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Green Milestones: A Chronology of Environmental Legislation in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Over time, it has been observed that countries are encountering the evolving threats of climate change and the environment. The new emerging environmental issues have led countries to design and reassess the existing environmental policies. Like other countries, Pakistan is also facing many environmental challenges, ranging from soil erosion to loss of biodiversity. Since its independence in 1947, Pakistan has formed many environmental policies and frameworks to tackle its ecological challenges. This study has highlighted the legislation on environmental concerns into three distinct phases: 1) Post-Independence era from 1947 to 1972, a time period in which limited progress was made for ecological policy formation. 2) From the Stockholm Conference (1972) to the turn of the millennium (2000) – an era in which climate crisis concerns were recognized. 3) A journey from 2000 to the present – an era of transition to ecological sustainability. For a developing country like Pakistan, there are significant obstacles in the way of the successful execution of these legislations. The current study provides insights that Pakistan needs to formulate and revise its environmental policies to address its climate change challenges and promote environmentally sustainable development.

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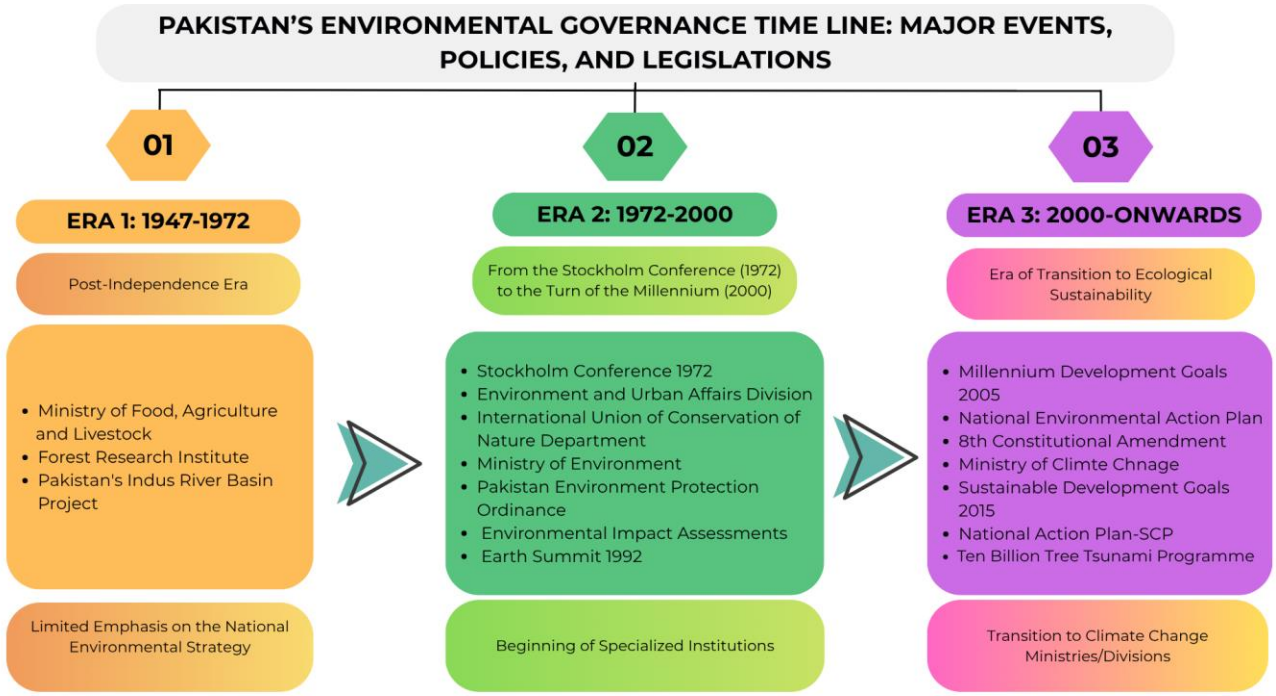
1. Introduction

Pakistan has acknowledged the ever-evolving environmental-related issues since its independence. Policy responses to environmental concerns can be grouped into three major phases. First, the post-independence era from 1947 to 1972 was marked by limited progress in ecological policy development. Second, the period from the Stockholm Conference in 1972 to 2000 was characterized by increased recognition of climate crisis issues.

Third, from 2000 to today, representing a transition toward ecological sustainability. In this time period, various new strategies and initiatives started to address the country's environmental issues. Figure 1 illustrates the evolution of national environmental priorities.

Figure 1: Historical Trajectory of Environmental Laws and Policy Changes from 1947 to the Present



2. Post-Independence Era (1947-1972)-Limited Progress in Ecological Policy Formation

The newly established government of Pakistan had many difficulties in the first years of its existence (1947-57), such as refugee resettlement, canal water dispute, and the distribution of military and other assets with India (Talbot, 2019). In 1950, the country formed a Six-Year National Development Program (1951-57) (Huq, 1958). Despite the fact that a number of initiatives were planned to boost economic growth and development, e.g., agriculture, industry and mining, transport and communication, fuel and power, and social capital, the program suggested no administrative reforms or expressed concern about climate change and sustainable growth.

By the time Pakistan's First Five-Year Plan (1955-60) was implemented, it had attempted to initiate economic advancement. However, it was still limited to agriculture, water and power development industry, education, health, housing, transport and communication services of the economy, and expanding government revenue. The period 1960-72 saw a significant increase in the industry and the start of the agricultural revolution. However, the spread of environmental issues due to resource exploitation and population growth was given less attention. Corrective measures were adopted to resolve the soil pollution issues in Pakistan's Indus River Basin region (Pakistan Engineering Council, 1998). Since the beginning of the Salinity Control and Reclamation Project in 1961, a large part of degraded land has recovered (United Nations Environment Programme and Government of Pakistan, 2013). The Soil Survey Department was established in 1962 in the Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Livestock (MINFAL) as a Soil Survey Project of Pakistan with support from the United Nations Development Program (Mian and Mirza, 1993). It was established to prepare an inventory of Pakistan's soil resources through surveys, updated maps, and reports (United Nations Environment Programme, 2013). Moreover, the Forest Research Institute started researching the conservation of forests, productivity, wildlife, and ecosystem management (K.M, 1992).

3. From Stockholm Conference (1972) to the Turn of the Millennium (2000): Recognition of Environmental Concerns

The period from 1972 to 2000 is the onset of an epoch in which policies, statutes, and institutions were developed. Pakistan started giving priority attention to environmental conservation soon after

the United Nations Conference on Human Environment (also known as the Stockholm Conference) from June 5-16, 1972 (United Nations Environment Programme, 1972). A delegation headed by Begum Nusrat Bhutto, the first lady of Pakistan, represented the country at the conference. The Stockholm Conference was the first United Nations major conference with regard to the impacts of human activity on the environment. The StockholmDeclaration contained 26 principles concerning environmental protection and sustainable development(United Nations, 2022).One of the important issues that emerged from the conference was the recognition of poverty alleviation as a crucial element for protecting the environment.(Mudaliar and Kashwan, 2024). In 1972, the Ministry of Industries & Production, Town Planning &Agrovilles was given responsibility for environmental problems. Despite that, the Ministry of Science and Technology was also responsible for various environmental concerns. In 1974, the Ministry of Housing and Works established an Environment and Urban Affairs Division (EUAD), and various environmental matters were shifted to this division.
The year 1973 also saw the adoption of a constitutional responsibility to protect the environment. The phrase "Environmental Pollution and Ecology" was included in the Concurrent Legislative List of Pakistan's Constitution, Schedule IV (IUCN-The World Conservation Union and Environmental Law Programme, Karachi, Pakistan, 2005).According to the Legislative List of Schedule IV, natural resource management and pollution control fall under the purview of both the federal and provincial governments. Several units of the provincial government operate very well, such as the forest departments, which launched biennial afforestation campaigns at the provincial level. Similarly, the "Provincial Soil Conservation Department" is actively working to promote contour plowing, cover cropping, and other soil conservation practices for sustainable land management and agriculture.
The initial formal steps for integrating environmental and economic development were taken by the government in the 1980s. Pakistan established the Ministry of Environment (MoE) in 1975 in response to the Stockholm Declaration of 1972. In 1983, it designed the first environmental law, known as the Pakistan Environment Protection Ordinance, and later, it was extended to all provinces of the country (Fischer, 2014). In 1984, the Pakistan Environmental Protection Council (PEPC) and the Pakistan Environmental Protection Agency (PEPA) were formed under the Pakistan Environmental Protection Ordinance. PEPC is Pakistan's apex statutory body for environmental protection. Its role is to approve national environmental policy following the National Conservation Strategy (NCS) framework. PEPC collaborates with stakeholders to incorporate environmental issues into national plans and policies and make suggestions on natural resource management.
Similarly, the prime responsibility of the PEPA is to draft the National Environmental Quality Standards. PEPA has the authority to revise the National Environmental Quality Standards (NEQS) when needed. PEPA also approves Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) and Initial Environmental Examinations (IEEs). It also encourages research and development in the field of science and technology to ensure sustainable development. PEPA provides guidelines to safeguard biodiversity, prevent natural disasters, and consider preserving the environment while managing natural resources. All four provinces now have EPAs: [1] Punjab EPA-1987, [2] Sindh EPA-1989, [3] NWFP-2004, and [4] Balochistan-2012.
Moreover, in light of the impact of climate change, the office of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) was set up in 1985 (IUCN-The World Conservation Union, 2000). The protection of biodiversity is the main goal of IUCN programs; priority areas include the coastal and forest areas. With a strong emphasis on sustainable development, IUCN operates at the community and policy levels.
An understanding of the strong relationship between economic development and the environment was another significant breakthrough of the 1980s. The Planning Commission provided advice on socio-economic policies and established an "Environment Cell" to monitor the adverse effects of public sector projects on the environment at the federal level. In later years, planning departments of provinces also created dedicated environmental units. In order to support sustainable development, the Sixth Five-Year Plan (1983-88) placed a strong emphasis on integrating the environment and accelerating growth through the "Rural Transformation"policy (Burki, 1984). In similar lines, the

plan included comprehensive initiatives to utilize fisheries and forestry resources while taking ecological, economic, and technological constraints into account.

Furthermore, considerable progress regarding legislative and policy development was achieved in the 1990s. The 1972 Stockholm Conference laid the foundations for the 1992 Earth Summit, also known as the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), which took place in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (Runnalls, 1995). At UNCED, Pakistan took the lead. Pakistan represented the developing nations as the head of the group of 77. During the 1992 Earth Summit, Pakistan's prime minister, Muhammad Nawaz Sharif, presented the National Conservation Strategy, an extensive environmental framework. The National Conservation Strategy has three primary objectives: [1] preserving natural resources, [2] environmentally friendly development, and [3] optimizing the use of natural resources. These objectives, in turn, are based on three pillars: encouraging public involvement in environmental management, integrating environmental sustainability and economic viability while making decisions, and enhancing the quality of life in the long run. NCS is also called Pakistan's Agenda 21.

Significant progress was made in the years following the Rio. The National Environmental Quality Standards (NEQS) were created in August 1993 (Qurratulain, Shams, and Khwaja, 2019). All startups were required to adhere to these standards by July 1994, while existing firms had a later deadline of July 1996. The NEQS set up end-of-pipe standards for pollution control in both industrial and municipal waste. Additionally, there were regulations for controlling noise and smoke emissions from vehicles. Similarly, as a signatory of the Biodiversity Convention at the 1992 Earth Summit, Pakistan initiated a marine conservation plan with Astola Island and declared it the first Marine Protected Area in 2017. Furthermore, Pakistan is obliged to fulfill its emissions mitigation responsibilities, which the country ratified and signed in 1997. In order to protect the ozone layer, Pakistan additionally signed the Vienna Convention and its Montreal Protocol.

Likewise, the Pakistan Environmental Protection Ordinance was reconstituted as Pakistan Environmental Protection Act (PEPA) in 1997 (South Asia Cooperation for Environment Programme(SACEP) Colombo, Sri Lanka, 2001). PEPA specifies the primary requirements and how the pollution abatement measures are to be implemented. This Act also defines the assignments of the PEPC, provincial EPAs, and Environmental Protection Tribunals. Besides, Pakistan's policy think tank, the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI), was founded in 1992 based on the National Conservation Strategy's suggestions (Sustainable Development Policy Institute, 2020). The Societies Registration Act, XXI of 1860, governs SDPI's registration. It focuses on trans-disciplinary research on the environment, economy, foreign policy, energy, food security, and societal transformation challenges.

Despite being a major success in the formulation of legislation, the policies failed to have an impact on much decision-making and implementation. There were many reasons for this; for example, much of the initiative, as imported from the global agendas (such as the Rio Earth Summit 1992), relied on external sources of funding rather than local funding. That's why there was less adoption of these policies at the national level (Kakakhel, 2022). Similarly, the period from the 1980s to the 1990s is characterized by frequent changes in government and regimes. Environmental policies, which required long-term efforts, were often sidelined due to this instability. As a result, the constant turnover in leadership hindered environmental initiatives from being prioritized within the National Conservation Strategy (NCS) before they could be effectively implemented (Chaudhry, 2022). Moreover, other factors, such as illegal logging groups, exerted their influence to prevent new laws, including those on green issues such as forestry, from being enacted and implemented(Ahmed & Mahmood, 1998). Similarly, another issue was the continuous operation of the environmental tribunals due to delays in appointments, insufficient resources, and a lack of environmental literacy (Ahsan & Amin Khawaja, 2013). Furthermore, the population of Pakistan was growing rapidly at that time, causing the government to focus on providing basic necessities to the people, reducing poverty, and giving less priority to environmental issues (UN Environment Programme, 2014).

4. A Journey from 2000 to Present: An Era of Transitioning to Ecological Sustainability

In September 2000, Pakistan signed the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDGs comprise eight goals and eighteen targets with a focus on poverty, education, health, gender equality, climate change, and international collaboration. Similarly, in 2001, Pakistan launched its National Environmental Action Plan (NEAP) (Ministry of Forestry & Environment, Pakistan, 2001).

The primary goal of NEAP was to reduce poverty through environmental sustainability programs. NEAP was approved by the Pakistan Environmental Protection Council. In 2005, Pakistan developed the National Environmental Policy (NEP), and it offered a comprehensive framework for federal, provincial, and municipal governments to tackle environmental challenges (Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Environment, 2005).

In 2009, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) assisted the government in preparing its draft of National Sustainable Development Strategies (UNDP, 2012). National Sustainable Development Strategies (NSDS) attempt to address numerous challenges with economic sustainability in three dimensions: environmental, social, and economic. NSDS ensures that all stakeholders' consultations are considered. The 18th Constitutional Amendment was passed by the National Assembly of Pakistan in 2010 (Shah, 2012). Before this amendment, the MoE was the prime body in charge of managing Pakistan's environmental issues. The 18th Constitutional Amendment, enacted in 2010, abolished the Concurrent List, eliminated MoE and its functions, including environmental issues, and established the "Federal Ministry of Disaster Management". It was later renamed the Federal Ministry of Climate Change and is known as the Division of Climate Change. The Climate Change Division is the primary government agency responsible for implementing the Pakistan Environmental Protection Act. It functions as the PEPC's secretariat. The Climate Change Division also deals with environmental mitigation and protection agreements with international organizations. The Pakistan EPA is administratively supervised by the Climate Change Division, allowing for a better-coordinated approach to environmental issues.

As Pakistan is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild/Fauna and Flora, the government passed the Pakistan Trade Control of Wild Fauna and Flora Act in 2012 for wildlife management and conservation. In addition, Pakistan joined the Paris Agreementon greenhouse gas emissions and mitigation in 2016(World Bank Group and Asian Development Bank, 2021).The Paris Agreement is indeed a landmark international accord within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The Paris Agreement aims to tackle the global climate change threat by limiting the increase in global temperature in this century to 1.5°C. In 2015, Pakistan, among all other state members of the United Nations, endorsed the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, constituted by Sustainable Development Goals(Ali, 2017). The National Assembly of the country adopted these SDGs as national development goals in 2016 with unanimous approval. Since then, national development programs have incorporated the 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

In 2016, the government of Pakistan participated in a United Nations-sponsored round-table on Sustainable Consumption and Production (SCP) (United Nations Environment Programme, 2021). The minister for climate change, Zahid Hamid, defined (SCP) as an approach to ensuring the efficient use of natural resources that contributes to food, water, and energy security and lessens our susceptibility to climate change. Pakistan adopted SCP as a strategy for green development, thus strengthening sustainable economic growth. In 2017, according to the National Action Plan SDG12-SCP, the country recognized SDG 12 to mainstream other SDGs. The NAP-SCP identifies ten core action areas for SCP to maximize resource and energy efficiency: industry, smart cities, marine biodiversity, terrestrial ecosystems, climate change, sustainable transportation, energy, sustainable water supply, education, and sustainable agricultural practices.

At the federal and provincial levels, the "SDGs Support Unit" was established to ensure the early nationalization of SDGs. The SDGs Support Unit is actively monitoring and reporting on the progress in SDGs. Out of seventeen SDGs, the priority goals for Pakistan are Goal 4: access to quality education; Goal 3: ensuring good health and well-being; Goal 8: promoting decent work and

sustainable economic growth; Goal 6: access to clean water and sanitation; and Goal 16: peaceful and just societies and strong institutions. As a result, the national poverty alleviation program, "Ehsaas", was launched in 2020 to expand the country's social protection, safety nets, and human capital development. A health coverage initiative, the "SehatSahulat Program", was established in 2020 to give health insurance coverage to needy individuals. Similarly, Pakistan initiated the Billion Tree Plantations program in 2011 to fulfil its commitment to national resource conservation (Government of Pakistan, 2019). Pakistan registered with the Bonn Challenge, a joint effort of the Environment Departments of Germany and IUCN, for this forest landscape restoration approach. This project then evolved into the "Ten Billion Tree Tsunami Programme" in 2018, a five-year tree plantation drive to combat the global issue of global warming through forestation. In 2019, Pakistan updated its climate change policy in the light of solar energy adoption and harvesting of climate-resilient crops. In addition, Pakistan revised its air quality standards to limit PM2.5 in the air.

Pakistan faces coordination challenges among climate response agencies following the 18th Constitution Amendment in 2010. Many climate-related issues, including water management, wildlife, disaster response, and forestry, were devolved to the provinces. As a result, though the Ministry of Climate Change and its division coordinate with international agencies, they cannot implement policies at the provincial level due to the lack of constitutional authority (Khan, 2025).

Pakistan updated its national action plans in light of the SDGs and green development. Still, its mitigation and adaptation goals are highly dependent on receiving foreign funding and concessional loans. As a result, the implementation of plans under these programs has been stalled (Pakistan Updated Nationally Determined Contributions, 2021). Moreover, in many projects, mishandling of funds and planning failures have been observed. For example, the audit of the Ten Billion Tree Tsunami Program reveals unplanned purchases and non-adherence to approved programs, leading to significant irregularities in wildlife conservation efforts in the Punjab region (Ali, 2024).

5. Conclusion

Pakistan has formulated various environmental policies and legislations on the guidelines of international agreements, including UNFCC, Kyoto Protocol, Paris Agreement, UN Agenda 2023, etc. However, the effective implementation of these policies requires that all stakeholders, including individuals, government agencies, and businesses, focus on their role in environmental and conservation planning. Similarly, the country should indulge in dialogue with the international organizations to make Pakistan a climate-resilient country.

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