

## The Role of Environmental Law in Achieving Sustainable Development Goals: A Case Study of Pakistan

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### ABSTRACT

*In the light of environmental laws in Pakistan, this doctrinal legal research investigates whether or to what extent the environmental legislation of Pakistan is contributing or hampering the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals including climate action conserving the ecosystems and environmental governance. The study examines national legislation including Pakistan Environmental Protection Act, 1997 alongside provincial laws, landmark court decisions, and Pakistan's international legal obligations like the Paris Agreement and the Convention on Biological Diversity. Results show that despite of Pakistan's strong base of environmental law, which is indirectly connected to SDG's and with absence of strong institutional support for implementation it has not been able to effectively translate international protocols into domestic law. The law courts have been instrumental in generating environmental rights, but systemic legal and administrative deficiencies persist. The report suggests amendments to legislation to incorporate SDG indicators as well as strengthen environmental enforcement and treaty implementation in national laws. These are the changes that are essential to support the shifting of Pakistan from a policy to a rule-based sustainable development approach that aligns with the 2030 Agenda.*

**Keywords:** Environmental Law, Sustainable Development Goals, Pakistan, Legal Reform, Enforcement, Climate Governance, SDGs, Environmental Policy

### INTRODUCTION

Environmental destruction is perhaps the biggest challenge of our time. Challenges like climate change, biodiversity loss, deforestation, and water scarcity not only jeopardize ecological balance, but they also deny human progress and social equality. The international community of nations has responded to these inter-connected global challenges by embracing a broad framework in pursuit of sustainability, most prominently via the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals a universal call to action to end

poverty, protect the planet and ensure prosperity for all by 2030 with the 17 interdependent goals which balance social equity, economic growth and environmental protection.

Environmental law is fundamental for the progress of the SDGs. It enshrines the legal tools, institutional mandates, and enforcement mechanisms that we need to regulate harmful practices, protect ecosystems, and ensure the sustainable use of the resources on which we all depend. While there are currently over 250 multilateral environmental agreements worldwide, the progress made towards achieving environmental goals is not only slow, but also inconsistent (Olawuyi et al., 2022). Academics contend that global (especially constitutional) frameworks such as the SDGs, to which many of the world's governments are committed are normatively powerful and can make an impact, but they also lack binding authority, and their success often depends on their diffusion into the national legal order (Biermann et al., 2022) (Sagar & Chandrappa, 2023).

In this context, Pakistan makes a strong case. Yet the country hardly implemented its environment law, even though there is much legislation to the effect, from various Pakistan Environmental Protection Acts, the first in 1997, to the ratification of multilateral environment agreements (*THE PUNJAB ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION ACT 19*, n.d.). Decentralized environmental governance that was instituted through the 18th Constitutional Amendment has resulted in confusion of jurisdiction and poor coordination between institutions (Farooq Akbar, 2023). There is often a problem of a lack of technical capacity, regulatory authority, and access to up to date data for Provincial Environmental Protection Agencies (Zaheer Syed et al., 2024). Furthermore, in Pakistan, climate change adaptation and environmental planning activities are often driven by policy rather than backed by legal commitments thus making them less enforceable (Adnan et al., 2024).

Pakistan continues to poorly rank on the international indices including the ones under the Sustainable Development Goals and registers highly on the environmental challenge spectrum despite tremendous environmental risks covering air, water, deforestation, and floods (Waheed et al., 2024). Research shows that Pakistan's environmental governance largely offers only symbolic support to SDG targets.(ZEEWAQAR, 2024). Though some institutional initiatives like the LEAD network work with some elements of the food system, they typically lack funding, political support and regulatory capacity necessary to enforce compliance or facilitate long-term accountability.

With much of the existing literature on the subject conducting a cursory analysis of environmental law and SDGs at a policy level, we find few attempts to examine national laws (for instance, Pakistan) for their compatibility with specific SDG targets. There is also limited research on the enforcement and effectiveness of these laws in actual practice, and the conflict between international obligations as institutions can be argued such as e.g., the Paris Agreement, and domestic legal realization. This paper aims to fill all three gaps through an evaluation of Pakistan's environmental legal framework, assessment of its effectiveness, and proposes practical reforms for alignment with 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

We seek to understand how the environmental law may meaningfully contribute to this agenda by critically evaluating its state in Pakistan against the Sustainable Development Goals. Using a doctrinal legal research method, it critically analyzes the effectiveness of existing environmental laws, gaps in institutions and laws, and recommends reforms in Sri Lanka that would better align its legal frameworks with its obligations under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In this context, while balancing international aspirations with the practical challenges of local legal realities, this study aims to provide an informed perspective on how environmental law can be augmented to play a more impactful role as a vehicle for sustainable development in Pakistan.

### **Research Questions**

1. What is the status of Pakistan's environmental laws with respect to specific SDG targets?
2. Are they enforceable, and do they work in practice?
3. What is lacking between international environmental commitments and domestic legal implementation in Pakistan?
4. What reforms are necessary to ensure Pakistan's environmental laws better align with SDGs?

### **Research Objectives**

- To study the convergence of Pakistan's environmental laws with the SDGs.
- To check the enforceability and effectiveness of these laws.
- To identify discrepancies between Pakistan's legal framework and international environmental commitments.
- To advocate feasibility-amendments rendering greater coherence with the 2030 Agenda at arrange level.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Environmental Law and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**

As a baseline, environmental law helps realizing the results of the Sustainable development goals particularly SDGs related to environment: e.g. SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 14 (Life Below Water), and SDG 15 (Life on Land). (Olawuyi et al.,2022) go even further, arguing that environmental law, when epistemically connected with global sustainability agendas, becomes more than regulatory (rather, transformative). They call for a "nexus governance" approach that links multilateral environmental agreements to SDG targets to be coherent, accountable and quantifiably impactful.

While there exists some understanding internationally about the importance of environmental law in promoting sustainable development, there is still a lack of legal scholarship on how national laws contribute to specific SDG targets. Biermann et al. (2022), concluding in their meta-analysis of SDG-related governance that SDGs have influenced political discussion around the globe but retain little real legal significance. They argue that the majority of SDG adoption has been superficial, with little transposition into binding legal changes.

Similarly, (Kotzé & Adelman, 2023) state that while environmental law has grown, it often reinforces the unsustainable status by prioritizing economic growth instead of ecological limits.

The gap between environmental policy and its implementation through binding legal means is a common theme in the recent literature here. Entitlements emerging from the constitution, in specific instruments created within the legal framework, would be the marrow of a sustainability principle embedded in successive generations of laws as seen in countries such as Germany and Costa Rica (Sagar and Chandrappa, 2023), while doing almost nothing in the absence of such alignment as is the case in developing societies, including Pakistan. That means, that beyond mere rhetoric, sound environmental lawmaking must connect global ambitions and binding national promises.

Also, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) maintains that sustainable environmental action is essential, informing all Global, regional, and national implementation of the goals and works to assist the member states in its implementation as well (*Integrate Environmental Sustainability into the Sustainable Development Goals* | UNEP - UN Environment Programme, n.d.). This integration is essential for

informing stakeholders in the preparation and implementation of multiscale actions and plans with synergies and avoidance of redundancies (Olawuyi & Bratspies, 2022).

Outside of the realm of policy rhetoric and international declarations, legal frameworks are the foundational structure for the realization of the SDGs in practice. In the area of environmental law, legal frameworks are not just statutes and regulations, but include administrative procedures, judicial mechanisms and clearly defined institutional mandates that translate principles towards sustainability into binding obligations (Sand, 2017) These frameworks ensure that environmental targets do not depend on political will or voluntary compliance. They are law, and adherence to them is a legal obligation, not good policy.

For example, SDG 13 (Climate Action) explicitly enshrines the need for resilience and climate adaptation but in order to happen, it is necessary to have laws that require assessment of climate risk in infrastructure planning and mandate carbon emissions reporting and enforcement of national climate commitments. Such mandates in countries like Germany and France are baked into environmental codes and climate action laws (Sachs et al., 2022) By contrast, as various scholars highlight, developing countries have many SDG-aligned policies, however they often lack binding legal statutes or enforcement mechanisms, which compromises their effectiveness (Olawuyi & Bratspies, 2022).

The legal frameworks also have a monitoring and accountability function. They enable stakeholders like NGOs, citizens, and media to take action against environmental harm or failure of policy through judicial review, citizen petitions, and administrative tribunals. In a way, laws enact the SDGs' principle of "Leave No One Behind" by establishing people-centred pathways to environmental justice. For example, constitutional rights to life and health have been interpreted by courts in India and Colombia to encompass the rights to a healthy environment, thus tying legal doctrine explicitly to SDGs outcomes (Kotzé & Adelman, 2023).

An appropriate legal framework also is crucial to institutional and inter-agency coordination, which helps facilitate progress on cross-cutting objectives such as SDG 6 (Water and Sanitation) and SDG 15 (Life on Land). Laws define jurisdictional powers, establish environmental protection agencies, delegate them to operate in inter-ministerial working groups which in turn facilitate coherence between national strategies and international commitments. In the absence of this legal clarity, inevitable overlaps and gaps in policy development occur—resulting in piecemeal or conflicting environmental governance.

In sum, legal frameworks are the operating system of sustainability—they are necessary because they enable implementation and protect against rollback, especially in politically unstable or resource-constrained contexts. As highlighted by (Okereke & McDaniels, 2012) Strong legal frameworks with embedded SDG alignment provide context, legitimacy, and enforceability that strengthen the continuity required for transformative change

### **Pakistan's Environmental Laws and Their Relevance to SDG Targets**

The environmental governance in Pakistan largely relies on the Pakistan Environmental Protection Act (PEPA) of 1997, that provides the legal cover for environment conservation, pollution control and sustainable development. Responsibility for PEPA specifies the role of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and requires Environmental Impact Assessments for proposed developments. In particular, under Section 12 of PEPA, no industrial or development activity may proceed without carrying out an Initial Environmental Examination (IEE) or, where applicable, a comprehensive EIA and approval by the relevant environmental authority. The act also authorizes the EPA to develop and enforce National Environmental Quality Standards (also known as National Ambient Air Quality Standards) under Section 6, and to enforce the Act itself under Sections 17 and 18 and issue regulations (*Environment Protection Act, 1997 - Khalid*

*Zafar & Associates*, n.d.). Yet, PEPA's approach has come under challenge, especially in relation to its compatibility with the SDGs.

It also has the legal basis, under PEPA, to make it illegal to dump untreated waste into the water and to control air pollution, noise and hazardous waste. It provides processes for tribunals and appeals for environmental institutions in order to provide judicial redress for non-compliance. Scholars point out, however, that enforcement has been weak because of resource limitations and political difficulties (Khalid Anser et al., 2023).

The 18th Constitutional Amendment in 2010 transferred environmental matters to the provinces resulting in enactment of provincial environmental laws. For example, Punjab, Sindh, KPK and Balochistan have formulated their respective environmental protection acts. Although intended to make environmental governance suit the local circumstances, such decentralization as a system has led to piecemeal implementation, with variations from one province to another (Ahmad Rafay Alam, 2018).

(Khalid Anser et al., 2023) emphasize that in spite of environmental legislations, reality of the practice is weak because of reason such as institutional weak, lack of technical know-how, and lack of legal instruments for compulsory compliance. They stress that the law-practice divide hamstrings NPR's capacity to achieve environmental targets set within the framework of the SDGs.

Moreover, the congruence of Pakistani environmental legislation with some of the SDG targets like SDG 13 (Climate Action) and SDG 15 (Life on Land) is found wanting. While such aspirations may be addressed in policies, without robust legislative frameworks, legal punch, and mechanisms to enforce, progress is impeded. A study by (ZEEWAQAR, 2024) highlights the political necessity of integrating the SDG indicators into national laws, to ensure that impact is monitored and accountability upheld.

Even though there is comprehensive environmental legislation in Pakistan, there are some obstacles to its effective implementation and enforcement. They are institutional, social, political, and economic problems, and collectively they impede the ability of the country to accomplish the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular those focusing on climate action and environmental protection.

### **Practical Implementation Challenges**

Practical challenges on a practical aspect, face recognition could face several challenges in its deployment in an outdoor environment: Size and Position of Faces: Given that people move around as well as the variability in their pose, size, position, etc.

### **Scarce ability and resources**

The Islamabad-based Pakistan Environmental Protection Agency and its provincial equivalents often have very limited resources. These are lack of adequate funding, antiquated devices and the lack of appropriately skilled environmental inspectors and legal practitioners. This inability has affected the capacity of the agencies to regularly test and conduct environmental checks, and to file for legal action (Pakistan Lawyer, 2024).

### **Lack of Public Awareness**

Many people are ignorant of environmental legislations, rights of citizen under them and the long term implications of environmental degradation. This ignorance further dulls public demand for accountability and blunts the watchdog function of civil society. Environmental conservation has, therefore, got to be a command and control regime subject to similar rigours as other experiences in social engineering do (Pakistani Lawyer, 2024). "Without citizenry that is strong so that they are informed of environmental issues, it is difficult to mount popular pressure to socially compel compliance.

### **Economic and Environmental Interests at Stake**

Economic development versus environmental sustainability is the continuous struggle in context of Pakistan. So many industries, especially in manufacturing and energy, place greater emphasis on economic output than on environmental norms. And regulators are under constant pressure to wink at transgressions in order to create jobs and expand industry. This inequity results in natural resources that are depleted ad integris and damages that are persistent (Wōqlaw, 2023).

### **Enforcement Gaps**

Pakistan laws particularly related to environment have a flawed enforcement system. Corruption, political meddling, and administrative sluggishness often get in the way of environmental laws being enforced. In addition, environmental tribunals and vibrant appellate functionality is not autonomous and is largely dormant leading to an accumulation of pending cases. This unstable institutional environment undermines the confidence in environmental governance and undermines proactive behaviour for compliance in business and developer organisations (Wooqlaw, 2023).

Initiatives such as the **Billion Tree Tsunami** have revealed the strong environmentalist side of Pakistan, dedicated to environmental sustainability and combatting climate eventuality. The programme was initially introduced in 2014 by the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government and later expanded nationally as the Ten Billion Tree Tsunami Programme in 2019 with the aim of restoring deforested landscapes through reforestation, ensuring enhanced biodiversity and ecosystem services, as well as greater resilience against the impacts of climate change (*Ministry of Climate Change and Environmental Coordination*, n.d.) The initiative is in line with global pledges including the Bonn Challenge and the Paris Agreement, and has received backing from bodies including the United Nations Environment Programme (*Pakistan's Ten Billion Tree Tsunami*, n.d.).

Despite its high aspirations and some early achievements, the institutional instability, political discontinuity, and legal fragility described above tends to compromise the sustainability of such large-scale environmental interventions. Because there is no legal standing, the programs can be sidelined or recast by future governments, whether or not they are obliged to continue them or give to give them the same attention (Haq et al., 2024). Adding to the challenges are the lack of adequate mechanisms for monitoring and low community participation which also undermine the sustainability of projects in the long term (*Pakistan's Largest Afforestation Program – Promoting Green, Resilient, Inclusive Recovery | IUCN*, n.d.).

For the Billion Tree Tsunami and similar conservation efforts to survive and remain transparent and accountable, they must have a sound legal framework within Pakistan's environmental policies. This might include enshrining reforestation targets, passing a constitutional budget allocation, and incorporating environmental monitoring systems in provincial and national development plans. Not only it would help in better institutional standing of legality, we would also be seen to be taking tangible steps to take environmental responsibility and accountability under SDG13 (Climate Action) and SDSG 15 (Life on Land).

So despite promulgation of environmental laws and implementation of various SDGs related initiatives, there is still a gap regarding legal congruence, institutional capabilities, and their through enforcement in the country. It is therefore essential that the country responds to these challenges appropriately in order to bring about sustainable development at the global level.

### **International Environmental Agreements and Implementation at the National Level**

Pakistan is party to a number of international environmental agreements, including the Paris Agreement, Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Yet, to translate these pledges into national legislation poses a serious challenge. (2024) notes that in Pakistan, there is only scant reference to the obligations found in these treaties in domestic laws, and even where such reference is made, enforcement is absent or remains confined to the superficial.

Siddiqui and Baloch (2024) claim that climate vulnerability of the country necessitates transition from policy pronouncements to internationally conditioned enforceable legal standards as perceived for protection of the environment. But according to the reforms proposed by Akbar (2023), provincial governments have neither the human resources nor the coordination tools that are needed to discharge those responsibilities — especially in areas such as biodiversity, air pollution, and climate adaptation.

Olawuyi et al. (2022) highlight the urgency for developing countries to shift away from regarding international agreements as aspirational and instead begin anchoring them in legally binding frameworks. The Pakistani case is generally illustrative of this larger dynamic whereby MEAs are ratified by parties without a manual in place for domestic accountability and enforcement. Biermann et al. (2022) call such outcomes a “discursive effect”—governments talk a good game on SDGs and agreements, but fail to transform rhetoric into meaningful legal action or legal accountability.

Adding to this morass is the effect of Pakistan's 18th Constitutional Amendment, which decentralized environmental governance to the provinces. This separation of powers has resulted in imbalanced and inconsistent environmental laws and regulations among regions that have hampered the consistent fulfilment of international environmental commitments. For example, even though international treaties are ratified by the central government, the absence of a coherent national legislation structure is an obstacle to the uniform enforcement of these agreements in all provinces.

Moreover, it help that there is no well-defined coordination between federal and provincial governments. As such, many provinces are unable to cope with the needed resources and institutions to put environmental policies into practice and provide for their enforcement. This division weakens Pakistan's capacity to fulfill its international environmental commitments and emphasizes the necessity for more coherence in environmental governance.

### **Judicial Construction and the Right to Environment in Pakistan**

In Pakistan, the judiciary especially the Supreme Court and the High Courts have championed the cause for broadening the horizon of environmental rights. “We have seen in many countries where the executive or the legislature are not pushing, then the courts are stepping in using the constitutional provisions as a way to enforce through constitutional mandate, environmental protection as a fundamental right. This jurisprudence has provided an important tool for adding in an accountability mechanism in environmental governance in Pakistan and indirectly to the achievement of SDG targets such as SDG 13 (Climate Action) and 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions).

The landmark (Zia v. WAPDA, P L D 1994 SC 693) case remains foundational. This is where the apex court read Article 9 of the constitution the right to life as including the right to a clean and healthy environment. In its decision, the Court opined that life is more than just survival. The calculus here includes quality of life, safety, and dignity. This case recognised protection of environment as a State responsibility and brought the concept of right-based environmental management to Pakistan (ELAW, 1994).

Building upon this precedent, the Lahore High Court in (LEGHARI V. FEDERATION OF PAKISTAN, 2015.) held that the government’s rejection to enforce its own National Climate Change Policy was a breach of rights of the people. The judgment established a Climate Change Commission for the implementation of the policy and accompanying structures, based on the state duty under domestic law and

international instruments towards climate action such as the Paris Agreement (UNEP, 2016). This case is now a world first example of direct court enforcement of climate commitments.

More recently, the (D.G. KHAN CEMENT COMPANY LTD. V. GOVERNMENT OF PUNJAB 2021) The case before the Supreme Court represented a stark turn toward climate-aware adjudication. Justice Syed Mansoor Ali Shah, referring to the intergeneration equity and the precautionary principle, specifically acknowledged the role of the judiciary in ensuring rights of coming generations. He pointed out that the interpretation of the constitution must change in accordance with environmental and climate realities (IUCN, 2021).

The Lahore High Court has also reaffirmed these principles in (Sheikh Asim Farooq v. Federation of Pakistan 2019) where it ordered the government to "take some immediate measures to stop deforestation and also to implement the Forest Act in its true sense. The court emphasized the state's duty to respect international environmental standards, and to give effect to the constitutional provision of life and dignity by way of overt environmental protection (UNEP, 2021).

In another notable case, (Ameer Bano v. S.E. Highways (PLD 1996 Lahore 592) court in Lahore held that a lack of action to address proper sanitation and refuse was a threat to life in contravention of the right to life in the constitution. With these cases, the trend is clear: Courts act where the executive does not to implement environmental protection, underscoring the judiciary's increasing significance in climate and other environmental governance.

Together, these cases show that even if statutory alignment with the SDGs is restricted, judicial interpretation of constitutional rights allows a secondary pathway to promote environmental protection. Yet, despite this forward-looking judicial position, the utilisation of the SDGs per se within legal arguments and decisions is still in its relative infancy. This opens the proverbial door to greater use of international sustainability goals in domestic adjudication through citing to the SDG templates, international treaties, and climate litigation templates utilized in other jurisdictions.

Finally, despite its record of participation in international environmental agreements, Pakistan lacks effective implementation. Solutions in this regard involve improving the capacity of institutions, intergovernmental coordination, and formulating an overall country framework in line with international environmental benchmarks.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This research is based on a qualitative-legal doctrinal type by critically considering the contribution of environmental law towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Pakistan. Legal-doctrinal space is particularly valuable for this purpose, since it enables the juxtaposition of texts, rules, and institutions against the backdrop of ideals and an ideal workplace in order to determine to what extent the content of Pakistan's environmental law is in harmony with both its constitutional commitments and its commitments to the global environmental commons.

### **Research design**

The research model is developed to explain and assess the contents, structure and performance of Pakistan's environmental legal regime which is based upon the Pakistan Environmental Protection Act, 1997 (PEPA) and after-18th amendment provincial legislations. Doctrinal research offers an orderly process of determining legal gaps, institutional shortcomings and normative discrepancies between the domestic laws of Pakistan and the SDGs especially Goals 6, 13, 14 and 15.

### **Sources and Collection of Data**

**The study draws heavily on primary legal publications, such as:**

- The Pakistan Environmental Protection Act, 1997 (PROTECTION OF ENVIRONMENT)
- Provincial statutes (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Environmental Protection Act, Punjab Environmental Protection Act), Sindh Environmental Protection Act etc.
- International Instruments to which Pakistan is a Party, including Paris Agreement, Convention on Biological Diversity and UNFCCC

Secondly, and also importantly, this work is highly dependent on secondary sources. This includes academic journal articles, reports of the UN and NGOs, and judgment reviews from Pakistani courts having cases related to environment. Academic observations, as well as comparative analyses, have also been referred to in order to situate Pakistan's legal framework within international best practices.

Online legal databases, government websites (Ministry of Climate Change, Pakistan EPA), and scholarly repositories (ScienceDirect, Springer, JSTOR) were accessed for document collection. Only proven and reliable sources, mostly published in the last 5–10 years, were taken into account to enhance its relevance and academic strength.

### **Analytical Approach**

Content analysis of national environmental laws was performed to evaluate the legal language, coverage, the enforcement mechanism. Particular focus was placed on the level to which these laws align with the normative backdrop of the SDGs. The assessment also focused on whether relevant legal provisions could be realistically implemented and whether institutional mandates were adequately funded and organized to allow for effective implementation.

And, wherever relevant, the jurisprudence was consulted to understand the Pakistani courts interpretation of environmental rights and obligations, in line with the international obligations. This doctrinal investigation was enriched with a comparative view, referring to other developing countries facing similar socio-political and environmental scenarios.

Using this methodological approach, the project plans to produce a critical and systematic account of the legal ecology that governs management of the environment in Pakistan and to suggest the reform agenda that is required to bring it in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Assessing Pakistan's Legal Structure for Environment protection**

The examination of the environmental legal framework of Pakistan with the main focus on Pakistan Environmental Protection Act 1997, it is found that the country has a framework in place but it is not fully aligned with some of the SDGs and is fragmented. PEPA puts in place processes like Environmental Impact Assessments, pollution control standards and the constitution for Environmental Protection Agencies at both federal and provincial levels. Yet the law rarely includes explicit references to SDG targets such as SDG 13 (Climate Action) or 15 (Life on Land), or a definition of quantifiable indicators tied to sustainability.

The non-binding nature of documents like the NCCP (2012) and the Framework for Implementation (2014–2030) attempt to address some of these gaps, even though they contain only policy intention. As Olawuyi et al. (2022) assert, the legal instrument must be transformative and binding rather than aspirational in order to adequately underpin global sustainability agendas.

This part finds that Pakistan's laws are essentially compliance-based rather than rights-based, preventive or climate-adaptive, preferring regulatory approvals (such as EIAs) over legal entitlements. This tends to restrict what could be the contribution of the legal system to the SDGs in a planned consistency and

### **Challenges in Enforcement and Effectiveness**

There are significant challenges of implementation, notably at the provincial level, to Pakistan's environmental laws. After the 18th Constitutional Amendment, management of environment has been devolved to the provinces however, the majority of the Provincial EPAs are understaffed, under-skilled and under-capitalized. As Khan et al.; see also id., this 'weakness in structure' results in inconsistent implementation amongst jurisdictions.

There is still poor public knowledge about activities and involving citizens, that is through instances such as public hearings in EIA processes, takes place in a cosmetic manner. Also, industrial non-compliance is rampant and there is very little legal penalty. Meanwhile, the absence of environmental courts in many parts of the world, and underutilization where they do exist, erodes already weak accountability.

Nevertheless, courts have at times stepped in to protect environmental rights. The Asghar Leghari case created an institution of Climate Change Commission while that of D.G. Khan Cement focused on the issues of inter-generational equity and the precautionary principle. But while judicial action cannot substitute for institutional rectitude, its impact is still individual, not systemic.

### **Legal Gaps Between International Commitments and Domestic Law**

Pakistan is a signatory to several international conventions including the Paris Agreement, Convention of Biological Diversity and UNFCCC. Through these agreements, we have commitments to reduce emissions, protect biodiversity and promote sustainable use of natural resources. However, relatively little of this international norms is enacted into binding domestic law.

Key international commitments of Pakistan exist only as policy statements or high-level strategies, not as statutes or enforceable rules. For instance, NDCs of Pakistan under the Paris Agreement are more of policy instruments and do not have legal backing.

If at all, courts have in few cases, referred to international principles e.g., in Shehla Zia and D.G. Khan Cement cases; However, they are not a part of the parent statute such as PEPA. This creates legal uncertainty and the development of monitoring, reporting, and accountability mechanisms in line with the SDGs.

### **CONCLUSION**

This research is focused on the contribution of Environmental Law to Sustainable Development Goals in Pakistan. While the country has sound legal basis for environmental protection, it does not have a direct correspondence to any of the identified SDG targets. Weak enforcement, insufficient capacity and the non-incorporation of international treaties in domestic law undermine the effectiveness of the legal framework in place. Judicial activism has contributed to some relief, but the prospects for environmental law in its entirety to contribute to the doctrine of sustainable development is far from evident in the absence of a systemic legal reform.

To overcome this gap, Pakistan should consider harmonising its laws to integrate SDG indicators into statutes and to enhance institutional coherence, as well as incorporate international obligations on environment in the national law. These distinctions are crucial to shifting from a policy-and not the law-based approach to sustainability. The results provide important direction to lawmakers, legal experts and 'green' entities towards direction of Pakistan law with world 2030 Agenda.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Pakistan continues to be challenged by fragmented laws, weak enforcement, and lack of synergies between its international commitments and national legal frameworks to ensure green and sustainable environment under the 2030 Agenda. The implications of this paper highlight the need for an integrated legal strategy at all levels (institutional, legislative, implementation). Although advancement may be achieved, to realize it the political will must be strong, the legislation must be clear and the authorities need to commit to a dialogue with parliamentarians, lawyers and with civil society. For this reason, it is advised to:

- Also integrate and domesticate SDG targets in terms of tangible indicators and enforcement mechanisms into the core environmental laws, including PEPA 1997.
- Create dedicated environmental courts in all provinces for better enforcement, timely dispute resolution, and to improve public confidence in environmental justice.
- Accommodate international environmental obligations (Paris Agreement, CBD) in binding national law through a special Environmental Treaty Implementation Act.
- Strengthening institutional capacity by upgrading technical training, inter-agency coordination, and resource management of provincial Environmental Protection Agencies (EPAs).

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