

**Country:** Pakistan

**IPU geopolitical group:** Asia-Pacific Group

### **National Assembly of Pakistan**

**Focus area:** improving access to essential healthcare services for vulnerable and marginalized communities at risk of being left further behind.

### **Key highlights (messages)**

- Parliaments can enhance institutional dialogue with government counterparts and relevant stakeholders so as to integrate the principle of “leave no one behind” in national hearings and law-making deliberations.
- Parliaments can deploy additional support and resources to reach the most marginalized and vulnerable groups by exploring opportunities for multistakeholder partnerships.
- Integrating the SDGs into relevant parliamentary procedures can foster mutual learning and knowledge exchange among MPs and between parliamentary committees.

### **Context**

In 2016, the National Assembly of Pakistan unanimously adopted a resolution on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development explicitly recognizing the direct applicability of the SDGs to the national development framework. After the adoption of the resolution, the National Assembly of Pakistan established at Parliament House a secretariat for a parliamentary taskforce on the SDGs. The taskforce comprises more than 60 cross-party members of the National Assembly with a Convener as its head. The inclusion of all political parties in the SDG taskforce was instrumental in securing broad-based parliamentary ownership in the process of enacting and influencing the enabling environment for SDG implementation. The SDG taskforce convenes regularly during National Assembly sessions. Its agendas focus on relevant SDG issues and the government’s corresponding measures. In addition, knowledge-sharing, peer-learning and awareness-raising consultations with stakeholders and thinktanks are held regularly for SDG taskforce members and secretariat staff.

The SDGs Secretariat provides technical assistance and coordination support to parliamentary taskforce members through targeted research, data collection, information-sharing, communication, advocacy and media outreach about all SDGs. These activities support a more informed approach towards SDG policy-making and evidence-based lawmaking. The taskforce plays an important role in promoting the legislative reform agenda and promulgating new legislative initiatives. Its work facilitates SDG implementation, and creates space for dialogue and coordinated SDG work among members, various party groups and the parliament in general.

The taskforce has already established several parliamentary subgroups on various SDGs. It aims to form subgroups on all SDGs with the support of the SDGs Secretariat. Through these working groups, the

Secretariat has also been engaging different stakeholders to elaborate a well-structured framework and operational workplans on key SDG priority areas for Pakistan, such as health, education, climate change, human rights and child immunization. Furthermore, provincial parliamentary SDG taskforces were created to enable proper SDG localization that reflects specific development realities on the ground, and directly engages with different vulnerable and marginalized groups at subnational level. The national and provincial parliamentary taskforces jointly oversee national and subnational progress towards achieving the SDGs, including by ensuring that parliamentary work focuses sufficiently on the Goals.

### **SDG integration into parliament's core functions**

Following the adoption of the SDGs, a consultative process identified the most pressing priority areas. These were integrated into national policies and strategies, including the Five-Year Plan, provincial strategies and Pakistan's long-term vision document. The priority areas were also aligned with the National Assembly's medium-term Strategic Plan (2014–2018). At a more operational level, the SDGs Secretariat has elaborated key performance indicators in its annual workplan that ensure regular assessment and progress tracking for relevant SDG commitments.

The national and provincial SDG taskforces are responsible for examining whether and how existing or new draft laws incorporate relevant SDG targets, and if necessary, for making specific inquiries into any gaps. In cooperation with line ministries, agencies and other stakeholders, the SDG taskforce members have thus far supported the formulation and adoption of multiple legislative initiatives that provide a solid basis for SDG implementation, including on issues such as: decent work opportunities for the youth of Pakistan, compulsory immunization, nutrition, prevention of child marriage, maternity and paternity leave, gender equality, anti-harassment and domestic violence.

Each ministry prepares its budgetary proposals for the Public Sector Development Program and submits them to the relevant parliamentary standing committees. The committees can then make specific SDG impact assessments with the technical support of the SDGs Secretariat. If necessary, the committees can return budget proposals to the ministry responsible. Members of parliament often request the floor and comment on budgetary issues related to high-priority SDGs such as those on health, education, access to safe drinking water and sanitation, and the inclusion of vulnerable groups.

The thematic standing committees often organize public hearings and receive public petitions on SDG-related topics. This can result in concrete legislative initiatives, such as a recently adopted law establishing employment quotas for people with disabilities.

### **Innovative approaches to enable progress towards:**

#### **(i) Achieving universal health coverage for all, and improving access to quality healthcare (including to sexual and reproductive health services) for vulnerable and marginalized populations:**

Pakistan has set clear targets and timelines to achieve SDG 3. Recent legislative initiatives have aimed to provide accessible and affordable healthcare coverage to the entire population, and improve the

effectiveness of the monitoring system for healthcare policies. These activities have been supported by an increase in the 2020–2021 federal budget allocation for healthcare, although health expenditure as a percentage of total budget distribution still represents a challenging proportion. In 2018, Parliament passed the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act. It categorically provides protection to transgender people as a specific vulnerable group that is at risk of being left further behind. The Act advanced their inclusion and equitable treatment, and promoted socioeconomic opportunities for their participation in the public sphere. It has been considered one of the most progressive legal instruments in the world, as it provides for targeted measures to promote and protect the rights of transgender people, including legal identity registration to access essential healthcare services and psychosocial support.

#### **(ii) Integrating disaster risk reduction and climate change measures into national laws, policies and strategies:**

Due to its geographical context, Pakistan is extremely vulnerable to climate change and extreme weather events. It has therefore made available substantial funding for climate change action. By integrating relevant climate change enablers into national policies and planning frameworks, the government has focused strongly on reducing greenhouse gas emissions and increasing by up to 30 per cent the renewable energy share of the country's total energy mix. Moreover, Parliament has passed the National Energy Efficiency and Conservation Act 2016 and the Pakistan Climate Change Act 2017. The 2017 Act established the inter-institutional Pakistan Climate Change Council, headed by the Prime Minister. A draft bill promoting the use of renewable energy is also under deliberation. Additional funding has been secured for different ongoing and new climate change projects, with the objective of enhancing national resilience capacities against environmental degradation. These legal and budgetary initiatives aim to further regulate and integrate the related objectives of Pakistan's nationally determined contributions.

#### **Supplementary activities**

Members of the National Assembly are included in the National Advisory Committee on the SDGs. They participate in the strategic coordination and institutional arrangements that guide the overall SDG implementation and review processes in Pakistan. Members of the SDG taskforce actively engaged during the preparation of the 2019 Voluntary National Review and co-presented at the High-Level Political Forum in New York. Targeted support has also been provided to different progress-monitoring activities, capacity-building measures and SDG localization efforts (in coordination with provincial SDG taskforces).

In close cooperation with relevant government agencies and ministries, the SDGs Secretariat regularly organizes consultations and meetings with different constituency groups, such as the Women's Parliamentary Caucus and other stakeholders. This consultative work is designed to gather feedback and input on the development of an SDG implementation roadmap. Reports from such work are brought to the attention of the Speaker, and individual members present findings during plenaries. Any concrete recommendations are shared with the relevant standing committee chair. The parliamentary project management office ensures regular monitoring and follow-up on these commitments.

A particular priority for the SDGs Secretariat has been to increase accountability and oversight mechanisms, and thereby guarantee that the 2030 Agenda is effective in achieving its expected outcomes for society at large. As a result, a number of partnerships with civil society organizations and development bodies have been facilitated, including a recent project with the United Nations Development Programme. The project jointly supported the development of district-wise SDG scorecards to ensure that harmonized SDG data collection and tracking methodology are used at all levels. The scorecards include a number of results-based indicators that allow MPs to monitor the performance of public policies in different districts. Based on analysis of evidence from the scorecards, MPs can advocate for particular policy uptakes or increased funding.

Currently, the SDGs Secretariat and the Ministry of Interprovincial Coordination are working to produce Pakistan's first gender-sensitive free trade agreement template and gender-sensitive budget template. In collaboration with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the National Assembly of Pakistan hosted a round-table session on integrating the SDGs into the workflow of the parliamentary standing committees, and discussed the effect of the SDG-related budgetary analysis on the expenditures allocated to human development programmes.

The Pakistan Institute of Parliamentary Services (PIPS) is an autonomous department of the National Assembly that was initially established to support the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals. PIPS has organized a series of thematic round tables, workshops and conferences on the SDGs, with participation from members of parliament, ministry officials, civil society representatives and other stakeholders. These collaborative arrangements were complemented by good quality research and technical advice from PIPS, and were designed to facilitate a consensus on Pakistan's national priorities and strategic narrative for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. They resulted in the drafting of specific SDG-related legislative proposals, and raised MPs' awareness of particular SDG issues.

Given the multitude of challenges that countries face from the COVID-19 pandemic, the National Assembly organized a peer-learning panel discussion to exchange experiences on how COVID-19 had affected SDG implementation in the region. The discussion was attended by members of parliament from Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

The *Green Parliament of Pakistan* has been another major SDG visibility initiative of the National Assembly. It aims to turn the parliament into a sustainable and self-sufficient solar-powered institutional building that other domestic and international government institutions can use as an example for replication.

### **Challenges and lessons learnt**

A key challenge is how to maximize the interconnection between the language and terminology of development actors and that of political party representatives. The SDGs must be adapted culturally and translated into national priorities, which requires the active engagement of parliamentarians and staff members. Parliamentarians can play a leading role in facilitating this process and ensuring that progress

towards the SDGs reflects the diverse needs and priorities of their constituents. It is also important not to overexcite people about goals that cannot realistically be achieved in the short-term or that need to be addressed with context-specific strategies. Instead, public engagement should be built up on a regular basis so that people can clearly understand the SDGs.

### **Sources and links**

National Assembly of Pakistan: <http://na.gov.pk/en/index.php>

The Pakistan Institute of Parliamentary Services (PIPS): <https://www.pips.gov.pk/index.php?s=SDG>

Women's Parliamentary Caucus: <https://wpc.org.pk/>

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