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# Invisible Chains: How Social Evils are Undermining Pakistan's Sustainable Future

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## ABSTRACT

Pakistan's commitment to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has not translated into meaningful progress. By 2025, the country ranked 140th out of 166 nations, revealing a deep disconnect between policy aspirations and on-ground realities. This article argues that the primary obstacles are not merely resource shortages or technical gaps, but a set of deeply entrenched social evils—corruption, institutional weakness, human capital crisis, social fragmentation, extremism, sectarianism, economic stagnation, and environmental degradation. These problems do not operate in isolation; rather, they function as interconnected "invisible chains" that bind Pakistan to a low-growth, high-instability equilibrium. Drawing on recent empirical studies and institutional analyses, this article examines how each of these evils reinforces the others, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of underdevelopment. It concludes by offering an integrated reform agenda focused on governance restructuring, human capital investment, social cohesion, and environmental management as pathways to break these chains.



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## 1. Introduction

In 2015, the United Nations introduced the Agenda for Sustainable Development, presenting 17 goals designed to reduce poverty and hunger, provide better-quality health and education, and ensure peace and prosperity across the globe. Pakistan accepted this agenda and declared it a national priority. Yet by 2025, Pakistan ranked 140th out of 166 countries—a disappointing position that reflects more than just a lack of financial resources or technical expertise. The real problem lies deeper. A wide range of social evils, including corruption, institutional weakness, and ineffective governance, have created barriers that slow economic growth and weaken the very human capital the country needs to move forward.

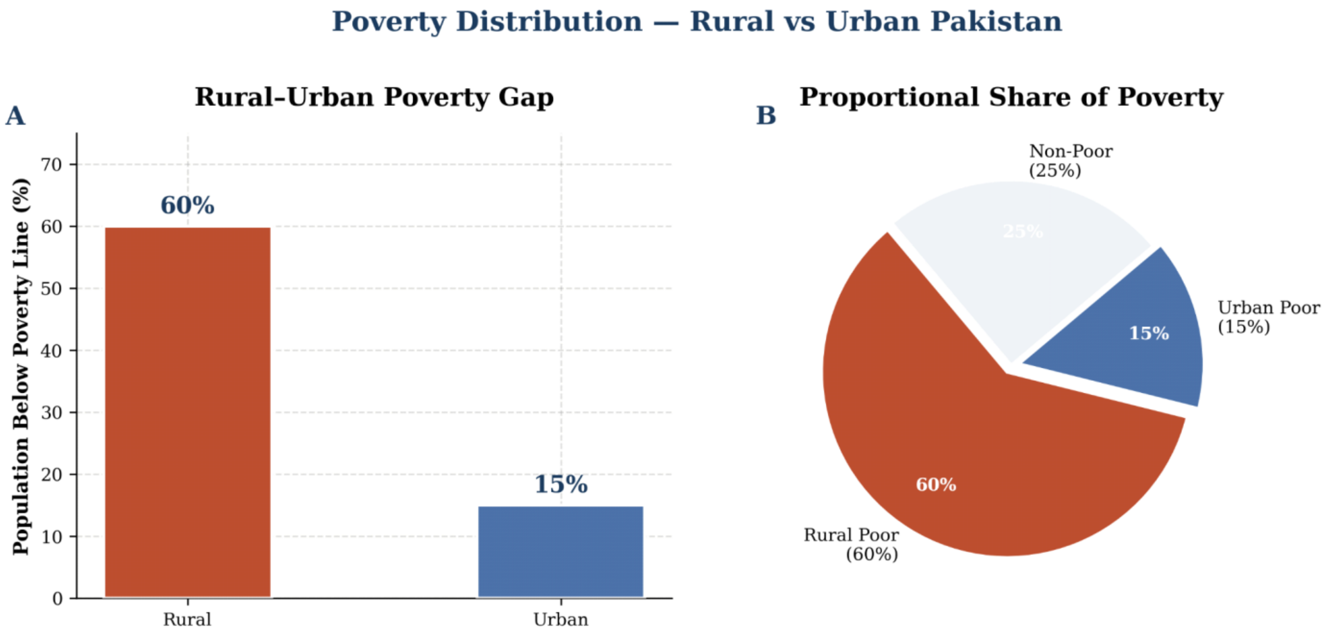
Corruption and weak institutions do not act alone. They are joined by social discrimination, extremism, poverty, and economic inequality, all of which harm political stability and erode social solidarity. Gender inequality and poor education further limit the population's ability to contribute meaningfully to national development. Meanwhile, environmental disorders—air pollution, deforestation, soil erosion, and plastic waste—exacerbate every other problem, putting already scarce resources at even greater risk.

The economic consequences of these interconnected problems are clearly visible. Foreign direct investment fluctuated wildly in recent years: from 2.06 billion dollars in 2020, it rose slightly to 2.15 billion dollars in 2021, then collapsed to 1.46 billion dollars in 2022—a decline of approximately 32 percent. Internal factors such as bureaucratic inefficiency, inadequate support for small and medium enterprises, labor market rigidity, widespread tax evasion, and deep regional inequalities make it extremely difficult for the economy to gain any traction. Add to this the persistent threats of political instability, terrorism, and weak governance, and it becomes clear why investors remain hesitant and economic activities remain disrupted.

Social development has suffered just as badly. Pakistan continues to struggle with high rates of maternal and newborn deaths, stubbornly low literacy, and a steady decline in the quality of education. Poverty remains overwhelmingly a rural phenomenon, affecting 60 percent of the rural population, while in urban areas the rate stands at only 15 percent. Environmental challenges are equally dire. In the Environmental Performance Index, Pakistan ranks 176th out of 180 countries, facing severe problems that range from deadly air pollution to deforestation, soil erosion, and plastic waste choking both land and water.

Taken together, these interconnected social issues—corruption, weak institutions, a human capital crisis, social fragmentation, extremism, economic slowdown, and environmental degradation—form what this article calls "invisible chains." They are invisible because they are often normalized, accepted as just the way things are. But they are chains nonetheless, binding Pakistan to a future of unmet potential. Tackling these challenges is not optional. It is essential if the country is ever to achieve a stable, prosperous, and sustainable future.

**Figure 1:** *Rural-Urban Poverty Disparities and Proportional Share of Poverty in Pakistan.*




Author's own construction of the figure by utilizing data derived from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) Report and the Sustainable Development Report (2025).

## 2. Corruption and Institutional Weakness

Sustainable development in Pakistan is fundamentally hindered by two closely related problems: corruption and a lack of solid institutional foundations. Together, they create "invisible chains" that contribute to governance failures across the economy, society, environment, and government. Various studies show that corruption in Pakistan takes many forms—bribery, misuse of authority, tax fraud, nepotism, and political meddling in major institutions. Transparency International's 2022 Corruption Index ranks Pakistan 140th out of 180 countries, a clear signal that poor governance will continue to create problems for years to come.

Corruption is present in many government departments, but it is most visible and damaging in the police, land revenue, and income tax departments. In these three areas, petty corruption has become an everyday part of administrative life, woven into the very fabric of routine processes. Yet there is an important exception that proves the rule. The motorway police have shown that good institutional structures, effective accountability, and properly designed incentives can dramatically reduce corruption. This comparison suggests that corruption is determined less by some vague notion of societal culture and more by how institutions are designed and how well they comply with basic governance requirements.

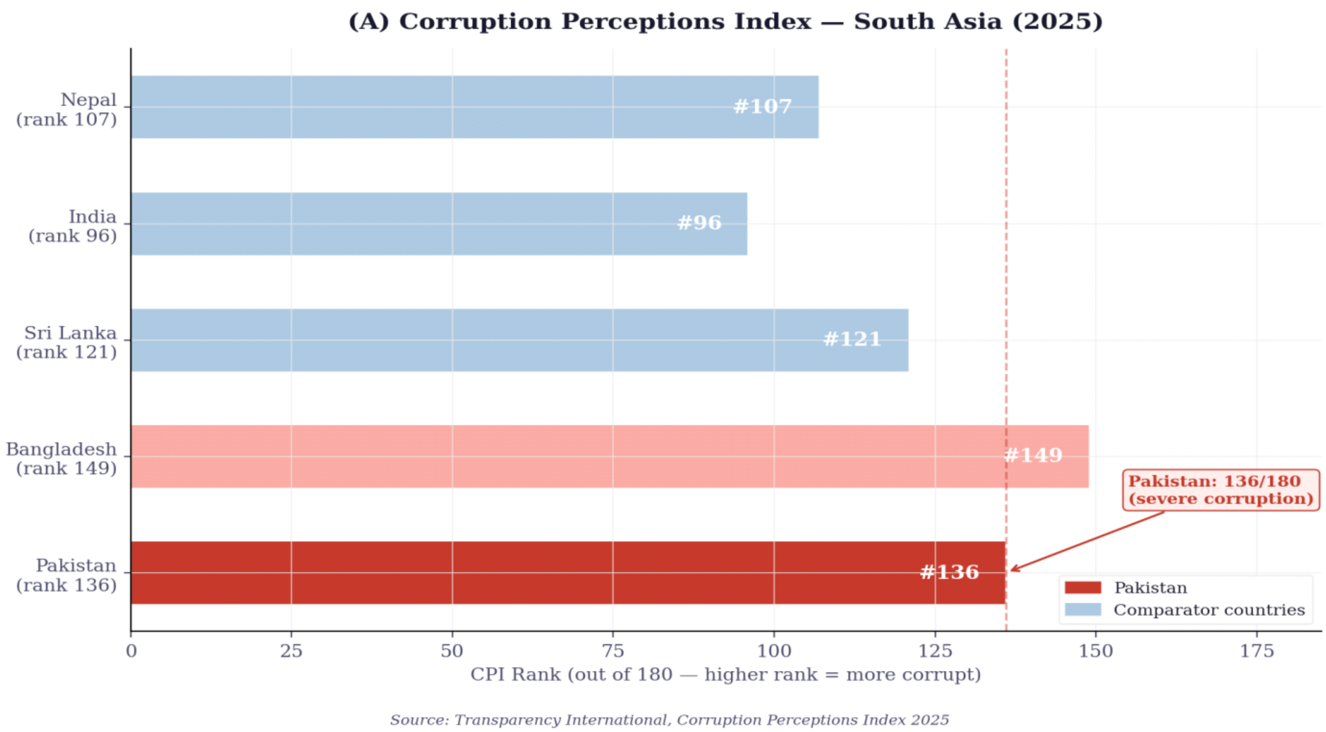
Institutional weaknesses in Pakistan's governance system compound these problems at every turn. Weak judicial autonomy, ineffective bureaucracy, political intervention, and ineffective rules and regulations all work together to weaken accountability and transparency. The numbers are startling: reports indicate that nearly 96 percent of judicial personnel have experienced some form of corruption, highlighting major weaknesses in the legal and judicial system. The bureaucracy typically operates within an outdated administrative system, with little supervision and too much discretionary power—conditions that create endless opportunities for corruption.

The financial sector offers yet another example of institutional weakness. Tax evasion is rampant, and the tax-to-GDP ratio remains extremely low by global standards. As a result, the government has far fewer resources to invest in public services and development plans. Service delivery becomes ineffective, resources are misallocated, and investor confidence declines. The pace of economic growth slows, making it difficult for Pakistan to achieve long-term sustainable development.

What makes these problems particularly stubborn is the deep, self-reinforcing relationship between corruption and institutional weakness. When government employees do not receive proper financial incentives, when systems of oversight and accountability do not exist, and when the rule of law is not properly enforced, an environment is created that actively promotes corruption. That corruption then further weakens the very institutions that might have corrected it, leading to more corruption, more weakness, and so on. The economic consequences are severe: less foreign investment, a growing informal economy, and persistent instability. The social consequences are equally damaging: public services suffer, socio-economic disparities widen, and basic services like education and health deteriorate.

Overall, the evidence shows that corruption and institutional weakness are not just governance problems—they are systemic obstacles that fundamentally limit Pakistan's progress toward sustainable development. Breaking these invisible chains requires comprehensive institutional reforms: strengthening judicial independence, improving incentives in the government sector, making transparency and accountability systems actually work, and ensuring that the rule of law means something in practice.

**Figure 2:** *Comparison of Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) Rankings among Selected South Asian Countries (2025)*




**Source:** *Author's own construction of the figure by utilizing data derived from Corruption Perceptions Index 2025. Berlin, Germany: Transparency International.*

## 3. Human Capital Crisis

Pakistan's human capital crisis represents one of the most serious barriers to sustainable development, though it rarely receives the attention it deserves. Weak educational systems, inadequate healthcare investment, persistent gender inequality, and the continuous loss of skilled professionals have significantly limited the country's capacity to build a productive and innovative workforce. The numbers paint a grim picture. Literacy rates remain below 50 percent, and approximately 22.8 percent of children remain out of school. Between 30 and 40 percent of teachers lack formal professional training, which inevitably leads to poor learning outcomes and declining educational quality. These challenges are worsened by limited public spending on education, which remains below 3 percent of GDP—far below the 4 to 6 percent recommended by UNESCO. Such structural weaknesses prevent the education system from producing the skilled professionals that modern labor markets desperately need.

Healthcare deficiencies deepen the human capital crisis even further. Public spending on healthcare remains below 1.2 percent of GDP, resulting in inadequate medical infrastructure, chronic shortages of trained healthcare workers, and predictably poor health outcomes. Environmental pollution, high disease prevalence, and limited access to medical services all contribute to high mortality rates and declining workforce productivity. When people are sick or malnourished, they simply cannot participate effectively in economic activities, and the already fragile public institutions come under even greater pressure.

Gender inequality plays a significant role in limiting the effective utilization of whatever human capital Pakistan does manage to develop. Women continue to face social and cultural barriers that restrict their access to education and economic participation. Even when women do enter the labor market, they are often concentrated in lower-paying and less secure employment sectors. This underutilization of female human capital represents a massive loss of economic potential and contributes directly to persistent social inequalities that span generations.

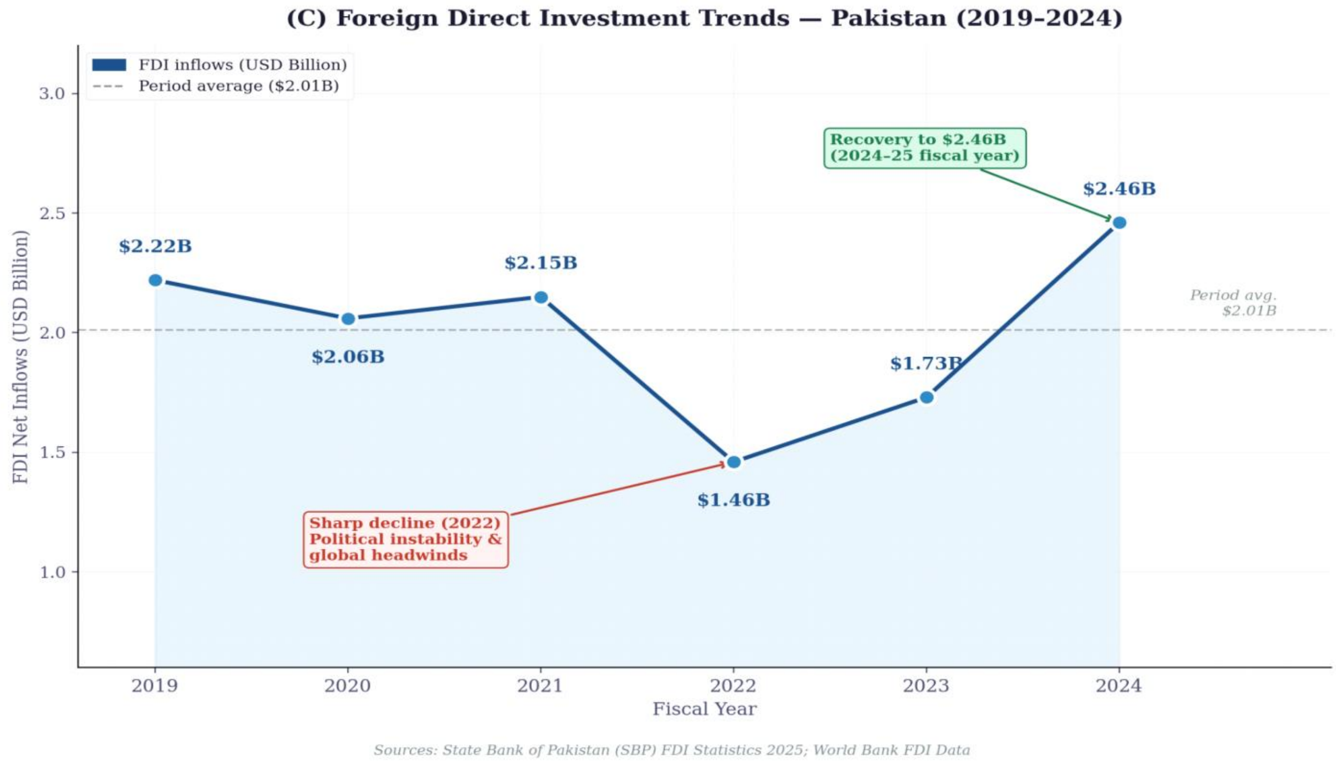
Another major challenge is the growing mismatch between what the education system produces and what the labor market actually needs. Many graduates lack the technical and vocational skills required by industry, leading to high unemployment rates even among educated individuals. Weak collaboration between educational institutions and industries, outdated curricula, and limited training opportunities all prevent the workforce from adapting to technological and economic changes. As a result, Pakistan's industrial and technological sectors struggle to find skilled labor, which in turn limits productivity and economic expansion.

The phenomenon of brain drain intensifies the human capital crisis in ways that are both obvious and insidious. In 2022 alone, more than 750,000 skilled professionals left Pakistan in search of better opportunities abroad. This continuous outflow of talent weakens institutional capacity in critical sectors such as healthcare, technology, and engineering. The loss of highly skilled professionals not only reduces the country's immediate human capital stock but also limits its ability to train future generations of experts. Each departing professional takes with them not just their own skills but also their potential to teach and mentor others.

These structural weaknesses carry significant economic consequences. International estimates suggest that human capital constraints reduce Pakistan's potential GDP growth by approximately 1.5 percent annually. Inadequate education, poor health outcomes, and limited skill development reduce workforce productivity, weaken innovation capacity, and discourage investment in knowledge-based industries. Pakistan faces increasing difficulty in transitioning toward a modern, competitive, knowledge-driven economy—the very kind of economy that could lift millions out of poverty.

Overall, Pakistan's human capital crisis is not a single problem but a complex, interconnected challenge that undermines national development at every level. Weak education systems, inadequate healthcare, gender disparities, skill shortages, and the continued loss of talented professionals collectively function as invisible chains that restrict economic growth, social mobility, and institutional resilience. Unless significant investments are made in education, healthcare, and skill development, these structural weaknesses will continue to limit Pakistan's ability to achieve sustainable development and long-term prosperity.

**Figure 3:** *Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) Net Inflows in Pakistan: Historical Trends and Recovery (2019–2024)*




**Source:** *Author's own construction of the figure by utilizing data derived from Annual Report on Foreign Investment. Karachi: Statistics & Data Warehouse Department. Supplementary data from World Bank Open Data (2025).*

## 4. Social Fragmentation, Extremism, and Sectarianism

Pakistan's social fabric has long been strained by divisions rooted in ethnicity, language, and religious interpretation. These fractures have quietly but consistently undermined the country's path toward sustainable development. Sectarian violence, once primarily between Sunni and Shia communities, has deepened over time to include internal Sunni disputes, such as those between Barelvi and Deobandi subgroups. Vali Nasr's key analysis documented that between 1990 and 1997 alone, 581 people were killed and over 1,600 were injured in targeted killings, mosque attacks, and bombings. The situation took an even darker turn in the 2000s, when the Pakistani Taliban began joining forces with sectarian militant groups like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi. This alliance dragged the violence into new territory—targeting the Hazara community in Balochistan and striking Sufi shrines across the country.

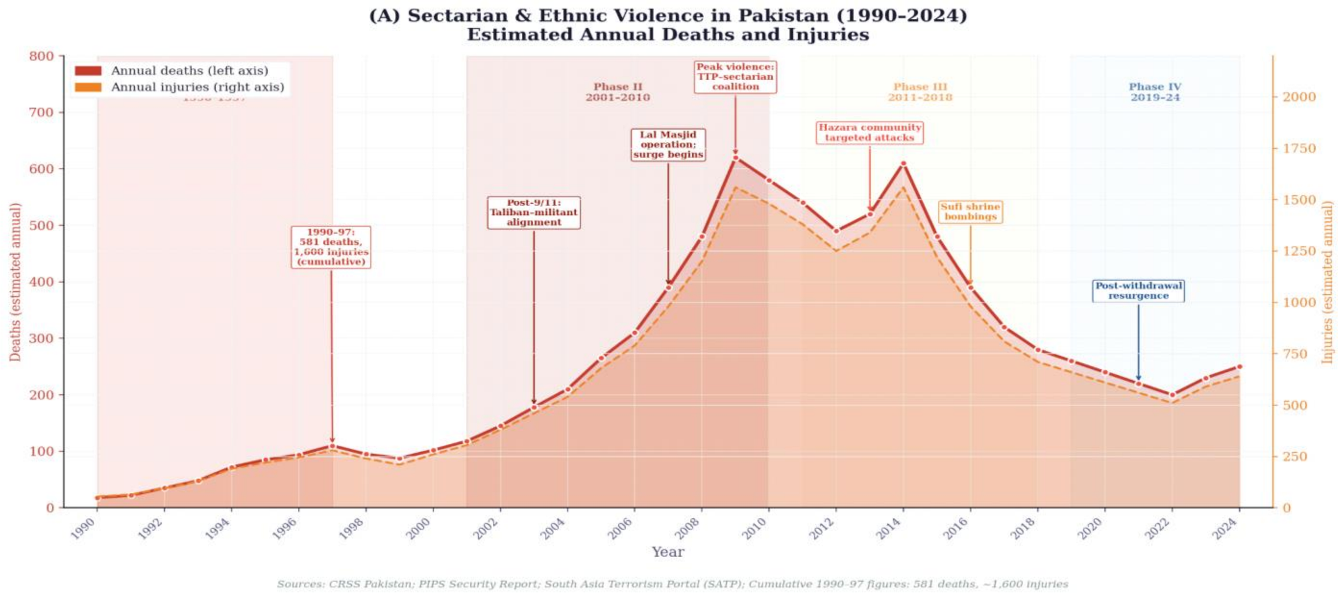
More recently, a 2025 study by Alam used mixed research methods to show that political polarization has gone far beyond media-driven fake news or infighting among the elite. It is now actively eating away at public trust in state institutions and making social divisions even deeper. The toxic mix of ethnic divides, religious extremism, and deep-seated political polarization has created what Bibi, Iqbal, and Yusuf (2022) describe as a ripple effect of social, economic, and psychological consequences across Pakistani society. Holding onto a unified national identity has become harder than ever.

The developmental consequences of this fragmentation have been severe. The constant threat of violence has discouraged both domestic and foreign investment, as businesses and investors view Pakistan as a high-risk, high-cost environment. Investor confidence has weakened considerably. Ahmar argued in 2021 that no country can achieve sustainable development without peace and stability, and that Pakistan cannot make progress as long as its society remains riddled with conflict. Education, a critical long-term driver of development, has also been badly affected. Unregulated madrassas often teach ideologies that promote radicalization rather than offering quality education. Farooq's 2014 research identified clear links between unequal education, gender disparities, poverty, and economic stagnation in Pakistan between 1972 and 2008, demonstrating how social problems directly harm economic performance.

Governance and public service delivery have deteriorated as well. Aslam and Muzaffar noted in 2025 that weak institutions, political instability, and corruption are the main reasons Pakistan has struggled to meet its Sustainable Development Goals. What emerges is a destructive cycle: violence suppresses economic growth; a weak economy leaves the government unable to provide basic services; and poor services deepen the marginalization of already vulnerable communities, which in turn fuels further unrest. Sustainable development in Pakistan suffers because all of these problems feed on one another.

These problems do not exist in isolation. They are interconnected chains that lock Pakistan into a long-term pattern of stagnation. Kırşanlı observed in 2024 that corruption has been a persistent issue in Pakistan since its founding, operating within a fragile institutional system that perpetuates instability. Mehmood and colleagues showed in 2025 that institutional weakness—driven by civil-military tensions, limited judicial independence, and political interference in the bureaucracy—leads to low foreign investment, weak accountability, and inefficient service delivery. When combined with Pakistan's deepening human capital crisis, the situation becomes even more alarming. The World Bank has noted that most of Pakistan's population is under 35 years old, yet this youthful demographic has been failed by inadequate education and health services. This creates a self-reinforcing loop: corruption weakens institutions; weak institutions fail to invest in people; underdeveloped human capital fuels extremism; and extremism further destabilizes institutions. Aziz and colleagues argued in 2025 that this dynamic directly undermines Sustainable Development Goal 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions) by allowing law enforcement to weaken and politicians to interfere with accountability systems. Breaking these chains will require a coordinated strategy that includes institutional reform, anti-corruption enforcement, human capital investment, and inter-communal reconciliation. As Qureshi and Khan noted in 2025, policies must work together rather than focusing on economic growth alone. Only by addressing all these dimensions simultaneously can Pakistan hope to achieve its goals.

**Figure 4:** *Chronological Trends of Sectarian and Ethnic Violence in Pakistan: Impacts of Geopolitical Shifts and Institutional Accountability (1990–2024)*




**Source:** *Author's own construction of the figure by utilizing data derived from Pakistan; Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) Security Reports; South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP). (2026). Annual Security Assessment 1990-2025.*

## 5. Economic Stagnation Amid Environmental Degradation

Pakistan's economic stagnation and environmental degradation are not separate crises—they are two sides of the same coin. Each fuels the other, creating a downward spiral that directly blocks sustainable development. The country faces severe environmental challenges: air pollution in cities like Lahore and Karachi regularly reaches hazardous levels; deforestation continues at an alarming rate; water scarcity is worsening; soil erosion reduces agricultural productivity; and plastic waste chokes urban drainage systems. According to the Environmental Performance Index, Pakistan ranks 176th out of 180 countries—a stark indicator of how poorly environmental health is being managed.

These problems are not merely ecological nuisances. They have real, measurable economic consequences. Air pollution alone significantly increases healthcare costs, as hospital admissions for respiratory and cardiovascular illnesses rise. Water shortages directly hit agricultural output, which still employs nearly 40 percent of Pakistan's workforce. When farmers cannot irrigate their fields, rural incomes fall and food prices become more volatile. Industrial productivity also suffers, as factories face power shortages and unreliable access to clean water. Studies by Abbas, Kousar, and Yaseen (2020) have shown that socioeconomic factors such as population density, urbanization, and poverty strongly correlate with higher levels of environmental damage, meaning the poorest communities often bear the heaviest burden.

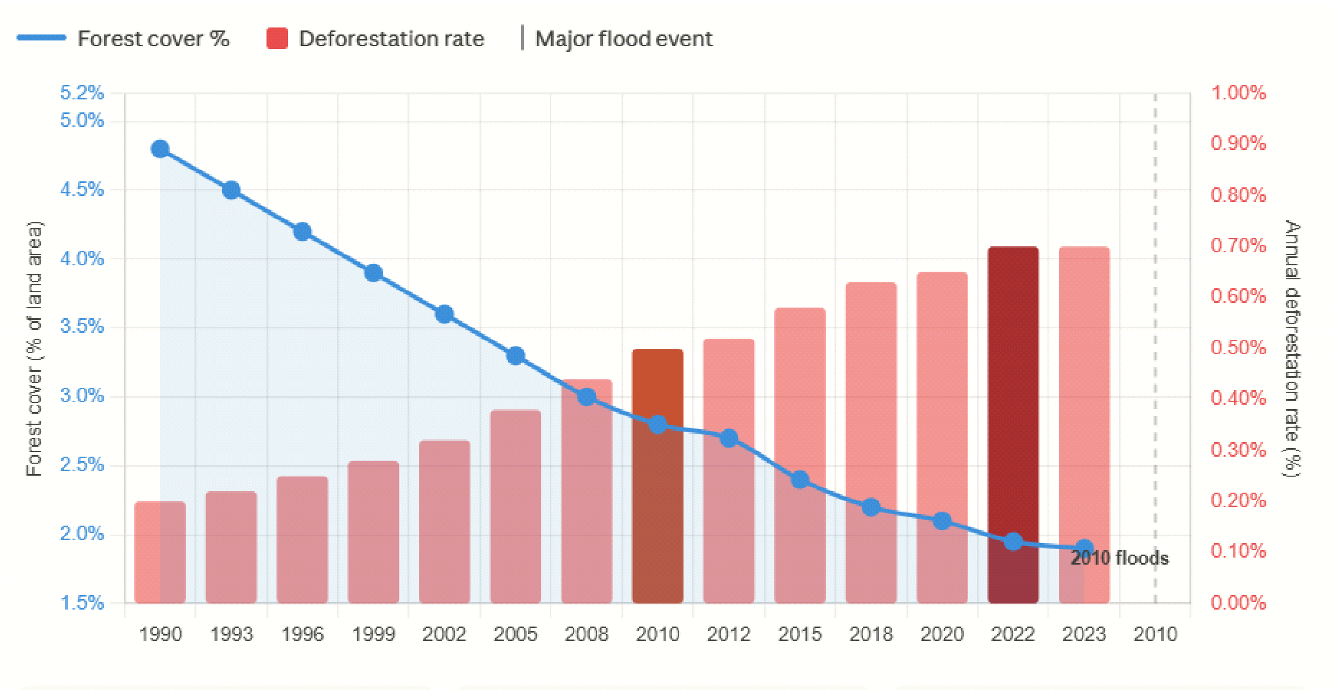
Several underlying drivers make these problems worse. Weak environmental governance is a major factor—regulatory agencies lack both the authority and the resources to enforce pollution controls or prevent illegal logging. Rapid population growth, as Pakistan remains one of the fastest-growing countries in the region, places constant pressure on land, water, and energy supplies. Unplanned urbanization has led to sprawling cities with inadequate waste management, drainage, and public transport systems, all of which amplify pollution. Unsustainable resource extraction, including groundwater overdraw and timber smuggling, continues largely unchecked. Gul, Shahab, and

Javed (2025) found that climate change is already reshaping regional economies in Pakistan, with areas like Buner and Punjab experiencing different but equally damaging impacts. Machhi, Govind, and Masroor (2025) further documented how climate variability threatens agriculture, water resources, and the livelihoods of millions of vulnerable households.

The economic costs are substantial and growing. Rising healthcare expenses, falling crop yields, reduced labor productivity due to heat stress and illness, and increasing competition over dwindling natural resources all take their toll. In Karachi, Azhar, Khan, and Arif (2024) identified severe barriers to sustainable urban development, including inadequate infrastructure and weak enforcement of environmental regulations. When viewed through the lens of sustainable development, environmental degradation acts as an invisible chain that binds Pakistan's economy to a low-growth, high-cost equilibrium. The government spends more on treating pollution-related diseases and less on education or infrastructure. Declining agricultural productivity forces the country to import food, draining foreign exchange reserves. Water scarcity sparks conflicts between provinces and between farmers and cities, diverting energy away from productive activities.

These pressures make it nearly impossible to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly those related to clean water (SDG 6), affordable and clean energy (SDG 7), sustainable cities (SDG 11), climate action (SDG 13), and life on land (SDG 15). Breaking this chain will require Pakistan to treat environmental management not as a luxury to be addressed after economic growth, but as a foundation for growth itself. Reforestation programs, investments in renewable energy, stricter enforcement of pollution controls, and climate-resilient farming practices are not optional extras—they are essential components of any serious economic recovery plan.

**Figure 4:** *Correlation Between Declining Forest Cover, Accelerating Deforestation Rates, and the Frequency of Catastrophic Flooding in Pakistan (1990–2024).*




**Source:** *Author's own construction of the figure by utilizing data derived from World Bank Group. (2022). Pakistan Country Climate and Development Report (CCDR); Global Forest Watch (GFW); and Pakistan Meteorological Department (PMD) Historical Flood Records (2026)*

## 6. Breaking the Invisible Chains

The development challenges confronting Pakistan—corruption, institutional fragility, human capital deficits, social fragmentation, extremism, and environmental degradation—do not operate as separate problems. They function as a mutually reinforcing system of constraints that collectively block sustainable progress. Corruption erodes institutional integrity across governance, judiciary, and financial sectors, directly undermining the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 16 on peace, justice, and strong institutions. Weak institutions, in turn, fail to enforce environmental regulations, enabling the ecological degradation that costs Pakistan an estimated 6 percent of GDP annually and diminishes the agricultural productivity upon which millions of livelihoods depend. Simultaneously, chronic underinvestment in human capital—reflected in a Human Capital Index value of 0.41, well below the South Asian average of 0.48 and comparable to Sub-Saharan Africa—perpetuates low labor productivity and constrains the economy's capacity for diversification and innovation. These deficits compound social fragmentation and extremism, as marginalized populations with limited access to quality education and employment become susceptible to radicalization, further destabilizing governance structures and deterring investment. Pakistan's ranking of 137th out of 166 countries on the 2024 SDG Index, with an overall score of only 57 percent, starkly illustrates how these interlinked barriers form systemic invisible chains that bind the nation's development trajectory in a self-perpetuating cycle of stagnation.

Disrupting these chains requires an integrated reform agenda that simultaneously addresses governance deficits, human capital formation, social cohesion, and environmental sustainability—rather than pursuing isolated sectoral interventions. On the governance front, Pakistan's own experience with the motorway police offers instructive evidence. Structured institutional settings with reasonable salaries, effective accountability, and strong checks and balances have proven capable of dramatically reducing corruption, even within the same socio-cultural environment that tolerates it elsewhere in the bureaucracy. Judicial independence and civilian oversight must be strengthened, drawing on comparative models. Colombia and Kenya offer relevant lessons in consolidating democratic accountability and reducing military interference in governance. In education and health, the World Bank's Human Capital Review recommends a life-cycle approach encompassing early childhood development, improved schooling quality, and enhanced female labor force participation. Countries that were once at Pakistan's level of development have achieved substantial gains through sustained, multi-sectoral commitment.

Countering extremism demands a paradigm shift from purely security-centric approaches toward policies that balance security, development, and prevention. Pakistan's evolving National Internal Security Policy framework increasingly emphasizes madrassa reform, youth socio-economic reintegration, and community-level resilience building. These efforts must be expanded and properly funded. Environmental sustainability measures—including reforestation programs, clean energy transitions, and climate-resilient agricultural practices—must be integrated into this reform matrix, recognizing that ecological restoration is inseparable from economic recovery.

The expected outcomes of successfully breaking these invisible chains extend well beyond incremental economic gains. They encompass a fundamental transformation of Pakistan's development trajectory. Improved governance and anti-corruption measures would restore investor confidence and create the regulatory predictability necessary to attract foreign direct investment. Broadening the tax base and rationalizing state-owned enterprises could unlock fiscal space for productive public investment. Enhanced human capital, achieved through sustained investment in education, health, and skills development, would raise labor productivity and enable the demographic transition from burden to dividend—turning Pakistan's overwhelmingly young population into an engine of growth rather than a source of social pressure. Greater social cohesion, cultivated through inclusive governance, interfaith dialogue, and equitable resource distribution, would reduce the appeal of extremist ideologies and foster the political stability essential for long-term planning. Collectively, these reforms would position Pakistan to make meaningful progress toward the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and beyond, transforming the current vicious cycle of degradation, institutional decay, and social fragmentation into a virtuous cycle in which economic growth reinforces institutional strengthening, which in turn sustains environmental protection and social inclusion.

## 7. Recommendations and Suggestions

Based on the analysis presented in this article, the following recommendations are offered for policymakers, civil society organizations, and international development partners seeking to help Pakistan break its invisible chains.

First, **institutional reforms must be prioritized and implemented systematically**. The judiciary requires genuine autonomy, free from political interference, along with adequate resources to process cases efficiently and transparently. Bureaucratic structures need modernization, including merit-based recruitment, performance-based incentives, and meaningful oversight mechanisms. The tax administration must be digitized and depoliticized to broaden the tax base and reduce evasion. Anti-corruption bodies should be granted operational independence and protected from political retaliation.

Second, **human capital investment demands a sustained, multi-year commitment.** Pakistan must increase public spending on education to at least 4 percent of GDP, with particular attention to teacher training, curriculum reform, and the reduction of out-of-school children. Healthcare spending should rise above 2 percent of GDP, focusing on primary care, maternal and child health, and the prevention of communicable diseases. Vocational and technical training programs must be expanded and aligned with labor market demands, and policies should actively encourage female labor force participation through safe transport, childcare facilities, and legal protections against workplace harassment.

Third, **countering extremism and social fragmentation requires a comprehensive approach that goes beyond security measures.** Madrassa registration and curriculum reform should be enforced while providing alternative educational pathways. Community-based dialogue initiatives that bring together religious, ethnic, and sectarian leaders can help rebuild trust at the local level. Youth employment programs in high-risk areas can reduce the appeal of militant recruitment by offering tangible economic alternatives. Media literacy campaigns can help citizens recognize and resist polarizing misinformation.

Fourth, **environmental management must be integrated into economic planning.** The government should enforce existing environmental laws rigorously, including pollution controls on industry and vehicles. Reforestation programs like the Ten Billion Tree Tsunami should be continued and expanded, with local communities as active partners. Investments in renewable energy—solar, wind, and hydropower—can reduce both pollution and dependence on expensive imported fossil fuels. Climate-resilient agricultural practices, including efficient irrigation and drought-resistant crops, can protect rural livelihoods.

Fifth, **social cohesion initiatives should be funded and supported at all levels of government.** Equitable distribution of resources across provinces and regions can reduce the sense of marginalization that fuels separatism and extremism. Interfaith and inter-sectarian dialogue programs, supported by respected religious scholars, can help counter hate speech and reduce violence. Inclusive governance structures that give voice to ethnic and religious minorities can strengthen national unity without demanding assimilation.

Finally, **international partners should align their assistance with Pakistan's reform**

**priorities rather than pursuing fragmented, project-based interventions.** Technical assistance for institutional strengthening, long-term investment in education and health, and support for climate adaptation are all areas where external cooperation can add genuine value. However, such assistance must respect Pakistani ownership and be coordinated across sectors to avoid creating new dependencies or distortions.

Breaking the invisible chains that bind Pakistan is neither quick nor easy. It requires political will, sustained investment, and a willingness to confront powerful vested interests. But the alternative—continued stagnation, deepening poverty, environmental collapse, and social disintegration—is unthinkable. Pakistan has the resources, the people, and the potential to build a very different future. What it needs now is the courage to act.

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## Declaration of Conflicting Interest

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to research.

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