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Issue Brief

Pakistan: The road towards achieving the SDGs

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April 27, 2016

Seventeen goals. One Hundred and sixty nine indicators. A population of over seven billion people. One deadline. That in summary are the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Also known as the Global Goals, this idea was conceived in September 2015, as a successor to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)- eight anti-poverty targets that the world committed to achieve by 2015. The MDGs drove progress in several important areas: income poverty, access to improved sources of water, primary school enrolment and child mortality, and showed the value of a unifying agenda underpinned by goals and targets. Despite this success, poverty has not been eliminated. The mission remains incomplete and millions of people are still suffering from abject poverty. The new Global Goals, and the broader sustainability agenda, go much further than the MDGs, addressing the root causes of poverty and the universal need for development that works for all people. The year 2030 has been set as the target date.

The SDGs cover a broad range of sustainable development issues, including ending poverty and hunger, improving health and education, making cities more sustainable, combating climate change, and protecting oceans and forests. They are a step forward. If development is to be inclusive and just, and the resolve of the international community is to leave no one behind by 2030, it must be rooted strongly in human rights. Seven SDG targets explicitly refer to persons with disabilities; an additional six targets refer to people in vulnerable situations, while seven targets are universal and two refer to non-discrimination. Inequality is not just measured in terms of growth but in terms of making sure the most excluded people can exercise their human rights. The SDGs cover this completely.

However, the SDGs have also aroused criticism. Academics have stated that in seeking high levels of global GDP growth, the SDGs will undermine ecological objectives. It has further been pointed out that these goals ignore local context and promote a 'one policy for all' notion. The *Economist* called the 169 proposed targets "sprawling and misconceived," "unfeasibly expensive" at \$2–3 trillion per year, and so unlikely to be realised that they amount to "worse than useless"—"a betrayal of the world's poorest people".

In Pakistan, the SDGs have received mixed reviews. Skeptics argue that if the country could not achieve the MDGs with its 40 indicators, realising the SDGs with their 169 indicators is not realistic either. Instead, developing countries should identify goals based on their resources and try to achieve them. Furthermore, financing these seventeen goals is a major issue for developing countries like Pakistan. Lack of coordination, disjunction between different departments and lack of capacity at state institutions are serious impediments in advancing the SDGs.

But there are those who are optimistic that the SDGs are achievable. Federal Minister for Planning, Development and Reforms, Ahsan Iqbal, has stated that “Pakistan has accorded the highest priority to achieving the goals which will enable us to join the league of upper middle class countries by 2030”. The government’s Vision 2025, which is premised on seven pillars has identified the kind of enabling environment that is essential for the nation to flourish economically, socially, politically and culturally. It has taken into account expected changes and trends in the world of tomorrow. It will be implemented in sync with the SDGs.

Way Forward

‘Vision-2025’ is a comprehensive long-term strategy for achieving inclusive growth and sustainable development. Its seven pillars are as follows; put people first by developing human and social capital; achieve sustained, indigenous and inclusive growth; establish a responsive, inclusive and transparent system of governance; sufficient energy, water and food security to fuel sustainable economic growth; private sector-led growth and entrepreneurship; develop a competitive knowledge economy through value addition and modernise the transportation infrastructure and promote greater regional connectivity.

Vision 2025 seeks to bring human resource development to the top of the national agenda. This requires capitalising upon existing social capital, strengthening it and improving the human skill base of the population to optimally contribute to and effectively benefit from economic growth. Pakistan has to make a leap forward in areas like education, health and social development to catch up with other emerging economies. Vision 2025 presents a comprehensive approach to addressing human and social development gaps with an emphasis on developing human and social capital to take full advantage of Pakistan’s youth bulge. In addition, the Vision recognises the rising power of a socially aware population and seeks to move towards a knowledge-based society with harmony, ethics and values.

Mr. Ahsan Iqbal, has stated that the pillars of this project are in complete harmony with the SDGs and emphasised that the project will enable the government to strengthen the data collection process and increase the coverage of household data at the district level. This will further lead to proper monitoring of poverty and vulnerability of the populations in all dimensions. Four key aspects that will enable the successful execution of this strategic undertaking include; sustained executive commitment & support, resources, macroeconomic stability, private sector engagement, and radical improvement in productivity.

Contrary to popular belief, achieving the SDGs is not an impossible feat. A human-centered rights-based approach across all sustainable development goals will not only help end poverty but simultaneously bring improvements in the quality of life, the environment and governance for everyone.

The government has taken many measures to advance the process; these include Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund (PPAF) - an apex governmental non-profit organisation for community-driven development; a SDGs Monitoring and Coordination Unit in coordination with UNDP; the Prime Minister's Youth programme- which includes schemes such as business loan scheme, interest-free loan scheme, skill development programme and free laptop scheme; an agriculture package aimed at helping small and medium farmers through provision of direct cash support, soft loans and introducing new technologies in the sector and a national campaign for education in partnership with the provinces to enrol all out of school children into schools to achieve universal primary enrolment by 2018.

Presently, Pakistan is facing security challenges. These can be tackled by following China's example of focusing on cooperation rather than conflict. In this regard, friendly ties with countries, especially neighbouring ones plays a major role.

What the country needs is critical evaluation. Scholars and academics need to be brought to the table. The government, civil society, think tanks and development partners in Pakistan must join hands in strengthening this post-2015 development discourse by aiding parliamentarians in understanding the SDGs. Since the SDGs are more universal and comprehensive in approach, localised home grown solutions need to be developed. Creation of indigenous development models will lead to self-reliance.

Sustainability means using fewer natural resources to produce food and reducing food waste and loss. The government needs to create better opportunities for farmers and focus on the needs of undernourished groups. There has to innovation in terms of delivery models and technology to bring the goal of healthy living for all within sight.

Tremendous strides have been made in raising awareness of the gender gap. However, there is still a long way to go. Workplaces, governments, healthcare and education systems must be designed to provide a level playing field.

All in all, Pakistan needs new policy frameworks and solutions that help provide the economy every chance to achieve inclusive growth. The roles and responsibilities of each economic agent needs to be

known. In order to realise the SDGs effectively, well defined coordination mechanisms among the four provinces, and special areas such as FATA, Gilgat-Batistan (GB) and Azad Jammu Kashmir (AJK) are needed. The federation will be strengthened by promoting inter-provincial and federal-provincial communication and co-ordination so that national and provincial priorities are aligned, and the federal and provincial governments work together to advance the sustainable development agenda. In short, everyone needs to be on board. The vision of achieving these goals needs to be shared collectively. This will enable the process to move forward quickly towards achieving sustainable development and hence a brighter future for all of Pakistan.