017).

Therefore, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development puts emphasis on localizing SDGs in national practices by coordinating the already existing national policies towards a common target that fulfills the agenda of "Green Growth" (Lee et al., 2016). Each country will therefore have to identify its own priorities in this regard and move towards localizing such targets with the help of parliamentarians and national actors for effective implementation. Moreover, the national development plans of countries should be adjusted by the Sustainable Development Agenda (Meuleman, 2021). These new development plans should encompass all possible dimensions of inclusive growth by tilting towards a much more holistic policy intervention against anti-development-related challenges, i.e., poverty. The SDGs provide an opportunity for all parliamentarians to illustrate their focus and commitment towards public welfare and well-being and the improved health of the environment. Furthermore, the SDGs have laid down a framework based on which national actors can pursue their own targets and move towards prosperity (Chungong & General, 2018).

It is of great concern as to how parliament can play a role in the implementation of the SDGs. Parliament is a key

institution under which a state runs, the legislative body is responsible for making laws that describe the rights and obligations of state-actors towards one another, which enables a state to function properly. The Parliament also plays an important role in the budget allocation process, as they approve how much and where the budget should be allocated (Hege & Brimont, 2018). As not only the law-makers but also the elected representatives of their people, parliamentarians have a major role to play in promoting people-centered development; therefore, parliamentarians must ensure their citizens' needs and interests are being fulfilled through government-initiated programs or plans (Adiputri, 2021).

Moreover, the emphasis on the importance of parliaments and stakeholders getting involved in the national implementation of SDGs became stronger after the first review of the UN of MDG implementation in 2005; it was argued that it was extremely important that these goals were not being implemented in isolation, further arguing that engagement of the parliament would lead to much more progress in the country (Adiputri, 2021).

Undoubtedly, parliamentarians are responsible for supporting and monitoring the implementation of the SDGs within a country and promoting the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda (Lee et al., 2016). Parliamentarians have a special role to play in Goal 16 of the SDGs, which is "Sustaining Peace and Good Governance," as they are the promoters of peace and justice for all and responsible for building effective and accountable institutions at local levels (Hope, 2022). This goal can only be completely achieved through the participation of parliamentarians through effective law-making, representing the interests of the public, and ensuring accountability and inclusiveness through proper monitoring (Kettunen et al., 2018). The presence of accountable and transparent institutions that take timely actions will guarantee proper implementation and desired outcomes, as implementation rests critically on accountability. Therefore, in order to achieve national sustainability goals, parliamentarians must look into unexplored areas to improve the effectiveness of their systems and processes (Guha & Chakrabarti, 2019).

An inclusive process can help nationalize and institutionalize the SDG agenda. In this process, a national SDG group is established that is responsible for providing guidance regarding the implementation of these goals. The parliamentarians are also included in these group activities, as their participation can help incorporate nationals' views and provide institutional support (Fitsilis & De Vrieze, 2020).

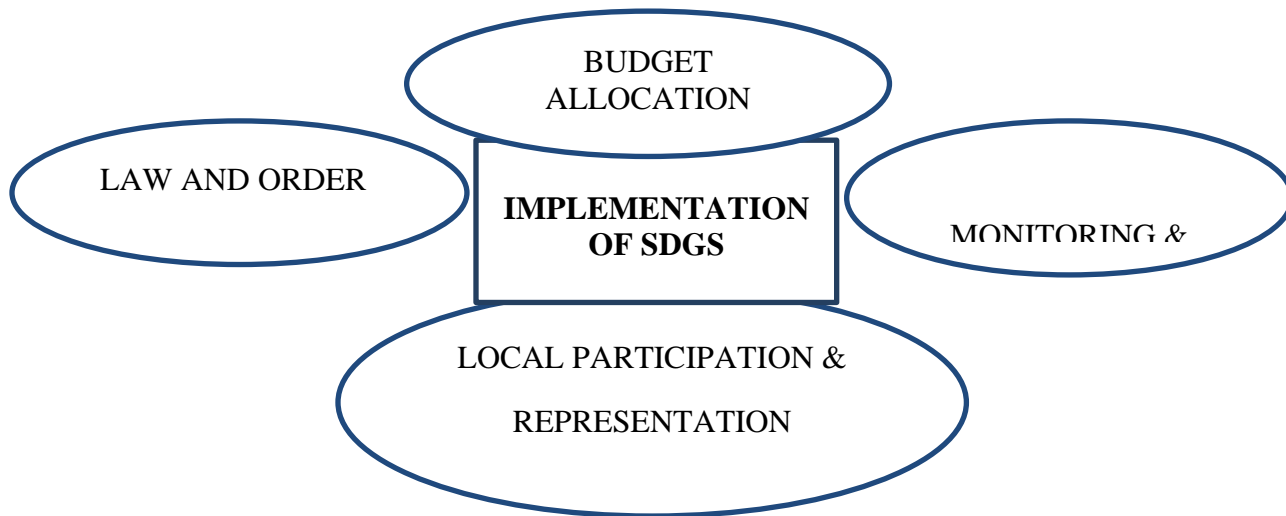


Figure 1. Proposed elements for implementation of the SDGs

Moreover, the national development plans are reviewed by the governments to ensure they are in accordance with the SDGs for achieving inclusive growth in the country. Public participation and consultation would further help in the efficient and effective implementation of national development targets. Lastly, monthly progress reports by the governments could be helpful for monitoring and evaluating the status of targets post-implementation to see if they are on track (Walsh et al., 2019).

The proper implementation of the SDGs depends on the following tools at the national level, as mentioned in Figure 1. All four dimensions that enable the implementation of the SDGs can be managed by the parliament. Law-making behaves as an enabling tool for the national implementation of SDGs in a way that a country’s legislature that promotes equality, a pro-poor policy agenda, inclusiveness, public accountability, and local participation in decision-making can better ensure the national preparedness towards achieving SDGs (Fitsilis & De Vrieze, 2020). Therefore, parliamentarians must be mindful of the kind of legislature their governments have proposed in the country and whether or not it promotes human rights. Moreover, the successful implementation of the SDGs depends on budgeting. The parliamentarians should carefully engage in this process by evaluating how much of the government funds are being allocated to their national SDGs and identifying if sufficient funds are being allocated, especially to areas that are vulnerable and socially excluded (Fitsilis & De Vrieze, 2019). Monitoring and Evaluation includes the pre and post assessment of government policy interventions in achieving national development plans, M&E will help national actors

keep track of the progress of their national sustainable development targets. Lastly, local participation and representation act as an enabling tool in pointing out gaps and weaknesses in the national implementation of the SDGs, as local citizens and stakeholders can bring forward their wider concerns and how they can be effectively met (Tam, 2022).

A self-assessment toolkit designed by the Inter-Parliamentary Union in order to support parliaments in becoming “fit for purpose” and carrying out their prime functions of legislation, budgeting, and representation on the SDG agenda. This self-assessment mechanism is used as a tool to provide assistance to parliaments around the world for their preparedness to firstly engage with the SDGs, look for different strategies, processes, and mechanisms that will ensure and support the implementation of the SDGs (Oosterhofm, 2018). Parliamentarians will get to identify multiple opportunities, practices, and gaps that need to be filled; as a result, they can easily institutionalize the sustainable development agenda in their national policies and legislative processes. Moreover, self-assessment may help governments identify their capability and capacity in terms of their preparedness for involvement in the 2030 Agenda and implementation of the SDGs in their respective countries. It will allow the governments to realize where they currently stand and where they want to go (Bexell & Jönsson, 2022). Furthermore, for the parliaments to stand strong on their human rights agenda, they need to include women and other minority groups within the country either through new electoral laws under which new deserving candidates could be hired or through participatory

development. This way, the issues captured by the Sustainable Development Targets will have legitimacy, as now the citizens will demand them (Dirth & Zondervan, 2019).

On October 15, 2017, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and the United Nations Development Program released the second Global Parliamentary Report; the aim of this report was to highlight the role of Parliament in the implementation of SDGs around the globe (Chiniaeva & Chinaeva, 2021). Additionally, the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda has also emphasized the role of Parliament in holding its government accountable for actions taken to eradicate extreme poverty and work towards green growth (Bexell & Jönsson, 2022). According to the report, the parliamentarians are given a golden opportunity to increase their participation and engagement in government-led actions to promote sustainable development in the country through proper implementation. Since the role of parliaments is also law-making, they can easily translate the language of the SDGs into their national law, which will compel the government to take initiatives and timely actions (Mulholland, 2017).

During the Declaration of the 2030 Sustainable Agenda, it was clearly stated

“We acknowledge the essential role of national parliaments through their enactment of legislation and adoption of budgets and their role in ensuring accountability for the effective implementation of our commitments.”

The Sustainable Development Goals Partnership Platform has also initiated the idea of having a Parliamentarian Assembly for the implementation of SDGs on a voluntary basis, in which parliamentarians and other actors will join hands to advocate the efforts to implement SDGs in national plans or legislations for their effective implementation (Tam, 2022).

Methodology

This study adopted a case study research methodology that included a thorough examination of lessons (case studies) from parliaments in other countries. The synthesis of the aforementioned study designs creates a thorough analysis. The goal of the current study was to develop lessons learned on the function of parliaments in implementing the SDGs. The field of SDG interactions has rapidly advanced since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda in 2015, but the field is still

relatively new. This paper could serve as the basis for the future research studies.

Data triangulation was employed to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings. This process has been found to be helpful in corroborating findings, supplying more complete data, and improving comprehension of the subject matter under consideration. The insights derived from comparative case studies were synthesized to formulate a set of recommendations for enhancing the role of parliament in implementing the SDGs in Pakistan.

Lessons Learned from Other Parliaments

The IPU is actively supporting parliaments in assessing their capacity to work on the SDGs in Fiji, Mali, Djibouti, Serbia, with Namibia, Kenya, and Sri Lanka in the pipeline, to name but a few (Nanda et al., 2020; Guet et al., 2020). We have organized regional seminars for parliaments in the Asia Pacific region, Sub-Saharan Africa, Central and Eastern Europe, and Central Asia, and the list goes on. We also promote parliamentary engagement and contributions to country SDG reports to the UN, a process that takes place every summer at the UN in New York. I have just come from this year's session, where there is growing evidence that governments and parliaments are working together to move forward with the SDG agenda. That is a good lesson worth emulating (Sherr et al., 2020).

Samoa

The International Labor Organization (ILO) has been the only tripartite agency of the United Nations (UN) since 1999, and it brings together governments, workers, and employers from all around the world in order to set labor standards. In 2016, UN agencies, in partnership with multiple Government Ministries of Samoa, including the Office of the Clerk and Legislative Assembly (OCLA), held a special workshop aimed at training new members of the Parliament on the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (Guerrero-Ruiz et al., 2021).

Malaysia

Malaysia is one of the countries facing issues with food security. Many rice fields in the country are being converted into housing colonies or commercial areas. Penang State Legislative Assembly, YB Dr. Norlela, State Assembly Person for Penanti, has been working to spread awareness about this issue among the general public. She is doing so through the Penang Paddy Festival, whose goal is to not

only raise awareness about the hardships faced by paddy farmers, but also shed light on the rapid urbanization of agricultural land in Malaysia (Abd Rahman & Yusof, 2020).

Azerbaijan

In a speech on the role of Parliament in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, Ghulam Isaczai mentions how all state institutions in Azerbaijan have been actively participating in the implementation of the SDGs. He went on to explain the important role of parliaments as powerful agents of change. In his own words,

“Parliaments play an important role in the localization, implementation, and monitoring of the SDGs. Parliamentarians are close to the people and can serve as advocates, mobilizers, and first-line ‘ambassadors’ for the SDGs. In representing those who elected them, and offering a platform for communication, parliaments can ensure an ongoing dialogue with civil society over the SDGs.”

According to him, parliaments must not only incorporate SDGs into national laws but also monitor their implementation by ensuring that the government is held accountable to the people for national progress in terms of achieving SDGs (Aliyev, 2019). Additionally, parliaments can contribute a great deal by guaranteeing that national development is inclusive and participatory, and that sufficient financial resources have been allocated for its success. Isaczai also commends parliaments from around the world that are taking notable action to advance the SDGs. As a few examples, he shares that the Parliament of Kazakhstan adopted a statement committing itself to the promotion of the SDGs in parliamentary affairs. Whereas, the National Assembly of Pakistan established an SDG Task Force to promote debates, engage MPs, and increase awareness of the SDGs. And finally, the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago established a new Joint Select Committee on the Environment and Sustainable Development (Taghieva, & Hashimova, 2019).

He concludes his speech by naming a few of the important legislations on which the Parliament of Azerbaijan has worked:

- The draft legislation on mandatory flour fortification is essential to reduce anemia, especially among women and children.

- Review of current legislation on inclusive education in order to build an enabling environment to achieve the SDGs goals on quality education for all.
- The adoption of the new **Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities** is important, as it would help to accelerate reforms in this field.
- Adoption of the revised **law on youth policy** will bring current legislation in line with best international practices.

United Kingdom

The UK adopted the SDGs in 2015 and has since committed itself to not only achieving these goals domestically, but to helping other countries do the same. In order to gauge the progress made since 2015, the UK Government will be presenting its Voluntary National Review to the UN in July 2019. For this purpose, the International Development Committee held an inquiry into UK progress on the SDGs, inviting written submissions on the government’s progress on the SDGs (Jones & Comfort, 2020).

Finland

Finland has been one of the most successful states in terms of SDG promotion. It has made commendable efforts in the field, including follow-up reports by Civil Society Organizations on Finland and the 2030 Agenda, which not only compare the current condition of SDG achievement in the country to UN standards, but also highlight what the country must do to improve in areas even if it is already doing well (Taghieva, & Hashimova, 2019). According to their Government Report on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, one of the basic principles regarding the implementation of the SDGs is Society’s Commitment to Sustainable Development (SCSD) - The Finland We Want by 2050. It consists of 8 goals for Finland to achieve by 2050, and was updated to align it with the 2030 Agenda, making them synonymous. This commitment presents Finland’s national interpretation of the 2030 Agenda and, thus, is a plan adopted by the entire Finnish society to achieve the SDGs. In short, the SCSD is an implementation mechanism that enables citizens, businesses, organizations, municipalities, and other stakeholders to participate in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda (Väänänen & Pöllänen, 2021).

In 2016, a number of studies were carried out to assess Finland’s preparedness to implement the 2030 Agenda on

the basis of indicator-based material, stakeholder opinions, and literature. The results are divided into Finland's success areas, which it must sustain, and critical points, which require urgent action (Gade et al., 2022). Such studies and reports have been used in the creation of Finland's SDG Plan. To further make use of this data, different stakeholder groups, the Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development, and the Development Policy Committee organized multiple events in which proposals were presented by the Expert Panel on Sustainable Development to highlight key priority areas for Finland, which served as valuable reference material and guidelines for the Plan (Ylönen & Salmivaara, 2021).

Sri Lanka

In October 2018, the Parliamentary Select Committee on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, in collaboration with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) of Sri Lanka, held a workshop on the critical role of Parliament and parliamentarians in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals. The aim of the workshop was to help parliamentarians and their members assess their preparedness to engage with the SDGs and identify additional strategies, mechanisms, and partnerships to support the implementation of the SDGs more effectively. Honorary speakers in the workshop included not only members of the Sri Lankan Parliament and notable government officials, but also speakers from the private sector, non-governmental organizations, and youth organizations (Wijegoonawardana, 2019).

The Republic of Seychelles

Despite their small size and many constraints, the groups of islands that make up the Seychelles have been demonstrating commitment towards the achievement of the SDGs not just at the international level but in regional partnerships and agreements and in national policies, action plans, and institutional frameworks (Baker et al., 2023). Through global initiatives such as the Global Island Partnership (GLISPA), Seychelles has been successfully engaging leaders from over 60 countries and has joined hands with overseas territories for island conservation and sustainable use of natural resources. In collaboration with UNDP Seychelles, the National Assembly of the country hosted a panel discussion on Engaging Parliament on the Sustainable Development Goals, to celebrate their first

International Day of Parliamentarianism. Members of the Department of Economic Planning and the Bureau of Statistics gave presentations with regards to SDGs in relation to their respective organizations (Gungadeen, & Paull, 2020).

The 2020 Sustainable Development Outlook for Seychelles highlights the current condition of the SDGs in Seychelles and how to improve them. Using macro-indicators such as economic development and social well-being, the Outlook also presents warning trends that may hinder the process of achieving the SDGs. This provides great assistance in formulating the next step to achieve a more sustainable Seychelles (Etongo, 2022).

Australia

Among other efforts, Australia has also established a reporting platform that provides official government data on the SDG indicators (Allen et al., 2020). In December 2017, the Australian Senate requested that its Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Trade References Committee examine and report on the SDGs. This report was to include not only the understanding of SDGs among the wider Australian community and government but also a cost-benefit analysis in terms of SDG implementation in the country. Additionally, the Committee recommended the following to the Australian Government:

- Publish a national SDG implementation plan that includes national priorities and regular reports of Australia's performance against the goals;
- Provide an indicator-based assessment to Parliament at least every two years that tracks Australia's performance against the Goals;
- Establish a national SDG secretariat to, inter alia, provide support to the existing interdepartmental committee;
- Provide effective coordination of Australia's actions to implement and report on the SDGs;
- Develop a framework to ensure that its agencies include the SDGs in their annual reporting by 2020-2021;
- Support state, territory, and local governments to create their own plans for the implementation of the SDGs in their jurisdictions;
- Partner with "private and tertiary sector" stakeholders to develop and disseminate Australian guidance on reporting against the Goals; and

- Identify opportunities to assist small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to build capacity to access sustainable procurement and reporting systems.

What role can Pakistani parliamentarians play in implementing the SDGs in Pakistan?

Pakistan has shown great commitment towards the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; moreover, it was one of the first countries to ever approve of the agenda in 2015. On February 16, 2016, the Pakistani Parliament approved the Sustainable Development Goals as the national Development Plan (Dobrowolski, & Sułkowski, 2019). Furthermore, it is one of the few countries to create a Parliamentary SDGs Secretariat under the National Assembly; this was indeed a vital step taken to promote sustainable growth in the country. The 18th Amendment touched upon several other functions, including that of providing social services to the provincial governments through the federal governments. Moreover, Pakistan has had panel discussions on the SDGs with other actors involved in order to strengthen efforts to promote and achieve sustainable development in Pakistan along with the eradication of poverty (Galli et al., 2018). Additionally, Pakistan's Vision 2025 has established 7 pillars that the country has to achieve, these pillars are in full alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals, therefore, and it can be argued that efforts have indeed been made to incorporate the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda in the country's national planning (Katramiz et al., 2020).

Through the involvement of the Ministry of Planning, Government of Pakistan, and Planning and Development Departments of provincial governments, along with the support of the United Nations Development Programme, Pakistan has launched a five years joint project called "National Initiative for Sustainable Development Goals to Institutionalize the 2030 Agenda" (Latif et al., 2022). National and international actors are working towards the coordination, reporting, monitoring, and financing of the SDGs in the country. They are also providing policy prescriptions through R&D (Asad, 2019). Along with that, the team is also raising awareness among citizens and stakeholders regarding the 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Targets with the use of different communication tools and a variety of activities (Javeed et al., 2021).

It is important to remember the already existing mission on which Pakistan was built in the first place. While

incorporating the historical targets, the parliament should address the SDGs in their relationship. As argued by the Inter-Parliamentary Union, it is important to first sensitize parliamentarians on issues like human rights, gender equality, and human well-being through capacity building (Tam, 2022). The first and foremost step should be to inform the parliamentarians and parliamentary staff and train them on their role in the national implementation of the SDGs. Once that is done, sessions should be conducted to initiate a debate among parliamentarians and parliamentary staff on the SDGs and their importance and analyze their capacity and preparedness for SDG implementation. An example is the Sri Lankan initiative (Albert et al., 2019). The stronger the parliament's relations and interactions with its government, citizens, stakeholders, etc., the higher the chances of achieving sustainable growth in the country. Additionally, different organizations working within the country can join hands with the Pakistani Parliament to promote local development preferences and needs through local participation, which can be difficult to identify at the state-level (Fatima et al., 2020).

Finland's Society's Commitment to Sustainable Development (SCSD) - The Finland We Want by 2050 is an implementation mechanism that enables citizens, businesses, organizations, municipalities, and other stakeholders to participate in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda (Räkköläinen & Saxén, 2022). Even though the Pakistani Parliament has established a national plan - Vision 2025, along with seven goals that are aligned with the SDGs - the implementation of sustainable development targets can only be achieved once every citizen takes responsibility to make efforts to promote green growth. The Pakistani Parliament must not only sensitize the masses at the grass-roots level but also utilize its legislative authority in order to incorporate the SDGs into the national laws of Pakistan. Doing so will normalize the concept of achieving sustainable development at a personal level, which in turn will compel every individual to work towards it to the best of their abilities (Abbasi et al., 2022).

The 2020 Sustainable Development Outlook for Seychelles highlights the current condition of the SDGs in Seychelles and how to improve them. Similarly, Finland has been reviewing its SDG Plan based on the studies conducted within the country regarding success areas that it must sustain and critical points that require urgent action. Additionally, these countries conduct multiple events in which proposals are presented by experts on sustainable development to highlight key priority areas for their respective countries, which serve as valuable reference

material and guidelines for their national agendas (Benzaken et al., 2022).

Conclusion

Pakistan is still facing a huge number of economic, governance, and security issues. It is important to notice that Pakistan was ranked 147 out of 188 countries in the year 2015 on the Human Development Index (HDI), which is the first indicator towards achieving sustainable growth (Olsen & Zusman, 2014). The human rights agenda is perfectly aligned with the SDGs; therefore, in order for the Pakistani parliament to engage itself in the implementation of the SDGs in the country, it must first shift its focus on the human rights dimension. Moreover, Pakistan ranks 143 out of 144 countries in the gender inequality index; this is also quite alarming, as without inclusive participation in the country, the Parliament may fail to establish rules that govern sustainability (Brollo et al., 2021). Furthermore, Pakistani society as a whole lacks a culture of accountability due to high levels of corruption both on micro and macro-levels. In the same way, the Parliament needs to safeguard the rights of minority groups and the public, respectively. The Pakistani Parliament, like all other parliaments, can play a vital role in the engagement and implementation of SDGs in the country through its alignment with the national plan (Khan & Ali, 2019).

However, in order for that to be successful, the Pakistani Parliament must be empowered to effectively and transparently pass laws in the country, engage itself in the budget allocation process, hold the government accountable for its commitment towards achieving a sustainable Pakistan, and monitor the implementation of SDGs by using an inclusive and participatory approach (KHAN, 2020; Xu et al., 2023).

Acknowledgement: None

Funding: None

Conflict of Interest: No conflict of interest declared

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