



Pakistan struggles to make progress on Sustainable Development Goals

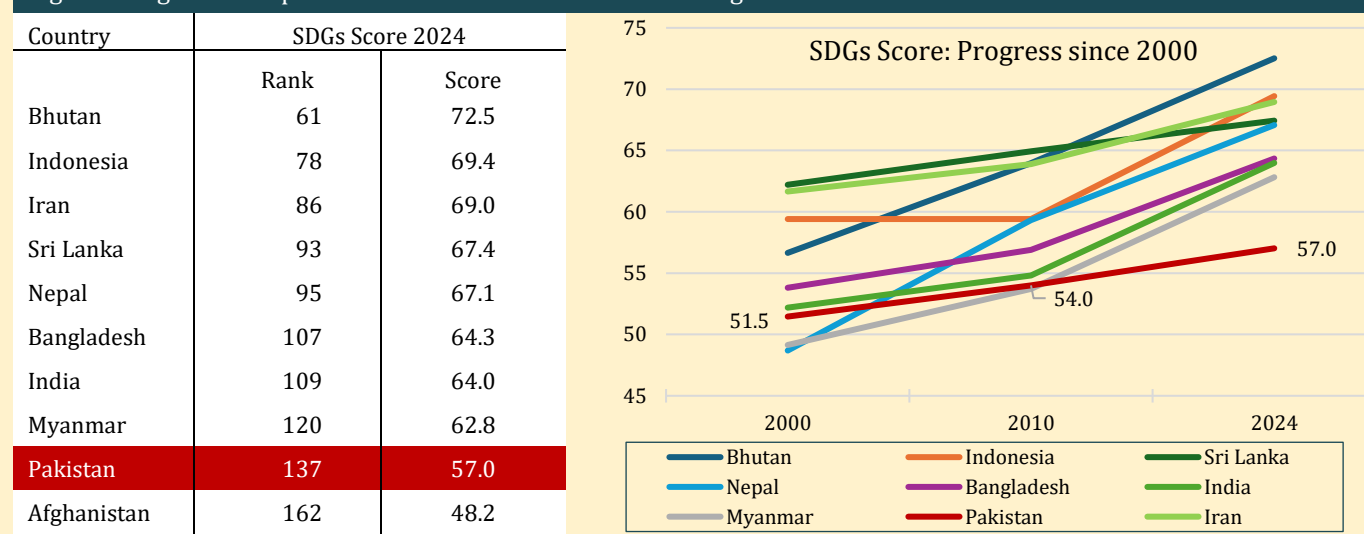
The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) represent a global agenda adopted by countries of the world in 2015 to address key development challenges and achieve sustainable development by 2030¹. Although progress varies significantly across countries and regions, the 2024 assessment suggests that the world is significantly off-track in achieving the 2030 Agenda. Out of 135 targets, only 17 percent are on course to be met by 2030. Nearly half (48 percent) are making minimal or moderate progress while alarmingly, 18 percent have stagnated, and 17 percent have regressed below the 2015 baseline levels (United Nations, 2024).

The Sustainable Development Report provides an annual assessment of progress on SDG targets in the form of the SDG Index score and ranking for all 193 UN member states². Between 2015 and 2019, there was evidence that poor countries progressed faster on the SDG Index than rich countries. However, since the pandemic, the SDG Index score of rich countries has improved slightly while that of the poorer countries has stagnated, resulting in a wider gap between the richest and poorest nations in 2023 than in 2015. As in previous years, the Nordic

countries (Finland, Sweden and Denmark) ranked at the top in the SDG Index 2024, while countries at the bottom (Yemen, Somalia, Chad, the Central African Republic and South Sudan) are those marred by military conflicts, security issues, as well as political and socio-economic instability.

Pakistan ranked 137th out of 167 countries, indicating a decline in performance compared to previous years³. The country's score of 57.0 on the SDG Index is also well below the regional average of 66.5. It is concerning that several neighbouring countries, including Bhutan (61st), Iran (86th), Sri Lanka (93rd), Nepal (95th), and Bangladesh (107th), have ranked higher and achieved better overall scores on the SDG Index (Figure 1). Among the listed countries, Pakistan's ranking is almost at the bottom, with only Afghanistan ranking lower. Moreover, the progress of Pakistan over the last 24 years has been uninspiring compared to other regional countries. From 2000 to 2024, Pakistan's SDGs score increased by only 5.6 points, while an improvement of more than 10 points has been observed in most of the countries during the same period.

Figure 1 Regional comparison of SDG overall score and ranking



PAKISTAN'S PROGRESS BY SDG TARGET

An analysis of the SDG targets for Pakistan indicates that only 20 percent are on track, while 42 percent show limited progress and 38 percent are declining (Sachs et al., 2024). This suggests that despite moderate improvements in some indicators, significant lapses and challenges hinder progress towards SDGs in Pakistan. Figure 2 summarizes the

progress made by Pakistan in selected SDG indicators since 2020. Moderate progress has been observed in only 7 of 17 goals, including health, clean energy and inequality. On the other hand, the progress is stagnant in 6 goals. The major areas of concern are food security, education, sustainable cities and communities, and peace, justice and strong institutions. The SDG score in all these areas has declined.

Figure 2: Pakistan's performance by SDG targets

SDG Indicator	2020	2024
SDG 1: No Poverty: Poverty headcount at \$2.15/day (2017 PPP, %)	5.77	3.8
SDG 2: Zero Hunger: Prevalence of undernourishment (%)	16.0	18.5
SDG 3: Good Health & Wellbeing		
Maternal mortality ratio (per 100,000 live births)	140	154.20
Mortality rate under 5 years (per 1,000 live births)	69.3	60.96
SDG 4: Quality Education: Literacy rate (% of population aged 15-24 years)	74.5	72.7
SDG 5: Gender Equality		
Demand for family planning satisfied by modern methods (% of females aged 15-49 years)	48.5	48.50
Ratio of female-to-male labour force participation rate (%)	29.6	30.19
SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation		
Population using at least basic drinking water services (%)	91.5	90.63
Population using at least basic sanitation services (%)	59.9	70.53
SDG 7: Affordable and Clean Energy: Population with access to electricity (%)	70.8	94.92
SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth		
Adjusted GDP growth (%)	-1.8	-2.7
Unemployment rate (% of total labour force aged 15+ years)	4.5	5.80
SDG 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure: Population using the internet (%)	15.5	32.95
SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities: Gini coefficient	43.0	29.6
SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities		
Access to improved water source, piped (% urban population)	51.3	39.01
Population with access to public transport in cities (%)	NA	41.0
SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production: Municipal solid waste (kg/capita/per day)	1.1	0.4
SDG 13: Climate Action: CO ₂ emissions from fossil fuel combustion and cement production/capita	0.9	0.86
SDG 14: Life Below Water		
Protecting areas in marine sites important to biodiversity (%)	39.3	14.6
Ocean Health Index: Clean Waters score (worse 0 – 100 best)	45.5	44.4
SDG 15: Life On Land: Protecting key areas in terrestrial sites important to biodiversity (%)	36.6	34.8
SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions		
Homicides (per 100,000 population)	4.2	4.21
Corruption Perceptions Index (worst 0 – 100 best)	32	29.0
Access to and affordability of justice (worst 0 – 1 best)	NA	0.39
SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals		
Government spending on health and education (% of GDP)	3.8	2.8

Moderate improvement

Score stagnating, challenges remain

Score decreasing, major challenges remain

Source: Sustainable Development Report 2020 and 2024.

SDG 1: Poverty incidence, as measured by the percentage of population living below the poverty threshold of \$2.15 per day, shows moderate improvement but current efforts are inadequate to achieve the long-term SDG goal.

SDG 2: Since 2017, undernourishment has been on the rise, along with stunting and wasting in children under 5 years of age, posing significant health challenges. Obesity is another fast-growing health concern for Pakistan where one-fourth of the adult population is classified as obese in 2024 as compared to just 6 percent in 2000. The prevalence and growth of obesity in Pakistan is the highest in the region.

SDG 3: The overall score is stagnating or increasing at less than 50 percent of the required rate to achieve the goal. While maternal mortality has decreased since 2000, more efforts are needed to reach the target. Despite moderate improvements, significant challenges remain in addressing neonatal mortality (38.76 per 1,000 live births) and the under-5 mortality rate (60.96 per 1,000 live births), which is the highest in the region for Pakistan. In comparison, Afghanistan has a neonatal mortality rate of 35.49, and other countries have rates below 20. Life expectancy has stagnated at around 66 years since 2016 underscoring need for improvements in the health delivery systems. In comparison, life expectancy at birth in neighbouring countries is highest in Sri Lanka at 76 years and in Bangladesh at 72 years.

SDG 4: Greater efforts are required to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all. Significant challenges exist in achieving net primary enrollment, and more attention is needed to improve the lower secondary completion rate. Additionally, Pakistan has the lowest participation rate in pre-primary organized learning for children aged 4-6 years, with a sharp decline since 2016. The literacy rate is the lowest in the region after Afghanistan, while countries like Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and Myanmar have higher literacy rates.

SDG 5: Pakistan performs relatively poorly in meeting the demand for family planning compared to other countries in the region. Since 2020, the female-to-male labour force participation rate has shown signs of slowing down. Both Pakistan and India lag behind countries like Bhutan, Indonesia, and Myanmar in terms of female labour force participation. Similarly, women's participation in national politics, as indicated by the number of seats in the national assembly, has also stagnated.

SDG 6: Access to drinking water and basic sanitation services steadily improved but has now stagnated, indicating that more efforts are needed to achieve the target.

SDG 7: Greater efforts are required to ensure access to affordable, reliable, and sustainable energy for all people. While Pakistan is on track to meet its goal for electricity access, only half of the population has access to clean cooking fuels, lagging behind India, Bhutan, and Indonesia in this regard. Additionally, more needs to be done to increase the share of renewable energy in total energy consumption. Sri Lanka leads the region in renewable energy consumption.

SDG 8: Pakistan faces numerous challenges in promoting sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth and gainful employment for those seeking work. Unemployment has shown signs of worsening since 2022. Additionally, Pakistan's performance is concerning in other indicators, such as the measure of victims of modern slavery and the poor enforcement of fundamental labour rights. Financial inclusion is also comparatively lower, with only 21 percent of the population aged 15 and above having an account with a bank or financial institution. In contrast, Sri Lanka, India, Nepal, and Bangladesh perform better in these areas.

SDG 9: There is an urgent need to develop resilient and modern infrastructure to support industrial growth and innovation. While there have been moderate improvements in access to the internet and mobile broadband subscriptions since 2014-2015, internet penetration remains low compared to regional neighbours. Moreover, insufficient investment in research and development indicates a lack of readiness to promote innovation that could stimulate growth.

SDG 10: There are significant challenges in reducing income inequalities.

SDG 11: Insufficient efforts have been made to ensure that urban living conditions are safe, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable. Nearly 56 percent of the urban population resides in slums, facing limited access to drinking water and sanitation services, insecure tenure, and poor housing durability against weather and climate changes. The proportion of slum-dwellers in Pakistan's urban areas is higher than in most other countries in the region. Access to improved drinking water (piped on premises) has been declining since 2000, indicating that most people are consuming contaminated or water not fit for consumption.

Similarly, access to convenient public transport in cities is poor compared to regional peers.

SDG 12: Pakistan has successfully reduced per capita daily municipal waste to the targeted level; however, this achievement does not include agricultural and industrial waste. Additionally, emissions of air pollution and reactive nitrogen from the production of goods and services need to be controlled. Therefore, greater efforts are required to ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns to safeguard human health and the environment.

SDG 13: Actions are needed to combat climate change and its adverse impacts on human lives and livelihoods by controlling GHG emissions, as well as emissions from the combustion and oxidation of fossil fuels and cement production. While Pakistan's carbon emissions from fossil fuel combustion are lower than those of India and Indonesia, further reductions are necessary to minimize the carbon footprint. Embracing green energy can significantly reduce carbon emissions and pave the way for a sustainable future.

SDG 14: There are significant challenges in conserving and sustainably using oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development. While there have been moderate improvements in some areas, such as fishing practices, more efforts are needed to address these challenges comprehensively.

SDG 15: There are major challenges to protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, manage forests and combat desertification, halt and reverse degradation and biodiversity loss.

SDG 16: Scores for perceived public sector corruption and press freedoms have worsened, and there are major obstacles in public access to and affordability of justice, as well as the safety of property rights from unlawful expropriations. The intentional homicide rate is the highest in Pakistan in the region, indicating a failure to effectively control violent and unlawful crimes. Additionally, the percentage of children (aged 5-17 years) involved in child labour is high.

SDG 17: Public expenditure on health and education as a percentage of GDP has been declining since 2015, and at the current pace, Pakistan is unlikely to reach the long-term target of 15 percent. However, there have been moderate improvements in the Statistical Performance Index, indicating progress in the national statistical systems.

CONCLUSION

In summary, Pakistan is very unlikely to achieve SDGs by 2030. While moderate progress is observed in certain areas, significant challenges and setbacks remain. The country's overall performance lags behind regional peers, with many SDG targets showing limited progress or even decline, highlighting the need for concerted efforts and targeted interventions to address issues such as food security, education, health, sustainable cities, and peace and justice. To achieve the SDGs, Pakistan must prioritize policies and initiatives that address these critical areas, strengthen institutional frameworks, and foster inclusive and sustainable development. Collaboration with regional and international partners, along with a commitment to transparent governance and effective resource allocation, will be essential in overcoming the obstacles and advancing towards the SDGs.

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¹ Hence also known as 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

² The SDG Index score is presented on a scale of 0 to 100. The difference between 100 and a country's SDG Index score is the gap, in percentage points, that is required to reach optimum SDG performance.

³ Pakistan ranked 128th in 2023 and 125th in 2022.