

ALIGNING LOCAL GOVERNANCE WITH SDGS: A STUDY OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT COUNCILORS IN PAKISTAN AND CHINA

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Abstract

This comparative study investigates how local government councilors in Lahore (Pakistan) and Chongqing (China) have contributed to the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 1 (No Poverty) and 5 (Gender Equality) between 2001 and 2024. Employing a mixed-methods approach that integrates legal, institutional, and policy analysis with quantitative indicators, it evaluates how variations in local governance frameworks shape developmental outcomes. In Lahore, limited fiscal and political autonomy combined with bureaucratic centralization and entrenched patronage has constrained the effectiveness of elected union councils, particularly in empowering female representatives despite a 33% quota. In contrast, Chongqing's top-down governance model has enabled remarkable poverty reduction through centralized investment and planning, yet local participation and gender equality remain structurally limited. Drawing on data from the World Bank, World Economic Forum, and recent scholarship, the study finds that both systems exhibit restricted local agency in SDG implementation. The analysis highlights that genuine progress toward SDG localization requires greater devolution of authority in Pakistan and the institutionalization of participatory mechanisms within China's centralized governance framework.

INTRODUCTION

Local governments are universally recognized as pivotal actors in translating the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into action at the grassroots level.¹ The 2030 Agenda emphasizes the role of subnational authorities in achieving "no one left behind" and gender equality. However, the SDGs were originally framed at the global level, and critics have noted that the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) often failed by ignoring "local realities and

constraints" of governance in the Global South. (Cheema et al., 2024). The 2030 Agenda seeks to remedy this by promoting local participation, accountability, and monitoring. Still, the degree of decentralization and local autonomy varies widely between countries. In practice, how effectively local councilors contribute to SDG implementation depends on legal structures, political context, and resources. This study compares Pakistan and China,

two populous developing countries, to assess how local government representatives in Lahore and Chongqing have advanced SDG 1 (poverty alleviation) and SDG 5 (gender equality) over the past two decades.

Local Governance and SDG Framework in Pakistan

Pakistan is a federal republic with four provinces, two autonomous territories, and numerous municipal entities (United Cities and Local Governments [UCLG], 2023). The constitution nominally decentralizes authority, but in practice power often remains centralized. Local government systems have been intermittently implemented. The 2001 Local Government Ordinance (LGO) under President Musharraf introduced an extensive devolution, creating elected union councils (UCs), tehsil and district governments. Crucially, the 2001 reforms mandated a one-third quota for women's seats in local bodies (33% of general seats), and 17% reserved in provincial and national assemblies (Ilahi et al., 2023). This expansion of women's representation was hailed as a step toward empowering women in politics, although deep-rooted patriarchy and socio-economic barriers continued to limit genuine empowerment.² Indeed, as Khan & Naqvi (2020) have shown, women who enter legislative bodies through quotas often face silencing and lack of substantive influence, underscoring the "dilemmas of representation" in Pakistan's assemblies.

In Punjab province, the Local Government Act of 2013 (PLGA 2013) reconfigured councils after a five-year gap. Cheema et al. (2024) noted that the PLGA 2013 "presents a compromised system and mechanism for devolving political, administrative, and financial powers to the local representatives". In effect, Union Councils (the lowest tier) were empowered with responsibility for water supply, sanitation, waste management and other civic affairs, but lacked any authority over major sectors such as education, health, or transport. These key areas were controlled by provincially appointed agencies and "Authorities" headed by bureaucrats. Consequently, Union Councils in Lahore and elsewhere operate under tight provincial oversight. Local budgets are mostly limited to modest taxes and fees, with councils

highly dependent on transfers from higher governments. Cheema et al. report that union councils exercise no independent power to make by-laws on civic management, and that principal accounting officers are appointed by the provincial government. Thus, councilors often find that "local decisions are subject to bureaucratic approvals" and intervention by provincial legislators.

Institutionally, Lahore's local government has changed over time. Under Musharraf (2001–2008) Lahore had a City District Government led by an elected mayor and union councilors. After 2008, local institutions were suspended until the PLGA 2013 re-established union councils and tehsil/town municipal administrations. Elections under PLGA took place in Punjab in 2015, reinstating many local representatives. The reserved seats for women were restored; for example, each rural Union Council in Punjab includes two women councilors on reserved general seats. However, societal norms and the "joint ticket" system (where chairman and vice-chairman run together, often with a male chairman and female vice-chairman) have meant many women councilors remain politically dependent on male relatives. Cheema et al. explicitly note their inability to recruit any female councilors for interviews, reflecting their limited presence or agency at the grassroots.

At the policy level, Pakistan formally embraced the SDGs in its national planning. The SDGs were integrated into Vision 2025 and subsequent development plans. Each province developed SDG frameworks and advisory bodies (United Cities and Local Governments [UCLG], 2023). However, multiple analyses (including national Voluntary National Reviews) have concluded that planning largely remained top-down, with local governments marginalized in implementation. In fact, a recent UCLG report finds that federal and provincial authorities "tend to exclude local governments from planning and implementation of SDG-related interventions" in Pakistan. Local council associations were weakly consulted; their involvement in reporting was assessed as "none" or "weak" for recent SDG progress reports. In summary, Lahore's councilors operate in a constrained local governance environment. They face limited fiscal autonomy and

few formal channels to influence higher-tier development policy, a situation echoed in many Global South contexts where central officials dominate SDG coordination.

Local Governance and SDG Framework in China

China's governance structure is fundamentally different. The country is a unitary socialist state under the leadership of the Communist Party. Administrative hierarchy runs from the central government to provinces, then to prefectures and counties, with municipalities like Chongqing enjoying province-level status. Chongqing became a direct-controlled municipality in 1997, merging former districts and counties into a single jurisdiction. Its local government is headed by a Party Secretary and a Mayor, both appointed by higher authorities. The formal legislature is the Chongqing People's Congress (人民代表大会), whose deputies are indirectly elected at lower levels. In practice, local decision-making is highly centralized: Chongqing's ambitious urban and social policies (e.g. social housing and land reforms of 2010–2012) were driven by the municipal party leadership, without independent political or judicial checks. As one analysis notes, Chongqing's "novel and ambitious" welfare schemes lacked corresponding institutional reforms to ensure accountability (Lafarguette, 2011). This reflects China's model of strong state-led governance, in which local officials implement national and regional strategies rather than negotiate policy with constituency input.

In the realm of SDGs, China has officially committed to Agenda 2030 but frames its efforts within national development goals. Beijing reports on SDG indicators alongside domestic plans (e.g. the Fourteenth Five-Year Plan). China in fact achieved one of the SDG targets ending extreme poverty by 2020. Government sources and studies confirm that nearly 100 million rural Chinese were lifted out of absolute poverty ahead of the 2030 schedule (Liu et al., 2023). A recent analysis finds that during the anti-poverty campaign (2010–2020) Chinese poverty counties saw improvements in environmental and public service indicators and a decline in inequality. For example, inequality between previously poor and non-poor

counties fell markedly during this period. However, they caution that imbalanced regional investment meant that gaps in education and health access actually widened between rich and poor areas (Pan et al., 2024). In short, Chongqing's local authorities, aligned with national directives, invested heavily in rural development, infrastructure, and social services as part of the poverty eradication drive.³

Regarding gender, China officially advocates women's rights and ratified CEDAW long ago. Its 2022 Global Gender Gap ranking (102 out of 146) shows moderate gender parity in education and health, but still a significant gap in political empowerment. The Chongqing People's Congress and local People's Political Consultative Conferences include women delegates, but their proportion is constrained by broader gender norms. Unlike Pakistan's reserved seat system, China has no formal quotas in local legislatures; instead, the party leadership sets targets for female representation. Overall, Chinese women make up around 26–27% of the National People's Congress (comparable to global averages) and similar shares in local people's congresses, about one-fourth. (World Economic Forum, 2022). Traditional gender roles and rapid urbanization have left many rural women with heavy care and agricultural burdens, which can hinder their participation. A UN Women report highlights a program in rural China that began training young women to run in local (village) elections, indicating ongoing efforts to increase female local leadership. However, scholarship notes that Chinese local councils remain male-dominated and that women rarely hold the top local offices. In short, Chongqing's councilors and bureaucrats operate within a development-driven framework that prioritized poverty reduction, but gender equality programs tend to be nationally mandated campaigns (e.g. promoting girls' education, women's employment), rather than driven by local political actors.

To summarize the contexts: Lahore's local councilors face a weakly devolved system under federal/provincial oversight, whereas Chongqing's officials work in a strong but top-down municipal government. Both operate in systems that officially

endorse the SDGs, yet local implementation authority is limited. The SDGs' success in aligning with local action depends on enabling these councilors/officials to address poverty and gender, which we now examine.

Methodology

This comparative study integrates qualitative and quantitative evidence from existing sources. It draws primarily on peer-reviewed research about Pakistan's local governments and China's poverty and governance. The study follows Cheema *et al.* (2024) in employing a mixed-methods perspective. For Lahore, Cheema's approach is instructive: they reviewed provincial local government acts and conducted 32 in-depth interviews with rural and urban union councillors to capture their experiences. It incorporates their findings on Punjab's legal framework and councilors' insights, as well as complementary studies of women's representation in Pakistan (Khan & Naqvi, 2020). For Chongqing, where such interview-based studies are scarce, the study rely on development indicator analyses (e.g. UN, World Bank, academic studies) and policy reports. For example, Pan *et al.* (2024) and Xie *et al.* (2023) provide multi-year statistical assessments of China's poverty reduction and health outcomes. These inform our understanding of what Chongqing's local government achieved in SDG 1. For gender (SDG 5), global indices (WEF Gender Gap Reports) and relevant literature is cited. Across both cases, the study considers official documents (SDG action plans, local government legislation) and scholarly critiques to triangulate our analysis. The narrative synthesizes these insights in an academic format, with all sources cited in the APA style bracket format.

SDG 1 (No Poverty): Local Action and Outcomes Pakistan (Lahore)

Poverty in Pakistan has been a persistent challenge. World Bank data show that poverty declined from the early 2000s through 2018 due to economic growth and remittances, but recent shocks (COVID-19, 2022 floods, economic crisis) have reversed some gains. Pakistan is considered one of the driest countries globally, with an average annual rainfall of under 240 millimeters. The nation's water resources are primarily

sourced from rainfall, rivers, glaciers, and groundwater. Each year, around 180 billion cubic meters of water enter the Indus Basin, most of which flows through India, and its availability is significantly influenced by glacier melt in the western Himalayas. The country's population and economy are both heavily reliant on this vital water supply (Aslam *et al.*, 2022). In Punjab province (of which Lahore is the capital), poverty rates are generally lower than in Sindh or Balochistan, but many districts still face deprivation. Importantly, the SDG-localization literature highlights that union councilors often relate poverty to deficits in basic services (water, sanitation, roads, microcredit access) rather than solely income. Cheema *et al.* (2024) report that local councilors cited service delivery as their main concern, yet lamented their inability to plan or finance anti-poverty measures locally. For example, a Lahori councilor might try to connect slum dwellers to a federal cash-transfer scheme, but without discretionary funds or program authority, their role is limited to liaison.

Qualitatively, local councilors in Pakistan have organized some poverty-alleviation initiatives: mini-grants for vulnerable households, community development projects, or advocating for infrastructure projects (drainage, health posts) that benefit the poor. However, systematic evidence is scarce. Cheema's interviews (though limited to non-female councilors) reveal recurring constraints: *lack of financial autonomy, high dependency on provincial transfers, and multiple external actors diluting local control*. In concrete terms, union councils in Lahore may raise local taxes or fees, but these revenues are modest. They rely on district and provincial transfers (e.g. Untied Grants) for almost all expenditures. Even then, provincial bureaucracies allocate funds by top-down formulas, not by councilors' plans.

This governance context weakens alignment with SDG 1. The SDGs call for local governments to identify and address poverty through tailored policies, yet Pakistani law does not empower councilors to do so in key areas. For instance, sanitation and waste removal (SDG 6, indirectly linked to poverty) are often contracted to semi-autonomous companies, limiting councilors' influence on the poorest neighborhoods. Health care (SDG 3) is centralized: district health authorities (created in 2016) report to

the Punjab health department, not to union councils. Thus, a councilor concerned about malnutrition or epidemic disease among the poor has no mandate or budget to act.

In sum, Lahore's local councilors contribute to SDG 1 indirectly through oversight of basic amenities, but lack authority over the structural factors of poverty (education, healthcare, employment generation). As Cheema *et al.* conclude, strong local institutions are "a prerequisite for SDG acceleration," but the existing devolution is so "compromised" that councilors are often mere implementers of higher-level decisions. Poverty reduction in Pakistan therefore remains largely the result of provincial and federal programs (e.g. microfinance loans, social safety nets) rather than council-led strategies. The councilors' role has been to relay ground realities to upward actors, rather than design and execute poverty policies themselves.

China (Chongqing)

China's model of poverty alleviation stands in sharp contrast. The central government's Targeted Poverty Alleviation campaign (launched 2013) set county-by-county poverty lines and orchestrated massive investments. By 2020, China declared all extreme rural poverty eliminated. Chongqing, with tens of millions of rural residents (some formerly very remote), was a major beneficiary. Local cadres implemented the strategy by relocating impoverished villagers, building roads and basic infrastructure, developing local industries (tea, tourism, etc.), and providing social assistance. In Chongqing's case, municipal leadership issued detailed plans and budgets for each county's poverty reduction target. Although local delegates (to the People's Congress) did not originate these policies, they participated in overseeing implementation. The results were impressive: Chongqing's poverty-stricken areas saw significant improvements in housing, sanitation, access to electricity, and school enrollment in the 2010s (Pan *et al.*, 2024). Environmental quality indices rose and the county-level poverty gap shrank. Quantitatively, (Xie *et al.* 2023) provides evidence of health and service gains for China's rural poor between 2013 and 2018. They find that after poverty alleviation policies, the formerly poor experienced higher healthcare utilization and lower out-of-pocket

costs than the non-poor. This suggests that targeted subsidies (likely financed by the state, with local implementation) effectively reduced the financial burden of illness on the poor. For Chongqing specifically, no single published study isolates the municipality's rural outcomes, but the overall Chinese data imply Chongqing followed national trends.

Importantly, these achievements relied on strong fiscal support from Beijing. Central transfers to Chongqing were sizable, enabling the municipality to support local agricultural modernization, vocational training, and microcredit programs for poor households. Local governments also leveraged the state's policy of new land rights (hukou permits) to allow migrant workers from poor counties to settle and work in the city, raising incomes for their families. In governance terms, poverty alleviation in Chongqing was a top-down campaign: local officials at all levels had explicit poverty metrics to meet. There was little autonomy or council deliberation in this process, it was an assigned goal.

Thus, with respect to SDG 1, Chongqing's local government successfully implemented a national poverty reduction program, achieving *de facto* elimination of extreme poverty. This aligns with SDG 1's quantitative target, but in a model foreign to most Western-localist conceptions of governance. The key point for our purposes is that Chongqing's "councilors" (i.e. local officials) did act strongly on poverty, but under central directives. They did not need to lobby or gain fiscal independence to do so. By 2020, the poverty rate in Chongqing's counties was minimal. However, scholars note that China's approach created new inequalities (e.g. the poorest counties still lag in health and education relative to rich counties so the SDG goal of ending poverty everywhere may not translate to full equity. The study also noted that by 2024, the focus in China has shifted from sheer income poverty to "relative poverty" and quality of life (like social security and rural revitalization). Local governments continue to manage social welfare expansions (minimum living allowances, rural retirement pensions, etc.) that affect poverty indirectly, but these remain under provincial policy frameworks.

SDG 5 (Gender Equality): Local Dynamics Pakistan (Lahore)

Gender equality in Pakistan is highly challenged. The country ranks near the bottom (145th) in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap index for 2022 (World Economic Forum, 2022). Women's labor participation is extremely low, and they face barriers in health, education, and leadership. At the local level, the 2001 devolution plan's 33% quota was a landmark measure intended to empower women. In Lahore's union councils, this quota (now entrenched in law) means that at least two of the nine council members are women. The intent was to involve women directly in governance.

However, research indicates that reserved-seat women councillors often have limited real power. Many serve as proxies for male relatives (fathers, husbands, brothers), and they frequently lack independent constituency ties. One study found that quota-elected women legislators view themselves as accountable to the public, but in practice suffer silencing and harassment by male colleagues (Khan & Naqvi, 2020). Although that study focused on national assemblies, the findings resonate locally. Cheema *et al.* were unable to interview any female union councillors in their study, reflecting either their small numbers or gatekeeping by male officials. Other observers of Pakistani local government have documented that women in rural councils often report feeling disempowered, with little say over projects or budgets. Statistically, the presence of women at the union council level has increased since 2001. Punjab province reports around 33% female membership in local bodies (union and tehsil councils) once reserved seats are counted. Yet, this has not translated into broader gender equality on the ground. Women councilors' priorities often center on community welfare (schools, health dispensaries, water), but their inability to control funding means they struggle to effect substantive change for women's economic empowerment or violence prevention. The literature critiques that quotas without capacity-building and genuine empowerment yield "descriptive" rather than "substantive" representation.

Nevertheless, local councils have a potential role in gender-sensitive policy. In principle, a Lahore union council could influence local school conditions (affecting girls' education) or crèches (supporting

women's workforce participation), but those lie outside UC remit. Some NGOs and development programs have tried to use union council platforms to raise women's issues – for example, inviting female councillors to budget meetings or involving them in health facility management committees. But official studies imply that without legal authority, the results have been modest. In short, Lahore's local governance provides women with a formal voice (through quotas) but the systemic obstacles highlighted by Khan & Naqvi (2020) persist: these women must still overcome patriarchal structures and seek additional affirmative actions to have more political influence.

China (Chongqing)

China fares better than Pakistan on many gender indicators, ranked 102 globally in 2022, up five places from the previous year (World Economic Forum, 2022). Girls' enrollment and literacy are near parity, and women's health outcomes have improved. However, gender gaps remain in economic and political spheres. Chongqing, as a major city, reflects national trends: women comprise roughly half the population and workforce, but hold a smaller share of managerial or legislative roles.

At the local level, Chinese law provides for equal rights of women but does not enforce electoral quotas. In Chongqing's People's Congress system, women are often offered seats but rarely lead key committees. The WEF report notes that China's gender parity is nearly closed in education and health, but the overall index is pulled down by low Political Empowerment, due to fewer women in leadership. In practical terms, Chongqing's local women face dual burdens: as many families' main caregivers, they benefit when local government improves services (schools, elder care, health insurance). However, few Chongqing women serve as party-secretaries of districts or large bureaus. The central policy emphasis on poverty and infrastructure left less room for gender-specific agenda-setting at the municipal level.

One positive signal is that Chongqing, like other Chinese localities, participated in national and UN-sponsored gender training programs. For example, the municipality has instituted policies to support mothers (longer maternity leave, childcare centers in factories, etc.), aiming to boost workforce participation. These are part of broader provincial or

national campaigns, not initiatives originated by councilors. Moreover, the de facto one-child policy legacy means there are now slightly fewer baby girls born than boys in Chongqing (as in China generally), but female life expectancy is high. The net effect on SDG 5: Chongqing reports improvement in women's education and health, but continued underrepresentation in executive roles.

Comparatively, Chongqing's local governance has not actively misaligned with SDG 5, the city's officials did not roll back any gender laws but neither have councilors substantially driven a local gender equality agenda. The policy toolbox remains national. Some Chinese scholars argue that the patriarchal undercurrents (e.g. elders preferring male heirs) still challenge progress despite top-down goals. Overall, Chongqing's alignment with SDG 5 depends mainly on central guidance (e.g. quotas for women's voices in consultative bodies) and public campaigns (e.g. anti-domestic violence laws) rather than local council initiatives.

Comparative Analysis

The cases of Lahore and Chongqing reveal both differences and similarities in local-SDG alignment. On SDG 1 (No Poverty), Chongqing achieved a national SDG target through centralized planning and resource mobilization, while Lahore's local government has played at best a supportive role. In Lahore, councilors' direct impact on poverty is marginal due to limited powers. In Chongqing, poverty reduction was a municipal priority from above, implemented through local projects, so outcomes improved dramatically (though equity trade-offs remain). The contrast highlights that simply looking at SDG indicators (poverty rates) might suggest China succeeded and Pakistan lagged; but from a governance perspective, Pakistan's councilors exerted little direct influence either way, whereas Chinese officials had clear directives. In effect, Chongqing's success on SDG 1 owes more to state capacity than to decentralized innovation.

On SDG 5 (Gender Equality), both contexts show constrained local agency. Lahore's system introduced quotas that raised women's participation in numbers, but these women face entrenched patriarchal norms and often operate without real decision-making power. Chongqing's women, by contrast, benefit from

universal education and healthcare but lack strong local representation in government. Both places share the pattern identified by global analysts: legislative quotas alone are insufficient for substantive gender equality. Furthermore, both Lahore and Chongqing have limited local scope to address systemic gender issues. Lahore's union councils cannot set gender-sensitive budgets or reform inheritance laws (beyond convening certain community meetings). Chongqing's councils do not oversee family law enforcement or women's employment policies; those fall under national ministries or courts. The result is that local councilors/officials in both cities have only indirect leverage on SDG 5 outcomes, relying on higher-level interventions.

Institutional constraints form a common thread. Cheema *et al.* (2024) warn that without genuine devolution, SDG localization remains "lukewarm" and can even create inefficiencies. In Lahore and Chongqing alike, vertical integration of policy is weak: the SDGs are largely integrated upward into national planning but not downward into local budgets. Both cases illustrate Jones & Comfort's (2020) "localization trap," where well-meaning SDG commitments on paper fail to translate to empowered local action. The UCLG profile of Pakistan explicitly finds that councils were largely excluded from SDG implementation mechanisms; we infer the same is true in China, where local governments act as implementers of national SDG-equivalent plans rather than participants in their design.

Yet there are some promising signs. In Lahore, the existence of elected women councillors and civil society networks means there is a foundation for bottom-up SDG advocacy. If reforms (e.g. Karachi's recent local body empowerment, or new rules for participatory budgeting) extend to Punjab, Lahore's councilors could become more active players. In Chongqing, the data-driven SDG monitoring pilot in Deqing County (developed by the UN, though not local to Chongqing) hints that Chinese localities are experimenting with more granular data and community feedback (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2017). If such tools are adopted, even top-down systems can benefit from local input. Ultimately, our analysis suggests that improving councilors' capacity (training in SDG frameworks, civic engagement skills) and incremental reforms to

grant modest fiscal flexibility would help align local efforts with SDG targets in both cities.

Conclusion

This comparative study of Lahore and Chongqing local governments underscores that achieving SDG 1 and SDG 5 at the local level requires more than good intentions; it requires institutional reform and empowerment of local actors. In Lahore, enhancing SDG alignment means strengthening the devolution framework so that union councils can plan and budget for poverty alleviation and gender-inclusive services. Legislative changes could grant UCs authority over primary health clinics or allocate them portions of federal poverty funds. Crucially, reserved-seat women councillors need mentoring and independent resources to become more than symbolic representatives. For Pakistan, civil society and provincial governments must recognize local councils as key partners, a transition that UCLG notes is currently lacking.

In Chongqing, while no formal local election reforms are likely, encouraging more transparency and consultation could help. The party-led system could incorporate structured feedback (via “grid management” or participatory budgets) on poverty and gender issues. Sustaining China’s SDG successes will depend on addressing the remaining rural-urban disparities identified by scholars. Importantly, further boosting women’s political and economic empowerment would advance SDG 5; Chongqing could pilot programs to elevate women cadres in community leadership (something already happening at smaller scales in China’s rural-elderly councils).

In both contexts, monitoring and data use are critical. Lahore’s planners could adopt multidimensional poverty indices at the city level (as Cheema suggests) to target interventions. Chongqing could share its data-driven approach (as in Deqing’s SDG pilot) to strengthen municipal monitoring of gender gaps.

Ultimately, our analysis highlights that the “last mile” of SDG delivery often lies at the local level, and local councilors, whether elected union representatives or appointed municipal officials, are the vehicle for that delivery. For SDG 1 and SDG 5 to be fully realized, these local actors must be recognized as partners, not obstacles. This requires political will from higher levels to devolve meaningful authority and budgets,

and to value gender-inclusive local governance. Only then can the laudable visions of the global SDGs be truly aligned with the realities on the ground in Lahore, Chongqing, and beyond.

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