

# Pakistan's substantial development challenge

Significant change may be a long way off

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TAHMINA RASHID

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**Pakistan's future faces many hurdles, and its progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals is stagnating – unless there is a major shift in approach the country faces a difficult future, Tahmina Rashid writes.**

Pakistan ranked 129th out of 165 countries in a recent [Sustainable Development Goal \(SDG\) Index](#) ranking, with an overall score of 57.7 per cent, mainly for its progress on one of the 17 goals – climate action.

The country saw moderate improvements in the goals for poverty, health and wellbeing, water and sanitation, decent work, peace and justice, and partnership, but it stagnated on zero hunger, quality education, gender equality, clean energy, innovation, sustainable cities and communities, and 'life below water'. It actually went backwards on 'life on land'.

In 2021, Pakistan was ranked 153th in the [Global Gender Gap Index](#), and in 2020, it ranked 154th on [Human Development Index](#), with [38 per cent](#) of its population living with multidimensional poverty.

The [Global Multidimensional Poverty index](#) noted that Pakistan is comparable with Afghanistan, with one in every four persons living in severe poverty.

Pakistan has an estimated population of over [220 million](#) in 2021, and a growth rate of 1.95 per cent per year. Adding 5.28 million people per year to its population, it is projected to surpass Indonesia in size around the year 2048.

Population growth remains one of the biggest challenges for Pakistan's development, with [60 per cent](#) of its population below the age of 25, and a fertility rate at 3.5 [births](#) per woman. This means that providing education, health and employment for a large and growing youth cohort will remain an issue for the foreseeable future.

Despite improved life expectancy, infant and maternal mortality remains [high](#), indicating the gap in health services to the female population. Pakistan also remains one of only three countries that have not yet been able to [eradicate](#) polio.

In the education sector, literacy rates remain abysmal at [59 per cent](#), especially female literacy, which stands at roughly 50 per cent, compared to male literacy at 68 per cent. The quality of education and employability of school graduates is very low, and the growing young population has little to no access to quality schooling.

The current government and the military leadership does [plan](#) to bring some 30,000 madrassas under government control and [streamline](#) the school education system by implementing a [Single National Curriculum](#) across the public and [private](#) sectors, but it remains to be seen how this policy initiative will be implemented in a country so divided, especially in times of deep post-pandemic economic crisis.

Pakistan is also facing an [energy crisis](#). This is not a recent issue – both domestic and industry users have suffered power shortages and blackouts for years. The energy [sector](#) relies on hydroelectric, thermal, nuclear and some renewables, though non-renewables remain the largest source.

Energy shortages have [impacted](#) the textile industry harder than other sectors. In 2012, in Faisalabad – the textile industry hub – 68 units went into closure, resulting in [one million unemployed labourers](#), and

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Despite the introduction of new varieties over the last two decades, cotton production in Pakistan declined in the financial year 2019-20 due to unfavourable weather, water shortages, and pest attacks.

Land reforms to help with this remain difficult to achieve, as current landholders and the military have opposed changes in land governance.

Pakistan also has one of the highest rates of urbanisation in South Asia. Urban areas have expanded immensely between 1995 and 2015. For instance, it has been estimated that various urban sectors convert 3,016 hectares of agriculture lands annually for urban uses in metropolitan Lahore, and if this rate doesn't slow, by 2030 all agricultural land at the fringes of cities will be urbanised.

Similarly, real estate prices are pushing the landless and subsistence farmers aside to make way for infrastructure and a growing number of farmhouses that cater to the urban rich outside of Faisalabad.

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There are no limits on land ownership after the Federal Sharia court unanimously decided that Islamic law sets no such limit. Powerful real estate groups continue to grab land by coercion, depriving millions of villagers in Punjab and Sindh from their ancestral lands. State institutions continue to help the powerful while the poor are evicted without reprieve.

Land reforms again would be key to justice in this space, but land is a highly contested political issue. The imbalance in the government's relationship with the military has led to agrarian interventions by the military. These ultimately have had a negative impact on development, depriving millions of small landholders, subsistence farmers, and landless agricultural communities of their land-based livelihoods.

Despite a democratic system and intermittent elections, the poor segments of society remain vulnerable, and have little power to influence policies in ways that will help them out of poverty. The country ranked 137 out of 157 countries on its commitment to reduce inequality.

Despite growth in income, inflation remains above six per cent, raising the cost of staples. And even in the face of a higher unemployment rate of 16 per cent among the educated middle class in 2018 to 2019, and increased wealth inequality, the recent budget offers no reprieve to the middle classes, who are not entitled to social protection assistance. Pakistan remains a country divided between ultra-rich and ultra-poor, with its middle class shrinking under the burden of rising prices.

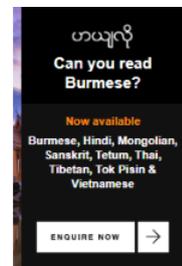
The World Food Programme says that 21 per cent of Pakistan's population is malnourished, 44 per cent of children under five years old have stunted growth, and 37 per cent of the population faces food insecurity, despite Pakistan being a major producer of wheat and rice.

Beyond these challenges, Pakistan has major water shortages. It is ranked 14th out of 150 countries at high risk of water crisis. Water Aid notes that 17 million people in Pakistan lack access to clean water close to home, and 70 million lack access to a decent toilet, the majority of them in rural communities.

Pakistan's development challenges constitute what is called a wicked problem, and sadly despite all the promises for change made by the current prime minister, the reality is that change will be very difficult to achieve without land reform and structural shifts in governance, which aren't forthcoming.

Without a major change in the thinking of civil and military bureaucracy, as well as the ruling elite, this won't happen. Without addressing historical injustices and structural policy problems, the achievement of the SDGs is likely to remain merely a dream for the people of Pakistan.

This article is part of Policy Forum's In Focus: Developing Asia section, which brings you analysis from experts on the policy challenges facing its least developed members.



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